Languages at war

I've never been through psychoanalysis and after recently attending a workshop in the interests of our new project on interpreters in conflict areas, I'm not sure I ever want to. All day I felt like a laboratory mouse.

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It was a glorious sunny day in London, the kind that reconciles me to my usually grey homeland: so what was I doing entering the dark and fearful portal of the Imperial War Museum? And by the way, shouldn't it be renamed: I thought we lost the Empire?

The day before I'd been watching the tennis at Roland Garros, trying to keep warm in a distinctly cool Paris. At least the weather had improved as I crossed the channel at a very early hour in order to do my duty for AIIC. The museum was the venue for a workshop and is a partner, together with the universities of Reading and Southampton, in a project called Languages at War whose aim is "to open up a new area of academic research which is recognised as important in government and military circles, but which has yet to be studied systematically... at the end of the project conclusions will be drawn on the ways in which the foreign language experiences of participants in invasion/occupation and peacekeeping relate to the language policies of official agencies involved." Not quite the same intentions as our own AIIC project, but still trying to fit the interpreters/translators and their users into a relationship of sorts. In the meantime it seems an awful lot of academic analysis has to be done: "scrabbling after infinity" as one of the papers was titled.

It all started off very well with coffee and biscuits, and I introduced myself, giving a brief outline of our project to the academics, most of whom seemed to think it was an excellent thing for AIIC to be represented, even though one unidentified person from a country just north of the U.S.A. told me in no uncertain terms that we couldn't hope to get recognition as a "neutral" body because we're not, are we?

We heard a keynote speech by Mona Baker which I was sure reflected her book (which I haven't YET read) about the way interpreters and translators are made to fit into war narratives, but don't always since they manage to wriggle into intercultural spaces, trying to protect themselves from identity crises, the insensitivity of foreign powers and their own people, whilst even changing that narrative in the process. In the middle of this, we all had to evacuate the building because of some alert (nobody told us what this was: maybe they were afraid we'd change their narrative...). At least this got us out into the sunshine and I managed to meet a few more people, including Christina Schaffner from Aston university who's very keen for AIIC to be represented at their Critical Link 6 Conference, highlighting public service interpreting, next year.

The rest of the morning's discussion was based on two papers about linguists during the WWII years. As I heard that "the need for specific interpreter training (not to mention the need for interpreters at all...) had been underestimated"; that linguists formed "a group apart" and there were problems of
"status" and the "feminisation of the profession"; that military linguists became "stuck in a rut because they couldn't get to officer training courses", and that non-linguists would not place a language in context and were loath to share background information about texts to be translated, it seemed to me that we've not moved on much in the last 60 years.

Already during the morning I'd had a bit of an uncomfortable feeling that I was being psychoanalysed - not personally, of course, but as a representative of practitioners. My very motives, my wriggling in that intercultural space, my place in the actor network theory, my distorting of the narratives, my untrustworthiness, my striving for status and my identity crisis had all been spotted by the academics, who were watching me and my cohort as they do those little white mice. We were running on the wheel and they were waiting for us to fall off, then tell others why we fell and how another kind of wheel should be invented. Or worse - how WE should be reinvented to fit the wheel!

The blow came in the afternoon - softened only by a very tasty little lunch served just outside the meeting room and gulped down in less than half an hour (I hadn't realized that academics are worse than trade-unionists: stachovites to the last).

The session was again based on two papers, this time about the war and peacekeeping in Bosnia-Herzegovina. My ears pricked up (I'd fully adopted the mouse persona by now) as we discussed the outsider's perception of the interpreter, his/her role, and the need for a negotiation of that role - and proceeded through a whole litany of other subjects: national policy-making and how to influence it, organisation of language services, professionalisation and profiling, the fear of creating an imbalance in the local economy by paying interpreters too much, and NGOs bidding against each other for the services of good linguists thus leading to a situation where "those who should be judges and editors become drivers and interpreters"(!). The difficulty of the local interpreters to remain "neutral" whilst having been witness to events was summed up as "the professional subjectivity of neutrality versus the witness' subjectivity of testimony". There was even a little hint of what was to come in the portrayal of some of the female interpreters working with the military....

But before I get to that, let me confess my heart warmed a bit to the last speaker, the man from the ministry: a practitioner like myself, albeit from the "other side of the fence", telling us that career prospects for linguists in the military were not good and indeed the casualty rates were high (well, I wasn't thinking of joining up). Only one person in the whole of the British armed forces had actually been recruited for having language skills despite the fact that 30% of personnel had to be given linguistic training and that a change from the "kinetic" role of the military towards "soft" intervention did require more linguists. Of course he spoke of the difficult question of trust and deployment of local linguists, and even of the difficulties of pooling linguists among the different elements of multinational forces. He truly seemed a bit desperate about the fact that nothing much was being done about future requirements (but we are all aware of what the Brits think about language teaching), not to mention the poor level of English amongst our own recruits. He, however, spoke very well and I was thinking he'd be a good man to invite to one of our meetings; quite jovial, in the way of Tim Washington of Nice fame.

Now I should point out that all through the day the speakers had seemed a little nervous about my presence, often pointing out with a nod in my direction that the translators/interpreters they were talking about were not, at least at the beginning, professionals. So, in the course of the afternoon, someone asked what they should therefore be called: paratranslator seems to exist as a term, but does parainterpreter? (I had visions of myself floating into action under a bright pink parachute). It seems not, though. Linguist was a problem: "What is a linguist?" they asked. So one of the academics who shall remain nameless said she tended towards the use of "language workers" whilst recognising, of course, the perhaps unfortunate connotations.
Yes, there it was, the final blow. But we are, after all, the two oldest professions in the world, and there must be some status in that.

Author's note:

Despite the somewhat frivolous nature of this article, I do think the Languages at War project is interesting and that cooperation between it and our own project could be useful. In the next phase of their project, they are specifically looking for interviewees amongst linguists who worked in Bosnia-Herzegovina in peacekeeping activities. If you did or might be able to put them in touch with someone who did, please contact C.Baker@rdyh1sr.soton.ac.uk.

Our Interpreters in Conflict Areas group would also be pleased if locally-recruited interpreters from any theatre of war would get in touch with us by writing to l.fitchett@dvtw2awhss.aiic.net.

Recommended citation format: