Interpreters in conflict zones: the limits of neutrality

Our association has more than once wondered if the time had come to reconsider our profession and its - our - place in the world. The need to do so has never struck me with such force as when beginners or outsiders ask apparently taxing questions about our responsibility and the moral conflicts it could lead to. They might be about translating a profanity or replacing a solecism with something better or perhaps more politically correct if we are to play the sublime role we claim as facilitators of dialogue or even messengers of peace.

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It is as if our kingdom were not of this world. In our discussions about the future of the profession our collective imagination has reached no further than if and under which conditions we should accept new technology and video conferencing. And yet we live in a world that - apart from our comfortable cocoon - is filled with appalling conflict in which every day people lose their lives in the most atrocious circumstances. For proof just look at the headlines in the daily papers, where they are identified by name: Darfur, Baghdad, Tikrit, Kerbala, Kabul, Beirut, Sderot, Gaza, Ramallah, Algiers, Madrid, New York, Colombo and until recently, Kosovo, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Srebrenica.

If our calling as neutral facilitators precludes our including these events in our examination of the profession and even bars their entering our thoughts on professional ethics, I wonder if that same calling has imposed a vow of silence on us in the face of the kidnapping, exploitation and murder of our colleagues who work in these conflict zones. I've been collecting press cuttings of interpreters killed whilst working; they now fill a shoe box. Only the International Federation of Translators (FIT) has recorded how many have been killed. Two hundred and sixteen. Just in Iraq. After the military, they make up the largest group of civilian victims of this conflict. Allowing for a few honourable exceptions - and if they exist I'm unaware of them - these interpreters have not featured at all in our publications, or triggered demonstrations of solidarity from our committees, assemblies or council or received any practical support.

The most recent example is Ajmal Naqshbandi. He interpreted for the Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo who was kidnapped by the Taliban and freed in an exchange. Neither the interpreter nor the driver was worth exchanging and both were killed. They were just run of the mill Afghans. In their case it would appear there was no reason to depart from the rule "we don't negotiate with terrorists". The interpreter was kept as a hostage for weeks yet did not even merit a show of solidarity from his colleagues throughout the world. However the people of Italy did take to the streets for him, with the support of the European Federation of Journalists. His fellow interpreters maintained silence. Was this silence neutral? Was it occasioned by lethargy or self-interest?
I cannot believe it was a corporative reaction: as they aren't members of the association they are not part of the known world. I think our imperceptiveness is not corporative, although it may be for some, but a matter of concepts. We believe that true interpreters - we - who come from this democratic society and belong to this self-styled universal association occupy a reserved space between cultures where we act as neutral agents, as guarded and discreet vectors of international understanding. Should our guardedness and discretion extend to a lack of solidarity? I refuse to believe it should. Perhaps we ought to reassess some of the ideas that we have so far considered accepted truths.

The notion of the unsullied interpreter who extracts the essentials of a message and transforms them into another language without sharp edges and roughness in the interests of communication and on the fringes of the contexts and intentions that exist well beyond the act of communication is a recent idea - what are 60 years? - that sits awkwardly with the profession's history and with the world we live in. Until very recently interpreters were members of the diplomatic service and army. They were essential members of scouting parties that gathered intelligence from disputed areas or the enemy camp. And that is exactly what happens now on the frontline. Where else are the interpreters working in these known conflict zones kidnapped and killed? Are they occupying a neutral space between civilisations? Or are they simply serving the intelligence-gathering interests of those who hire them?

**Incompatible narratives**

In this connection I find the concepts on narrative in social theory and in translation as developed by Mona Baker ([ii](#)) from Manchester University particularly useful. Baker makes extensive use of the conceptual models of Somers and Gibson ([ii](#)) (1994) that help her classify a narrative as a mental tool that is used to frame reality. She identifies different types of narrative: ontological, public, conceptual and meta narrative. She then uses them to question the notion of discourse used in translation theory.

In summary - and in the hope of doing her work justice - we can say that "ontological" narratives equate to the way we perceive our personal history and place in the world. "Public" narratives move between institutions like the family, trade unions or political groups and comprise concepts such as "the role of the father" or "freedom of speech" etc. "Conceptual" narratives are ideas developed by researchers or the scientific disciplines that are ultimately taken up by society at large, such as "class struggle" or "clash of civilisations". Following Somers and Gibson, Baker finally says that "meta narratives" or "master narratives" (a concept developed by Lyotard([iii](#))) are broad categories of interrelated concepts that include our personal or academic routines such as ideas on "progress", "the human spirit", "enlightenment", "industrialisation", and then go on to include the more modern concept of "war on terror", not on terrorism, which is something else.

Baker adds "accluar" to these categories, a concept developed by Bruner([iv](#)) (narrative accrual) and goes on to posit that the selective appropriation of certain facts and narrative accrual allows the spread of master narratives of, inter alia, progress, enlightenment, global terror and western democracy.

"It goes without saying that narratives do not travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and certainly do not accrue and develop into global meta narratives without the direct involvement of translators and interpreters". (I would like) "to draw attention ...to the way in which our own conceptual narratives in translation studies seem to be at odds with narrative theory... and with documented involvement of translators and interpreters in a variety of conflicting narratives." ([v](#))

The narratives used in translation and interpreting studies are well known. They are our daily bread.
Our starting point is our good intentions. Our work of mediating and facilitating dialogue must inevitably lead to a successful conclusion. But the naïve notion that we occupy neutral territory, in a no-man's-land that has formed between two narratives falls to pieces if our job is to collect intelligence about the area, worm information out of a prisoner or someone from the other side who has been wounded, or if we work for a cause we find morally repugnant. Or do we not find it genuinely repugnant? Do we not even ask ourselves the question because we are shielded by the conceit of being neutral mediators? Was Hitler's interpreter neutral? Was Stalin's? Or de Gaulle's, Churchill's or Franco's? Did they also ply their trade in the interstices between two narratives? Or where they committed to a message and a cause? The Taliban who murdered Ajmal Naqshbandi because of his complicity with the hostile western world are intellectually consistent. Can the same be said of the western interpreters who believe in his and their own "neutrality" but who do not defend it, and who say nothing to end his captivity or prevent his death?

"...I would argue that by over-romanticising the role of translation and translators as peace giving enablers of communication, we abstract them out of history, out of the narratives that necessarily shape their outlook on life, and in the course of doing so we risk intensifying their blind spots and encouraging them to become complacent about the nature of their interventions, and less conscious of the potential damage they can do... No one, translators included, can stand outside or between narratives. Hence, a politically attuned account of the role of translation and translators would not place either outside nor in between cultures. It would locate them at the heart of interaction..."[vi]

**Neutrality as violence**

Clearly a professional and impartial attitude when interpreting does not suffice if the situation calls for more. The testimonies of interpreters recruited for the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM) during the territorial dispute between Serbia and Croatia in 1991-1992 are instructive in this regard. The Croat interpreters who answered the call for interpreters were volunteers. Their testimonies have been collected by a Croatian social psychologist who conducted research into the trauma they may have suffered because of the need to be "neutral" when interpreting during a war. The findings are presented by Zrinka Stahuljak [vii] in her article "The violence of neutrality: translators in and of the war (Croatia 1991-1992)".

The interpreters, despite having volunteered to work for the ECMM, thought they could meet their obligation of collecting war testimonies with the impartiality that was demanded both by the EC observers and their own sense of professional ethics. But they remained volunteers, patriots in the cause of assembling accounts that would ultimately show that the Croats had right on their side in their conflict with the Serb zone. They saw themselves as "ambassadors" of the Croat cause. Despite their wish to act neutrally when interpreting eye witness accounts, they admit that in their free time between deployments, they were able to talk to the observers and explain things as they saw them. What is more, they admit that their views even slipped into their interpreting in some cases, and they even sometimes replied on behalf of the witnesses, incidents that brought reprimands and even one dismissal from the EC observers.

The task of interpreting the horrors of war and being seen to be neutral was proof of emotional strength that was rewarded with the slim hope that the interpreted accounts would finally be used to support their cause; what is more it was condemned by the Croatian army with accusations of treason for serving the interests of the European Union that was suspected of favouring the Serbs.

The violence of neutrality of the title is not the violence of denying interpreters the vacant and neutral spaces between discourses - as they do not exist - but the violence of denying them any space at all. Reviled by both the Croat and Serb narratives and suspected of partiality by the observers, the interpreters were defenceless, lacking not just a space between languages but also between societies
and lives.

In conflict, not only are the interpreters unable to find the neutral spaces or linguistically neutral spaces but the combatants do not recognise them either. Of the five interpreters who worked for Stalin between 1939 and 1945 three died at the hands of the political police the NKVD, the fourth under interrogation by Beria. The fifth, Berezhkov, survived Beria's grudges and lived to old age thanks to Molotov's protection.

The rising number of kidnapped and murdered interpreters in the powder keg that is the Middle East is also linked to their being identified with one of the sides; the victims' claims of neutrality count for little. As they have scant exchange value they are killed according to the tactic of "burning ones bridges" which is part of a deliberate strategy aimed at severing all possible lines of communication. There are no empty or neutral spaces between the Taliban narrative and that of the coalition in Afghanistan or Mastrogiacomo's readers in the Italian daily "La Repubblica".

Clearly the plight of interpreters in conflicts is not comparable with the more comfortable situations we encounter daily in the developed world. But we have just observed that the celestial chatter above the place occupied by the interpreter between two messages and his exalted task of guarantor of dialogue and bringer of peace cannot apply universally and even less where they are most needed, in armed conflicts and where the distance that separates dialogues is an abyss.

A change of this magnitude in how we see our work and its place in the world is tantamount to a paradigm shift. Analysis and academic research will not bring about this change. It will only happen if we all work together. A world in conflict needs greater solidarity and fewer "peace ambassadors". We will not grasp by its horns the raging bull of intolerance and death if we stay behind the barrier marked neutrality, even if the neutrality is purportedly linguistic. We must enter the public arena and take part in the dialogue and have no fear in nailing our colours to the mast.

It may be anecdotal, but our silence about Ajmal has been deafening. If he can be the trigger for serious and profound consideration his sacrifice will not have been completely in vain.

Notes


[iii] LYOTARD, Jean François, 1979, La Condition Postmoderne, Collection Critique, Les Editions de Minuit


[v] BAKER, Mona: Narratives in and of Translation, Ibid.


FURTHER READING


English version by Phil Smith

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