Languages at war 2010

The second Languages at War workshop met at the Imperial War Museum, London, under the title 'Meeting the “other” in war'. Combat narrative and the language of historians, language as part of the political economy of war, language teaching for war scenarios, interrogation and the “unsayable” things of war were all on the agenda. 

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The role of translators, interpreters and linguistic intermediaries in wartime and post-war peacekeeping is a central theme of this project that, allowing for its emphasis on language policy rather than protection of practitioners, can be linked in many ways to our own AIIC project Interpreters in Conflict Areas.

I recognised a few faces as I walked in and that’s not a bad introduction to the first paper: “Does the enemy have a face?” by Professor Joanna Bourke of Birkbeck College. 

I hasten to say that I was warmly welcomed by the Languages at War group, who don’t seem to have taken umbrage at my last article, so in no way am I saying that they’re the enemy. No, it’s the face recognition that’s important. The paper was all about combat narrative: the communicative nature of languages in confusion (war), the relation between language and killing and recognising your enemy (giving them a face), and the language of historians relating atrocities.

It all started with a shaggy dog story about Bobby the dog and prisoners of war during WWII. “Bobby knew we were men,” one of the prisoners states, although the warders didn’t treat them as such. If ethics are predicated on face-to-face encounters, do dogs have faces? If “language makes man” as Aristotle wrote, do POWs have a language? Are they men? What for me was so striking in the first paper was the statement that face-to-face encounters make soldiers more likely to want to kill. I would have thought the opposite. I mean, if you’ve been told how awful the enemy is then you can imagine they’re all horrible fanged monsters, not at all like you, and it would be easy to throw some bombs at them. But no, it seems the opposite is true. Look your enemy in the eye, realise that they’re humans, and then run them through with your bayonet. I, of course, think it must be a man thing.

The speaker went on to talk about historians writing about mass rapes by US troops in Japan: “Wartime rape helps to steel men’s boldness and helps bonding.” And about one soldier raping a woman soldier: “He needed to overcome his anxiety and assert his dominance.” In PTSD it appears that rapists are now being portrayed (by historians? or the military? I’m not sure, I might have
missed that bit.) as victims of trauma, whereas the victims are portrayed as unreliable, their memories being unclear because of their trauma. We’ll see about that in The Hague this autumn.

“There are ethical implications of writing about war,” the speaker says. Yes, there certainly are. Judging from this paper I think we have to change the male narrative. I seem to remember that all the famous historians have been men. Aristotle not only said that “language makes man,” but also that language serves to “distinguish between the just and the unjust.” Are there “just wars”? Do historians deliberately misrepresent the past? Might men and women interpret the past in different ways? The speaker said that “All narrative is a question of power relations.” Maybe it’s time for the women to write history and assert their power, or at least their take on history (and rape). Would all our “glorious pasts” then look quite so glorious in the future? Anyway, back to the workshop, where a majority of speakers were, after all, women.

The second paper by Professor Hilary Footitt of Reading University was entitled “Geographies of co-existence: fraternization revisited.” The premise was that languages are part of the political economy of war, playing a role both in the formulation of politico-strategic goals for each stage of conflict and then in what actually happens on the ground.

In WWII the initial security strategy of the Brits as their troops moved into Germany was non-communication. If the soldiers didn’t speak to the Germans, the latter’s resistance couldn’t corrupt them. That didn’t work of course - there’s not much of a security threat from a long line of non-German refugees coming down the road. And whoever managed to stop fraternisation between sex-starved soldiers and local, hunger-starved women?

The “useful phrases” in German that the British soldiers had been taught as “combat strategy” didn’t get them very far when trying to reorganise a country in turmoil. So what did they do? Anglicise the bureaucracy of course! And then what did they need? Interpreters! And who were the interpreters? The educated Germans of course! So thirty-six thousand “inside-outsiders” became interpreters. And I reckon that’s the way we’ve stayed. I think all interpreters are in a way “inside-outsiders”. We just don’t fit in with the norm.

The speaker explains that as tension mounted among the allies, the strategy turned to winning hearts and minds, i.e. to fraternising/socialising rather than not communicating with the locals. But how do you make small talk without your local linguists/mediators? You don’t. So they are actually becoming policy makers, influencing the way you interact with the local population. Surprise! It’s difficult to win hearts and minds if you can’t talk to people and know nothing about their culture. Does this remind you of anything more contemporary than WWII? Thousands of linguists had to be sought for Iraq and Afghanistan, and in many cases we’ve heard of their complaints that the soldiers don’t listen to them when they try to tell them how to approach the local people. Are we winning the hearts and minds?

But I mustn’t wax philosophical. The next paper was “Interrogations: transnational encounters during and after the war” by Doctor Simona Tobia of Reading University. This paper challenged the view that the British interrogation system is traditionally humane. How could she! A foreigner! Has no-one ever told her about cricket? Fair play? Obviously not. But it’s true that the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (CSDIC) set up by the British in Germany in 1945 to prevent a Nazi revival but also, later, to detect Soviet spies in the British sector, seemed more devious and indeed inhumane than fair.

For interrogation purposes, i.e. for linguistic reasons, the Brits called in 10,000 Austrian and German refugees or “the King’s most loyal enemy aliens” (who had fought with the British). These people might have had good reason to hate the Nazis. Lt Col. Robin ‘Tin Eye’ Stephens, who was in charge of CSDIC, was famous for saying that “Violence is taboo, for not only does it produce answers to
The centre was closed in 1947 because of scandal about abuse, violence and the threat of violence employed there. ‘Tin Eye’ was court-martialled in 1948, but was acquitted. The whole truth of the centre came out in the early 2000’s when the secret papers were released. Bang goes a bit of glorious past.

