Interpreters in conflict zones: what are the real issues?

Let us not delude ourselves. There is more to this business for our association than mere solidarity. We must grasp this opportunity to resolve a fundamental issue: are we an association that defends the interests of its members or an association that sets its sights on representing the whole profession? This is an important distinction.

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For example we cannot simply say that the 216 interpreters killed in Afghanistan in just one year (2006) are not really members of the Association or professionals, but taxi drivers or people on the make who have a smattering of another language. I believe that these people take on the work to meet a growing demand in societies riven by major conflict. In poor and developing countries needs have to be met with the scant resources available. Given the circumstances, the interpreters are the product of unavoidable improvisation, in the same way that someone with toothache will end up on the chair of the local barber who will pull the bad tooth, with precious little proper equipment.

Nevertheless, the bulk of these interpreters are not contracted by the local administration but by major interests and western companies pursuing their own political, economic and even humanitarian agendas. I'm talking here about the US army, NATO, the UN peace keeping forces, the European Union, ministries of foreign affairs, journalists and humanitarian and development NGOs like Médecins du Monde, to say nothing of major companies who prowl these choppy waters in the hope of being well poised when things improve.

A new social contract

It does not occur to these organisations to use professionals because a makeshift arrangement with locals is cheaper than taking on the financial responsibility of offering proper pay and conditions, danger money, and life, invalidity and sickness insurance. This is a cost of conflict and war that nobody has quantified because it is not paid in money, but with the lives and sacrifice of local interpreters (their lives are apparently not worth much) and the lives of their families, who likewise bear the brunt of conflict. We must not forget that once the occupying forces and humanitarian agencies have left, the interpreters are vulnerable and without protection because their previous activity marks them out for the warring factions as traitors to the cause or collaborators with their employers or the enemy.

It is not right that many otherwise honourable organisations operate in our communities and happily contract staff on terms and under conditions of security which fall well short - even ethically - of what is acceptable in their home countries. We must work to raise awareness, and if necessary blow the whistle on the organisations I referred to earlier: ministries, armies, NGOs, humanitarian
agencies etc. regarding the unacceptability of the situation and the pressing need to establish - based on existing contacts and likely negotiation - terms for what I would call a New Social Contract (although it carries echoes of Rousseau I mean it more in the Lockean sense as it would be a new contract between us, society and governments). This aspect of war that is never acknowledged or even glimpsed must be brought to light, even if we ourselves and our association are in denial, and we must bring it to the attention of the organisations and denounce it publicly so as to put an end to an intolerable situation. It is self-delusion to believe that we are safe from the blast waves, ensconced in our booths and blithely choosing to look the other way.

One of the ideas I’ve come up with in the reflection group on interpreters in conflict zones is that we should work to list and marshal the ideas that should be part of this New Social Contract. I think the interpreters who work in the private sector can make useful suggestions.

International trade unions, that have long experience in combating the most pernicious effects of globalisation and in negotiating outline agreements with transnational companies, would certainly be able to make a contribution.

The political context

Using people suffering economic hardship, who are badly informed and not properly covered for the risks they run when working (often kidnapping and death) is similar in more ways than one to using human shields in war, something that has been defined and strictly banned by the Geneva Conventions.

This brings us to the political aspect of the issue. I believe that we have to work on the political front to produce a global response that defines and confers status on our work within society, and in particular our activity in conflict zones.

Therefore we and society should: 1) define what we want to do and with which institutional framework; 2) recognise the independence and professionalism of interpreters’ work and 3) respect and protect their physical integrity in the exercise of their activity and after said activity has ceased (if as a result of their work the interpreter or his/her family is at risk regarding their safety or physical, social and material integrity).

Another proposal I have made to the reflection group is that the Association should run a long-term campaign, properly resourced, to obtain a declaration on protecting the status, independence and integrity of interpreters in the exercise of their activity. We could draw our inspiration from existing models that protect the deployment of medical staff, journalists and the Red Cross, etc. The proper instrument would be a Declaration of the General Assembly of the United Nations or the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe - or both. I believe this is an achievable political goal. The international situation is propitious for a public campaign and for soliciting the required support.

The role of the Association

Representing the profession also entails being aware of the role we play in society and its concomitant responsibility. Our Association made great steps forward at times of geopolitical upheaval (the end of World War II, the Nuremberg Trials, the creation of the UN system, etc.) and since then the development of our profession and its structures and way of working have played a historic role in those changes that has not been sufficiently recognised. Our vision of the Association, of its structures and objectives, however, has remained constant - perhaps a little too set in its ways - whilst the world around us has not stopped changing. However magnificent its
history, our Association's mission - our responsibility if you will - cannot be confined to managing the past.

Today the business world occupies areas of economic, political and even social power that were unimaginable just a few short decades ago. Many of these areas were taken from international organisations that are now left with a ceremonial or self-vindicating role. This is of a piece with the privatisation of public services.

The sapping of the authority and validity of the international political system finds its obverse in the proliferation of regional and international conflict zones and asymmetric non-conventional wars (mutilation, torture, rape, etc.). A huge amount of work and money is spent to intervene, quell fighting or mediate in these conflict areas and it is here that our profession is necessary and increasingly present: interpreters are at work yet the Association is absent.

Improvements within our own societies mean that groups that were marginalized in the past, such as ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, criminal offenders and the disabled, including those with hearing disorders, have access to justice; community disputes and provision for minorities and immigrants in the courts have created a whole raft of demands for interpretation and mediation which have been covered as best they can, by improvisation. This includes interpreters. And yet again our Association has stood and remains standing aloof. Clearly I am referring to our colleagues who work in courts, who do community interpreting, who work as sign language interpreters and those in conflict zones.

The basic issue

Nobody should be surprised that newly qualified interpreters do not flock to our ranks. As I see it this is not due to bad public relations or poor communication. I believe we must face up to the notion that an Association that distances itself from society disqualifies itself from representing that society. What flag should we nail to our mast to enthuse young interpreters if we are not part of the society from which they come and do not offer values or causes they can identify with? In a world that at times grows rapidly and haphazardly we are self-perpetuating in terms of the number of members and our take on the world. In other words we are becoming ever smaller in terms of our relative size and our horizons. We are travelling down a road that will inevitably lead to our own eclipse and irrelevance and - let's be candid - our disappearance to all intents and purposes from society. This is not in the interest of an association, even one that devotes itself purely to defending its members' interests. Managing memory is a rum deal. Memory inevitably fades.

Perhaps the time has come for us to raise high another banner. There are several that warrant the effort. The issue of interpreters in conflict zones springs to mind because of its topicality and impact, and because it affords us the political opportunity to make a qualitative leap. Just for once, let's open our eyes.

English version by Phil Smith.

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