Humanitarian Interpreting Symposium at Monash University

The April 2016 conference in Melbourne examined the challenges and opportunities in the provision and use of interpreters in high-risk settings, as well as adequate training.

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The symposium, organised by Dr. Marc Orlando, Senior Lecturer and Monash T&I Program Director, brought together some excellent speakers and a varied audience of interpreters, trainee interpreters, academic staff, government bodies, military personnel, services involved in refugee management and care, a recruitment agency, etc. It was a ‘first’ in Australia, bringing together so many participants from such diverse fields, and, on this scale may have been a ‘first’ in the world.

As the online introduction stated: “The work of interpreters in the 21st century is characterised by a need to adapt to many different contexts and modalities of work. One of these is the humanitarian context: in conflict zones, in disaster zones, or in refugee camps for example, interpreters have to cope with specific demands and realities. How do interpreters respond to them? How are they prepared to face them? What policies are put in place to help and protect them?”

In his opening remarks, Marc Orlando – a T&I researcher, trainer and practising conference interpreter and translator - declared: “Delivering military assistance or emergency and humanitarian aid across language and cultural barriers and through interpreters and language mediators can be a major challenge. Working in high-risk settings and stressful environments can pose numerous challenges to the interpreters involved in the field. Unfortunately training for professional interpreters and interpreter users in this area is very limited.”

Talking about training for such contexts of work, he went on to explain that “in a recent article on the topic (2014), Moser-Mercer et al. quoted a survey by Businario which showed that 98.7% of humanitarian workers believe that language barriers affect communication and compromise the delivery of aid, and that 42.9% of humanitarian actors believe that message transmission issues are due to a lack of training in interpreting skills”.

For him, the main issues are “that the role of interpreters in these areas is not recognised by those who employ them and not well defined by either the T/I community or by employers; that their identity may be perceived by local communities in two different ways: they may be seen as traitors or as advocates of a local or patriotic cause; that they lack training in interpreting skills and ethics and do not always understand well their role as linguistic and cultural mediators or even the exact nature of the work they are supposed to do. That is why the T&I community as a whole, with all the other stakeholders involved in these areas, must collaborate to improve the provision and training of interpreters working in the humanitarian sector”.


Maya Hess and I were invited to speak at the symposium on the subject of interpreters in conflict zones. We were given the opening keynote place to introduce what is now an undertaking involving 6 major international language organisations: AIIC, Red T, FIT, IAPTI, CLI and WASLI. AIIC’s project, born in 2009, has been centred on drawing attention to the plight of those civilians who, in Iraq and Afghanistan especially, were locally recruited to act as translator/interpreters for foreign forces, journalists, etc. in the wars there. Red T was created on the background of the persecution of T/Is around the world, stemming largely from the translator/traitor mentality. Together with FIT we first published a short Field Guide for T/Is, which contains some very useful points on rights and responsibilities for both the interpreters and those using their services, and has been quoted as a reference by the British military, a Danish think tank and various publications. From there we moved on, in cooperation with our other partner organisations mentioned above, to writing open letters, whenever we hear of the persecution of T/Is throughout the world.

We encourage governments who have employed T/Is in recent conflicts to honour their service and give them shelter in the form of protective visas or asylum, because they and their families are threatened as traitors in their own countries and are unprotected after troop withdrawals. Another historic ‘first’ is therefore this successful cooperation amongst different representative bodies of translators and interpreters. Our ultimate goal is to obtain an international legal text giving protection to T/Is in conflict and other high-risk settings. We recently launched a petition to encourage the UN to act and help us towards our goal, which we hope as many readers as possible will sign and share (anyone can do so – you don’t need to be a T/I).

Given the diverse participation at the Monash symposium, it was a great occasion to bring our message to a broad audience in Australia, for which we thank our hosts.

The discussion after our presentation raised many questions which need further research, discussion and answers, and were often reflected in other presentations and discussions at the symposium. Should we, for example, call the locally-recruited and untrained personnel ‘interpreters’? What, indeed, is in a name? What are the implications when these ‘interpreters’, having fled their home country, seek employment in host countries? Will less scrupulous employers try to side-step the accreditation requirements which apply to the profession there? Will this not discredit the profession at a time when many of its branches are trying to obtain more recognition and status through training and accreditation?

Journalists tend to call the people who function for them as interpreters ‘fixers’, and although the military refers to ‘interpreters’ in their deployment guides, perhaps indeed we should try to reverse that trend – until we’re sure that the civilians recruited to serve as such are truly trained in at least the basics of interpreting practice and ethics. Any suggestions? ‘Language assistants’? At the symposium, many spoke of ‘bilinguals’, but I don’t really think that term applies, since the second language may often be weak.

And what are the contractual conditions of employment of these individuals and are they monitored by governments? What is the role of these interpreters, what code of ethics applies? Have role and status of interpreters been defined in all cases?

Whilst at the present stage of action ours is a more basic human concern for what we believe to be the moral obligation of due care to those known to be in danger - especially by governments towards those who have served them in urgent and dangerous situations - the discussion of these questions by a mixed audience was a rewarding experience and food for much future thought and study.