I tend to think that you can’t always get information by just asking for it politely. But I can’t imagine how human beings have managed to inflict upon each other the atrocities that have marked our history. Have we moved on from using the rack to extort confessions? Where does psychological torture lie on the scale of horror? The paper concluded that “The whole space built around interrogation to serve its purposes becomes useless if it cannot exploit human emotions, which involve anxiety and distress even when violence is ‘only’ threatened… it is important to put them (human beings) and their emotions back into the written history of war.” Interrogation, the speaker says, belongs to the hidden aspects of history, and is in the domain of what is unsayable. We have learnt recently, with Abu Ghraib, that more must be said.

Next up after lunch (delicious little open sandwiches and things) came Bosnia. Professor Mike Kelly of Southampton University spoke about “Kicking the jeep: how a little language goes a long way.” Well, the last time I kicked my Punto the exhaust pipe fell off, but the situation wasn’t life-threatening. The jeep-kicker on the other hand, a foreigner lost in unknown territory, saved his life by kicking his jeep and uttering a string of profanities in the “right” language, thus causing laughter and friendship instead of instant death at the hands of armed assailants. That illustrated the short-comings (and saving graces) of language-teaching and learning in the British military for a conflict situation where “unforeseen” as well as “foreseen” needs can occur. Learning slang can be fun and useful.

This paper was also about language and identity. You’ll remember that Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian used to be considered one language called Serbo-Croat by us insensitive Brits (and many others) – as though we’d dream of calling whatever it is they speak in Glasgow “English”! This particular disintegration of a single language into three separate ones came about for political reasons as the war-torn countries of the former Yugoslavia tried to establish their separate identities. Well, apart from making the AIIC directory more complicated by adding a couple more languages to our members’ skills, the problem was apparently a weighty one for the Brits (because the language cards that they carried in their helmets became too heavy, since they had to be in three versions). Monolingual insular peoples find learning languages rather difficult. True to themselves, however, their theory was that English was better since it distanced them from the locals as a sign of authority. Too much (local) language proficiency weakens authority. You may have noticed that this is still their strategy at international meetings, much to the chagrin of the interpreters and the French Academy. “State-building in English,” says the speaker, “alienates the local population.” Yes.

Then came Dr. Catherine Baker of Southampton University talking about “Prosperity without security: locally-employed interpreters in the Bosnian economy.” This I found very interesting in the light of our own Interpreters in Conflict Areas project. Fourteen interviews had been carried out with local interpreters who had worked with the multinational military forces (UNPROFOR, IFOR and SFOR) in Bosnia, generally at the end of the 90’s, and eight more with the people who had managed, evaluated or recruited them.

Everyone has to make a living and it may not be a surprise to know that the good pay which helped these interpreters to maintain their family and property was more important to most of them than the ethical question of rebuilding or pacifying their countries. But good pay could also be disruptive in
traditional families where suddenly the younger members, rather than their elders, were becoming the breadwinners and the local community saw them earning more than local leaders. This social disruption must be seen against the backdrop of a country in disarray after the war, moving from a socialist economy to a market economy, from certainty to uncertainty.

Some of the anxieties of working for an international mission that could be curtailed at short notice are not totally foreign to freelance interpreters the world over, indeed to freelancers in all fields who live in the constant insecurity of when the next job might come along. But the constant risk of injury or death is not something most of us have to cope with. This was a post-conflict situation, but certainly the risk of landmines and working with soldiers on field missions still posed a threat. Some of the questions raised by the interviewees - the method of recruitment (sometimes direct, sometimes through agencies or by word of mouth), the lack of proper insurance, the differing amount of training and proficiency of the interpreters, their relationship with their military employers, the employers’ doubts about whether the interpreters kept secret the information given to them, and what happens to the interpreters when their employers leave - are all common questions that occur in relation to the recruitment of local interpreters in conflict situations. This discussion reminded me of our Forum in Rome earlier this year.

Without a professional association such as our own ensuring the spread of professional ethics, seeking insurance and pension rights, good working conditions, etc., no regulated profession would exist upon which to predicate guidelines for the use of interpreters and their employers everywhere. Unless we can obtain a recognised status for all interpreters we may all one day find ourselves as exposed as those who work in conflict areas today. We recently took a step towards this latter objective when 40 members of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly signed a declaration.

An added bonus at the workshop this year was that James Taylor, a member of staff from the Imperial War Museum, gave a talk about “Saying the unsayable: challenging history at the Imperial War Museum.” The museum was first opened in 1920 “in memory and recognition of those who served in WWI.” The present galleries were organised in 1989, when many of the veterans of WWII (and even WWI) were still alive and the memory of the war(s) was strong enough for people to be able to interpret what they saw in the galleries. But how now to bring the exhibits alive to visitors with no memory of the conflicts? How to encourage a more critical approach by the visitor and how to say what could not be said or even exhibited before? Indeed, what is the role of a museum, of objects and of memory? Which I think brings us neatly back to the first paper and those questionable historians.

The speaker said that his job title was “historian” but that his actual role was that of “interpreter”: “One of those people in the museum world whose responsibility is to translate often complex historical issues into displays which speak to a broad range of audiences.” Fortunately it seems that modern historians are questioning their own role and narrative, just as our interpreters are beginning to question theirs.

Historians interpret history; they have their own narrative. So what is the truth?

Only an interpreter – who hears both sides of the story - can tell you. But the interpreter won’t tell you, because an interpreter is sworn to secrecy.

Interpreters have their own narrative too. But the one they interpret is their client’s.

Have you thought of questioning your narrative today?

I would like to thank the team of Languages at War and the Imperial War Museum, London, for a very interesting day.

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