

Conflict and translation

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Table of contents Related articles *Handbook of Translation Studies, Volume 4* (2013, pp. 31–35). DOI: 10.1075/hts.4.con3

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Much of the academic discourse on translation and interpreting, has been articulated more or less explicitly in terms of conflict. Whilst some authors have focused on the tensions that are inherent to the process of translation (source text versus target text, adequacy versus acceptability, literal translation versus free translation, semantic translation versus communicative translation, and formal correspondence versus dynamic equivalence, to name but a few of the dichotomies and constructed oppositions that underpin discussions of translation and classification of approaches and strategies), others have represented translation as an aggressive act (see **Translation strategies and tactics**).

The discussion of translation as 'appropriation' (Steiner 1975), or as a potentially distorting process (Berman 1984/1992), or work that has stressed its 'violence' and the uses that can be made of it (Venuti 1995), all allude to an overarching context of 'conflict'. Translation has also been increasingly framed with reference to unequal power relations and ideological encounters (Calzada Pérez 2002). Whilst contemporary discussions eschew sharp contrasts and oppositions, give further scope to historical and personal contingencies, and are more likely to assume a continuum of engagement, translation and interpreting tend to be considered as sites of conflict.

What is relatively recent however is the sharpened focus on translation and interpreting in actual situations of violent conflict, past or present, and on the complex agency of translators and interpreters 'embedded' in armed conflicts, whether they are directly operating in war zones and engaged on the ground (Salama-Carr 2007; Stahuljak 2010) or dealing with conflict-related texts (Apter

2006). Over the last decade, a number of academic conferences have put under scrutiny the interconnection between conflict and translation and interpreting, some explicitly focusing on the translation of key 'conflict' terms or 'sensitive' texts as part of a larger ideologically-laden discourse on 'security' and 'intelligence gathering', or in order to challenge and rethink the assumed 'neutrality' of language mediation.

A number of factors can perhaps explain the growing interest shown to the "politics" of translation and the move away from a "naïve model of communication" (Baker 2010: 48) where the neutrality of mediation is taken for granted, towards a greater appreciation of the role played by translation and interpreting in the construction and representation of conflict as well as its resolution. The interrogation of translation and interpreting practices in 'conflict' situations is promoted by the increasingly explicit ideological or political engagement of translation and interpreting researchers in the context, for instance, of gender studies, postcolonial studies, etc. Brownlie (2007) discusses **Committed approaches** to translation research and suggests a distinction between those approaches shaped by a specific ideological or political engagement—for instance Venuti's critique of 'invisible' translation into a dominant language such as (American) English—and approaches which have as a premise that political engagement is inevitable. Brownlie maintains that the latter approach can be exemplified with the work of Maria Tymoczko (1999, 2000), and Mona Baker (2006). Both Tymoczko and Baker focus on translation and interpreting in conflict situations and as means of resistance and construction, reconstruction and reframing of public narratives which shape the perception of events.

From within the discipline itself, the traditional issue of mediation linked with the increased visibility of the translator and the interpreter as agents, a shift of perspective promoted in great part by the so-called 'cultural turn' in translation and interpreting studies,

followed and complemented by a 'sociological' engagement (see **The turns of Translation Studies**) has paved the way for the growing interest in the role and responsibilities of translators and interpreters in relating and formulating conflict, and in issues of trust and testimony that often arise in that context of shifting power differentials.

Translation and interpreting studies have come of age and researchers have greater confidence in the methodologies and theoretical apparatus they can now draw on to engage more explicitly with the politics of translation, rather than focusing solely on the textual aspects of the translation event (see **Ideology and translation**). Translation studies researchers, however interdisciplinary their work might be, have at their disposal an established, sometimes canonised, body of works, as evidenced by the number of reference works, encyclopaedias and anthologies in the field. It should not be forgotten, however, that the earlier development of descriptive and systemic translation studies which, according to Hermans "can be the critical conscience of translation studies" (Hermans 1999: 161) has promoted, to a great extent, the contextualisation of translation and interpreting from historical and sociological perspectives (see **Sociology of translation**), and has helped to position translation and interpreting as integral parts of the understanding of war.

