

Chapter 15

Interpreting to Bridge the Gaps in War Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

As a communicative link among cultures, interpreters have played a very important role throughout history. The main objective of this chapter is to analyze the language interpreter's role within warlike conflicts, paying special attention to their skills to bridge language, cultural, and power gaps. It has been observed that interpreting in conflicts is usually underestimated despite being extremely difficult and risky, and frequently, the support provided is quickly forgotten by all parts after the service is finished. This lack of consideration leaves many interpreters in danger in hostile countries. Due to the increase of displaced people and refugees in recent years, a brief historical review of the 20th and 21st century's wars has been carried out. This will be later referred to by the different interpreters and correspondents who work for diverse media and have been interviewed for the empiric study that we have carried out. Interpreters' work and ethical dilemmas they have to face are highlighted in this research. This study does not pursue, in any case, any political aims.

INTRODUCTION

By performing this research, the authors have noticed several gaps have to be covered when working as an interpreter for war conflicts: language gaps, power relations gap, emotional gaps and cultural gaps, mainly. The first type, language gaps, is present in many contexts where language interpretation is needed: a conversation between a doctor and his/her foreign patient, a school mentor and the parents of an immigrant pupil, a social worker and a refugee trying to search for a job in a new country or a person who must declare as a witness in a trial that takes place in a country whose language he/she does not master, to mention some. Anywhere a professional for filling these gaps is required, someone who

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could connect languages and unbreak inequalities among cultures and nations, the role of a professional interpreter would be essential. One of the fields where this gap becomes evident is war and armed conflicts: "From the point of view of interpreting, war and other forms of violent conflict are a classic point of contact between peoples of different nations and ethnicities, both within multi-ethnic armies and in their encounters with friends and foes" (Fernández & Wolf, 2014, p. 5).

There are many references to the role of war interpreters, from Ancient times: old Egyptians, Chinese, Greek or Roman conflicts - among others- to Modern times, world wars, Cold war, etc. which provide plenty of examples that have been studied in interpretation papers. Thanks to all this literature, the authors can conclude that interpretation is always a demanding profession that requires a good training, a strong vocation and several skills that the interpreter has to master: a good memory, mental agility, capabilities for summarizing, switching languages and codes or anticipating, tact, stress management, language reformulation, etc.

But interpreting in such kind of contexts is far from being easy. Apart from the language skills, cultural knowledge, mediation and diplomacy abilities, an interpreter who works in war conflicts must be a strong person in terms of stability, impartiality and empathy. He/she must deal with power relations, cultural gaps, language gaps, hostility, poverty, pain, destruction... Because of this power relation gaps, many times they have to exceed what is commonly understood as the language interpreter competences:

The role assumed by the translator/interpreter who worked for the British went far beyond that of impartial middlemen who merely provided communication services. Rather, they greatly affected the course of war, responsible for the collection, collation and interpretation of a great deal of military intelligence (Wang-Chi Wong, 2007, p. 42).

Sometimes war interpreters are hired to facilitate communication among diplomats, high-level military representatives, officials or even Presidents. In these cases, the hiring part prefers to hire a trusted confident interpreter they have previously worked with and who is clearly loyal to the politics or regime. They have normally received specific training on interpretation and are true professionals. Some others, war interpreters are hired *in situ*, especially where there are strong needs for communication among soldiers and the local population, as will be seen later on, they have no previous training and they have to learn on the terrain.

Furthermore, in most cases, experts of interpretation, especially in war and conflicts suffer from abandonment, isolation and distress after helping with necessary international communication. This is what can be called "emotional gap" and can also be found in other types of interpretation, mainly in community interpretation. Nevertheless, interpreters in war contexts are often regarded as intruders, which is not frequent in other types. This means that an interpreter who works in wars is someone seen as strictly necessary but not reliable: "The American military in Afghanistan "consider interpreters to be necessary evils, and even those who are Americans of Afghan descent are often scorned or mistreated for being too obviously 'different'" (Foust 2009).¹² Iraqi interpreters were accused of passing information" (Baker, 2010, p. 198).

Unfortunately, this mistrust is frequent and has long been since the Ancient Times, but it can be regarded as a curious fact in the 20th and 21st centuries, when the role of interpreters has long been proved to be quintessential for reaching peace and effective for intercultural communication.

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