

BOOK REVIEW

LANGUAGES AS WEAPONS

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Interpreting conflict. A comparative framework, edited by Marija Todorova and Lucía Ruiz Rosendo, Cham (Switzerland), Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 320 pp, €139,09 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-030-66909-6.

The case studies contained in this edited volume constitute an excellent compilation for practitioners – not just interpreters and their trainers, but military and humanitarian personnel too, as well as for researchers. Different types of sources, sometimes built by the authors themselves, make up the raw material of most of the research in this volume, always complemented by an arsenal of specialized bibliography. The chapters use a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives to approach topics or events in several locations, political and social entities, and historical moments.

Both editors share three characteristics that are relevant to building the frame of the volume: they are practicing interpreters; they have a long research background in this field, and they train interpreters and researchers.

In her introduction, Ruiz Rosendo articulates the idea that the moving of boundaries in the book refers not only to the geographical lines of separation that are often the cause or consequence of conflict, but also to disciplinary borders. This compendium handles this matter quite aptly by devoting eight chapters to military interpreting and six to interpreting in humanitarian settings. All the chapters deal with contemporary issues, some very recent, whose volatile objects of analysis require approaches in which empirical evidence cannot always count on the benefit of hindsight but rely rather on direct observation or oral interviews.

American Senator Hiram Johnson's words in reference to World War I, "The first casualty when war comes is truth", may support the idea that language and discourse become ammunition in the hands of those who wage war. This quote applies indeed to multilingual conflicts, where interpreters are required, always under the instructions of their commanders. While the war is raging, guns deafen the ears of combatants and it is difficult to talk, so it may seem that interpreting is needed only when truces or pauses in the battle bring about the necessary silence. In any case, at first sight, words do not kill. However, war is fought on many fronts and the potential participation of interpreters evolves throughout the whole conflict, from the preparatory phase to the post-conflict

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arrangements, as Hyongrae Kim points out in his chapter. Even the beginning of a war can be based on the manipulation of words. The concept of the Cold War was conceived when World War II was ending in order to define a new type of confrontation between former allies by apparently removing the *heat* associated with the fire and destruction from the previous war. But the Korean War, as shown by Kim, was as hot as any war can get, to the extent that its embers are still burning in the form of the 38th parallel north demarcation line between the two Koreas. When the “War on Terror” was launched in all directions as a reaction to the 9/11 attack, it hid the real enemy under a nebulous word, *terror*, which is something that one feels or that one tries to inflict on someone else. The truth is that the “war on terror” syntagm went beyond its blurred sense, as several chapters in this book show: Gómez Amich on a mission in Afghanistan; Ruiz Rosendo in her individual chapter on a mission in Iraq, where she analyzes two novels based on real facts; and Hess, who reveals the dishonor of the US military and justice system in their treatment of two Arabic-speaking linguists who were victims of ruthless scapegoating just for doing their job, as a result of an age-long *traduttore traditore* mentality.

A second element that emerges from the book is that interpreters’ roles and identities should be always defined in the plural. We may all agree that linguistic and cultural proficiency are the basic ingredients that make up an interpreter, since those are the key factors that allow for communication among people who use reciprocally unintelligible codes. The examples in this book show that understanding between the parties, more often than not, consists not of linguistic perfection, but rather of the crossing of a communication threshold, and that loyalty is more important than professional interpreting regulations. Moreover, even though interpreting is related to oral and gestural messages, the interpreters’ functions encompass a series of actions and tasks that go beyond oral communication. “Advisors, mediators, lie detectors, intelligence sources, coordinators, guides and subject matter experts” are the roles enumerated by Gómez Amich in her chapter on interpreters in Afghanistan (p. 89). “The administrative, training, and logistical tasks, and those involving direct and inverse translations, such as collecting information, analyzing documents, proofreading, direct and inverse interpretation of daily conversations, conferences, and meetings” are typical assignments Méndez Sánchez was called to perform in her mission in Senegal (pp. 146-147). “Interpreter, cultural mediator, intercultural mediator and language mediator” are apparent synonyms in users’ perceptions of the roles played by interpreters in humanitarian settings in present-day Italy, where cultural issues emerge as important factors in Radicioni’s case study on an NGO at Castel Volturno (p. 237). Thus, the “zone of uncertainty” described by Kim is a persistent feature in the attempt to define the roles of interpreters as social agents in a network of power structures.

As a result of some of the previous comments, an element that permeates all chapters is that of trust, which is related to how loyalty is perceived by users of interpreting services and by interpreters themselves, as it has been throughout recorded history. It is quite interesting to note the typology of loyalties described by Tian Luo & Ruiqi Zhu in their

case study on the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945): *Fervent*, including respect for samurai loyalty codes; *feigned*, including by Chinese Communist Party members; *shifted*, such as when a prisoner of the opposing side is turned; and *divided*, or the loyalty attributed to double agents. Takeda refers to “the muddled and risky aspects of dual citizenship and the visibility of interpreters in war” (p. 29), since an unstable national identity would eventually backfire on these interpreters during the wartime trials following the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945), where witnesses could easily identify them as language assistants of the Japanese political police or in the prisoner of war camps.

There are other significant factors when it comes to interpreting in specific situations, including in conflict: interpreters have feelings, and their performance reveals that language and discourse are far from innocuous. Moreno Bello shows that ideological differences are a significant component in the context of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon and that each interpreter understands their role and the way they perform it in a different manner, thus proving that a truly neutral translation does not exist. Manuel Barea Muñoz, referring to interpreters in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, discusses the influence that emotional and psychological factors may have on the interpreters’ performance. Cherine Haidar Ahmad focuses on how the positionality of United Nations interpreters working in the context of the Arab Spring fluctuates depending on their country of origin, since interpreters working in their own country may experience an additional emotional stress beyond the apparent outsider position associated with impersonal international staff.

Estela Martín Ruel and Marija Todorova devote their chapters to interpreters in the context of refugees arriving in Andalusia, Spain, and in Hong Kong, respectively. Martín Ruel covers a full array of aspects in her qualitative study on refugee reception agencies, where the issues of interpreters’ roles, their training or lack thereof, their gender, etc., have an impact on interviews with refugees in a variety of settings. Todorova touches upon the traits of interpreting in humanitarian refugee crises in Hong Kong derived from conflicts and war, where the use of non-professional interpreters, often refugees themselves, poses the added challenge of finding the right balance between trust for both parties and empathy towards those with whom interpreters often share cultural background and values. Lorena Guadalupe Baudo and Gabriela Fernanda Lorenzo provide a very honest account of the difficulties they faced and the coping strategies they sought in a conference setting where experts and refugees from different countries participated in an international dialogue session at Córdoba (Argentina), i.e. in a safe country.

Todorova’s conclusion sums up the salient issues in the volume, according to their respective backdrops (military or humanitarian) and emphasizes, *inter alia*, two ideas. First, the need to develop specific training programs adapted to the requirements identified by all parties from their different positions, which, ideally, would lead to an increased professionalization of those called to interpret in conflict or in post-conflict situations. Secondly, the importance of environmental issues (from climate change to the overexploitation of the Earth, to mention just two) as triggers of conflict and forced

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migrations. These prompt a higher demand for linguistic and cultural services; space must be made in interpreting research and practice for an awareness of indigenous populations' knowledge and expertise – food for thought and an invitation to stimulate further research.

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