The highly mediatised and globalised conflicts of the last two decades (the dismantlement of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans War, the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq, together with the pernicious consequences of the continued occupation of Palestine, the terrorist attacks on New York and the ensuing so-called War on Terror) have brought to the fore the centrality and complexity of the translators and interpreters' roles. Emily Apter acknowledges that her book *The Translation Zone*, a collection of essays which focuses on 'the role by mistranslation in war' (Apter 2006: 3), 'was shaped by the traumatic experience of September 11, 2001' (ibid: vii). The

contingencies of war and conflict (for instance the woefully inadequate provision of translators and interpreters with Arabic in the US, or the lack of trained interpreters in the Balkans and the conflicting allegiances of locally recruited linguists) (Salama-Carr 2011), and the dangers to which translators and interpreters in conflict zones are exposed have foregrounded the centrality and complexity of translation and interpreting in relation to conflict.

Scholarly inquiry into translation and interpreting in situations of conflict has also rekindled interest in the notion of **ethics** which had been so far absent from much of the debate, outside literary translation. From the ethical dilemmas faced by translators and interpreters in terms of allegiances, and their adherence to established professional codes of practices, to the realization that the ethical dimension had to be integrated further in translator and interpreting training (Salama-Carr 2007; Baker & Maier 2011), research into language mediation and conflict in itself exacerbates the methodological and ethical issues linked with the inevitable personal engagement and positioning of the researcher.

The greater articulation of language rights in the overall discourse on Human Rights (for instance in the context of the European Union, or in the context of translation and interpreting for asylum seekers and refugees) has also awarded greater visibility to the translation and interpreting processes. Such 'contingencies', it can be argued, have led an increasing number of translation and interpreting researchers to interrogate and challenge existing models of agency, and of linguistic mediation by drawing on 'conflict' generated data.

Research on translation and interpreting in conflict is frequently collaborative in that it draws on the experience of the translators and interpreters themselves who are articulating their concepts of neutrality and interrogate the way they negotiate codes of conduct and issues of ethics (Kahane 2007). The challenges faced by those 'embedded' interpreters are compounded by the fact that they are not necessarily trained linguists, and the Association Internationale

des Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC) has developed a field guide for interpreters working in conflict zones.

Baker's work on translation and conflict has opened a particularly promising avenue for the description of the role of translators and interpreters in the representation and construction of narratives, an approach that allows for a more nuanced and less binary description of language mediators' stances and can lead to new directions to account for the work of less mainstream mediators, for instance activist translators (see for instance the work of Translators without Borders <http://www.tsf-twb.org/>) and interpreters challenging hegemonic narratives of cultural encounters and geopolitical realities by giving a voice to less dominant constituencies or supporting the work of NGOs or engaging with civil society. Closely related to research on translation and interpreting in situations of (violent) conflict is the work which takes as its focus the framing and delivery of global news (see **Journalism and translation**)

Historical and archival research has also helped to shed light on the role of linguists in the aftermath of war and in post-conflict contexts, and on the ethical and professional challenges that they faced. Historians interested in problematising the intervention of translators and interpreters in situations of armed conflict can also draw on some of the models of translation and interpreting studies. One such research project, carried out in collaboration with the London Imperial War Museum (see **Footitt et al. 2012** and **2013**), has focused on translators and interpreters in war-torn Europe (1944–47), and has foregrounded the involvement and the agency of linguists in the context of peace-keeping in Bosnia (ibid.).

Researchers have also anchored their work in more linguistic approaches to discourse (for instance **Discourse analysis**) and applied their models and frameworks to the exploration of conflict. A contrastive analysis is applied to French translations published in *Le Courrier International* and their Arabic originals which dealt with the topic of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict (see **Guidère 2009**).

Focus on conflict has also opened new interdisciplinary avenues where language mediation (of which translation and interpreting 'proper' are forms) is interrogated within the context of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, in terms of military-civilian relations and the identification of different narratives, or with specific reference to communities in crisis, for instance displaced communities or communities dealing with the aftermath of conflict (see for instance, in the UK, the Arts and Humanities Council funded project on Languages and International NGOs: Cultural Knowledge in Communities in Crisis). New interdisciplinary work brings together academics from Linguistics and Conflict Studies as well as conflict resolution practitioners.

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