It would be impossible here to examine all the presentations given on the first day, but it’s interesting to see who was represented:

- The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) who revalidate
The Federation of Ethnic Community Councils of Australia (FECCA) who stated that 32% of refugees were not proficient in English, but that there is no economic incentive for accredited interpreters to work in the humanitarian field, leading to the use of non-accredited people for whom no minimum standards apply.

The Translation and Interpreting Working Group of the Federal Settlement Services Advisory Authority.

The Translation and Interpretation Service (TIS) of the department of immigration and border protection.

Refugee Legal, an independent legal centre specialising in refugee and migration law, policy and practice, who mentioned their use of protocols for working with interpreters.

The Department of Human Services (DHS, particularly the Division of Indigenous, Regional and Intensive Services) who stated impressively that it provides interpreter services free of charge to its clients with 600,000 pre-booked and 280,000 un-booked appointments with interpretation per year.

The Victoria Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) whose staff have received training for working with interpreters.

The Border Crossing Observatory.

Suffice it to say that Australia seems to be extremely well organised in the multilingual area of humanitarian action. How many other countries can boast such a plethora of services? All of these bodies deal in some way with the problems of multicultural communication, recognising the need for and using interpreters in their daily work with migrants, refugees and many less-favoured groups not proficient in English in administrative, social and legal settings. Whilst trying not to revert to the use of family members as interpreters, they stress the problem of finding trained interpreters with the right languages. Unfortunately, they all seemed still to include telephone interpreting in the panoply on offer, but as technology improves, this will no doubt gradually be replaced with other systems and the Monash staff were adamant that it should.

Sandra Hale, the keynote speaker on the second day, is Professor of Translation and Interpreting Studies and current Programme Convener at the University of New South Wales. Much of her research is into legal and court interpreting, while she also works as a conference interpreter and translator and is the current national president of AUSIT (the national association of translators and interpreters). That’s a very busy lady – and an excellent speaker. I absolutely agree with her when she says that “Languages are not valued like other skills… few realise the need for training….competent, ethically-informed practitioners raise our status… leading to better pay and working conditions and retaining interpreters in the profession”. That’s the message we like to hear. Whilst AIIC members may not be aware of their great good fortune in that our pioneer members organised our branch of the profession early on, other branches are being organised now, in much more difficult circumstances. And unless they organise, unless there are at least recognised minimum standards everywhere, the image and status of all interpreters will suffer, along with working conditions and rates of pay.

Sandra also spoke of the importance of the ‘voice’ of the person interpreted, of the interpreters’ role as an actor, and of the different purposes of e.g. conference and court interpreting, and therefore the need for a differentiated approach towards them. She stressed the need for briefing the interpreter and, in a court, the need to understand the effect of language on a case. She underscored the difference between trained and untrained interpreters, the need for accuracy and protocols concerning the positioning of the interpreter, etc. and of tests done using trained and untrained interpreters in mock interviews in the course of research into the change from ‘interrogation’ techniques to ‘interview’ techniques.
Other speakers included Adolfo Gentile, a former President of FIT and of NAATI, who worked for many years on the Migration Review Tribunal and Refugee Review Tribunal which have now become the Immigration Assessment Department, deciding on protection visas and ‘fast track’ processing for those arriving by boat after 2012. Given the problems involved with interpreting in these areas he raised the question of the need for a specialisation or at least an endorsement of accreditation.

The representative from the Australian military, who had been deployed in Afghanistan, reminded us that ca 550 Iraqis had been evacuated to Australia in 2008, and ca 800 Afghans had been withdrawn to date. Australia gave its interpreters body armour but no weapons – which is what we recommend in the Field Guide. He confirmed that Australia too had recruited interpreters through contractors and were sometimes obliged to use interpreters from other forces because of the need to find individuals with security clearance quickly for deployment at short notice. A soldier believing in his own professionalism, credibility and the need to find trust in and be trusted by his opposite numbers, he sought these characteristics in the interpreters as well as a facility in the use of military jargon and an ability to recognise the body language of partners in dialogue.

It was astonishing to hear from Julie Judd, the current president of ASLIA Victoria, the state branch of the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association that SLI is not mandated on TV throughout Australia (there are no regular daily news broadcasts with SLI). Since written information, e.g. in situations of emergency, are not always intelligible to the deaf, a new project – ‘National Auslan Communications for Emergencies’ – has arisen, sometimes requiring ‘relay’ interpretation from standard SL to a revised version for broadcasting. She stressed that training is usually self-managed, and there is no undergraduate degree for Auslan interpreters, who often do not grow up in deaf families and therefore have SL as a second language. SLIs are still not recognised as professionals.

I was really impressed by the quality of presentations and discussion at this symposium. I took away as a lasting impression that the interpreters present, those using and even those mediating their services want to improve on the quality of service, to professionalise and therefore to invest in training. I wish them and training institutes like Monash every success. I hope this kind of symposium will be repeated elsewhere – hopefully in Europe, where court and humanitarian interpretation needs help and encouragement through dialogue like this.

View a video recording of most sessions by clicking here.

Recommended citation format: