

Risk analysis as a heuristic tool in the historiography of interpreters. For an understanding of worst practices

Anthony Pym

Version 2.2. June 2014

Abstract: The specificities of the interpreter's work can be considered in terms of the way people come together in spoken encounters. Underlying the competing interests and implicit search for cooperation is the relative proximity of alternative non-linguistic action, sometimes violent. This gives mediated encounters an element of danger, at the same time as it makes them particularly suitable for risk analysis. This paper analyzes an extreme example of proximate alternative action, a military encounter in Afghanistan, where an interpreter's failure to render significant material is found to be rational in terms of his possible distribution of risk priorities. Risk analysis can enable us to understand multiple cases of what would otherwise simply be unethical or non-standard practices, just as it can help explain why actual encounters do not coincide with the abstract written formulations of best practices. This mode of analysis also opens to the historicity of the mediated encounter as an event, with its own priorities and truths.

Introduction

If I were to rewrite my book *Method in Translation History* (1998) I would insist, first, that the concept of "translation" should allow wider scope to its spoken modes, and second, that more serious methodological attention has to be paid to the complex plays of interests in the mediated encounter and their relation to action. These two desiderata are related: the more spoken the situation, the closer the possibility of alternative non-linguistic action. More simply, interpreters work in dangerous situations, and that is what might give them a special history.

In the next few pages I will try to unpack that proposition.

The importance of speaking, as opposed to writing

So you want to separate interpreting from translating? Do you really think your fundamental questions, your research methodologies, your intellectual audiences, will be all that different? A survey of 374 AIIC members (Brown 2002) found that just under 70 per cent of them also produced written translations professionally, so one could scarcely argue that interpreters, even conference interpreters, are a breed apart – sociologically, if not always financially, that ground for separation will always be a hard sell. Let us accept, nevertheless, that there *are* differences and that they can be significant. Where should we seek them?

Interpreting is usually defined by its spokenness: interpreters speak, translators write, we are told. That difference is now enshrined in a ruling by the US Supreme Court

(2012) – which incidentally enabled a company to get out of paying interpreters – yet that scarcely makes it intellectually satisfying. Don't interpreters write, for example when they take notes? Don't they use the written medium when available, performing sight translation (sight interpreting?) at times, or working from a simultaneously written transcript (as Professor Takeda tells me can happen in depositions)? And beyond those mixed technologies, there can be, after all, writtenness in language that is spoken, as for example when a judge reads out a densely constructed ruling, just as there can be spokenness in language that is written, as in a film script or transcript of an interview (on both these possibilities in relation to the interpreter's task, see Shlesinger 1989, Pym 2007). The fact of speaking or writing is not really what is at stake. So what might the difference be?

Conference interpreters tell us the difference lies in the simultaneity of their delivery, and thus the impossibility of correcting: we don't have time, they say, whereas translators who write have all the time in the world to correct everything they do. So here's the news: eye-tracking indicates that touch-typing translators can read while they write (so there is a degree of simultaneity in written translation); industrial deadlines in localization projects mean that speed is often more important than quality (so there is little time for correction, and in some translation-memory systems there is no possibility for the translator to correct); and then conference interpreters do in fact correct (or make "repairs"), dialogue interpreters are negotiating corrections all the time, and for that matter the same interpreters can merrily go off and do consecutive interpreting, which apparently still counts as interpreting, so all the arguments about simultaneity and non-corrections logically fly out the window. Now, what differences are left?

The significant difference, I propose, can be found by considering the illusory mutual presence of the communication participants. When the message is spoken, the participants are assumed to share the same time frame, if not be within physical earshot of some kind; when the message is written, it is precisely so that those proximities can be stretched – I write for someone who does not share my here-and-now. This difference is crucial because it theoretically enables the direct involvement of the participants in the spoken situation, with feedback and dialogic corrections. And that possibility in turn allows for a different kind of risk management, which is the thing I want to get to. But first let me make this notion of "illusory mutual presence" a little more precise.

As mentioned, in some modes of cross-cultural communication the main participants share the same time frame; in others, they do not. Spatial presence can also be important, but the key shared dimension is time these days, and all the more so now that electronic technologies enable our words to be shared simultaneously even when we are physically at different ends of the world. That is what I mean by "presence": sharing the same time frame. True, there are degrees of iconic clarity, noise in transmission, and slight delays all over the place, but presence, together, and in time, remains key.

Why should that kind of presence be important? Just a few further false leads have to be dispensed with before we can proceed.

First, let us admit, all presence is partly illusory to the extent that the people in front of each other are rarely deciding for themselves: they mostly represent absent parties and interests, and their interactions are in any case conditioned by the nature of language, which moves concepts from situation to situation (language is based on

recycling utterances). As any basic deconstruction will tell you, there is no pure presence. The illusion of presence may nevertheless remain important and influential in itself.

Second, as is more rarely admitted, a similar illusory quality enshrouds the dialogic principle whereby all participants construct meaning together. In idealist theory, in situations of presence, if you don't understand what someone has said, you can ask for some kind of remedy, perhaps an explanation or reformulation. That is, there is the possibility of feedback, and thus of communicative adjustment. Of course, the possibility of feedback by no means coincides with spokenness alone: it can happen with entirely written communication (I propose an article to a journal, I get reviewed, I change the article), just as it can be difficult with spoken interpreting (at a large conference, for example). There is, however, a rough correlation, close enough to make the matter interesting.

I suspect that the possibility of feedback does have consequences for the mediated encounter, even when there is no actual feedback manifested linguistically. Visual presence, body language, and awareness of multiple addressees all play parts in the creation of meaning. One might further suppose that the possibility of feedback allows for greater individuation of the participants ("the" interpreter becomes this particular interpreter), greater scrutiny of signals of trustworthiness, greater attention to the specific interests of each party, and perhaps greater communicative leeway (and less linguistic exactitude) so that those interests can be coordinated to a successful outcome.

To appreciate the importance of all of that, however, we need to ask why anyone should engage in dialogical feedback in the first place. Why should they care at all? It is there, I propose, that analysis of a rather extreme encounter will lead us to a rather deeper characterization of why spoken encounters can be special.

Best and worst practices in an Afghanistan encounter

It is easy to give example of what interpreters should not do. One example that I use in class is the video report *Lost in Translation – Afghanistan* (2008), which follows a US patrol into a remote Afghan village.



The video is easily found online (it is only 8 minutes long) but here is the story for those unable to watch it: The US base has been receiving bombs from the area; the

patrol has come to the village to find out where the bombs are coming from. When they arrive, no one is there – no one to speak with. Eventually a village elder comes along, and an enraged US sergeant asks him about the Taliban (the ACM – Anti Coalition Militia) and the bombs. The old man replies at length, telling a parable about ants eating some of the village’s wheat, which basically means that the village does not like the Taliban but they have to live with them. The interpreter, however, does not render the parable at all, and instead tells the sergeant that the Taliban are somewhere “behind the mountain.” Later the interpreter gives the sergeant his own account of the interaction: “I hate these people, sir! When I ask him something else, they give me wrong answer.” The report closes with the sergeant accusing the village elder of being “full of shit”, and he, the sergeant, wanting to “clean the town out.”

The standard lesson in ethics is easy: the interpreter should have rendered the parable, which is what was there to be translated; he did not do his job; so he is unethical. One might even hope that the parable could have enlightened the sergeant, perhaps initiating a to-and-fro discussion: the sergeant could even have come to trust the old man, and would then not want to kill everyone in the village. That would be the ideal scenario, a cross-cultural dialogue, mutual understanding, a best practice, a sweetheart story of the kind found in textbooks.

The hard part, though, is to understand *why* that particular best practice did not happen. That is, we have to understand why there was history here.

When I use this example in class, I get my students to imagine the position of each communication participant in turn. I then ask them to do a very simple kind of risk analysis, based on identifying the risks pertinent to each participant. We assume that each participant has a very basic goal: to enhance their chances of survival (other goals can be built on top of that one, but they will be for another class). We then use a grid where risks can be high or low frequency, and have high or low impact (which is actually the same grid I get them to use when analyzing localization projects):

	High impact	Low impact
High frequency	Do something!	Think about it.
Low frequency	Think about it	Do nothing (omit?)

For the US sergeant, the analysis might look something like this:

	High impact	Low impact
High frequency	Armed attacks	Cultural alterity
Low frequency	Bombs	Interpreter error

The sergeant’s main problem is the frequency of attacks on his men, but the bombs are becoming more frequent and he has to act before they become his main problem too. So his mission for the moment is to gather information, not to wipe out villages. He is constantly facing communication problems with the Afghans; he is aware of this; he tends to solve issues of cultural alterity by not believing what Afghans say; he thus logically seems not to care about what the interpreter says or does not say. In fact, he has developed a robust model of what is going on, which seems unlikely to be altered by anything that is said: “They’re afraid of the ACM.” So he has little reason to set store by

anyone's particular story. We might thus assume he is more or less aware that the interpreter is not conveying much information. After all, 111 Pashto words are rendered by 32 English words, anyone who can count must know something is missing! Yet the sergeant is prepared to live with the problem, just as the villagers are prepared to live with the ACM (ants eat our wheat, but not too much; interpreters make words disappear, but within an acceptable leeway).

What about the risks confronting the villagers? Now the grid might look something like this:

	High impact	Low impact
High frequency	Attacks by ACM	Contacts with ACM
Low frequency	Attacks by US	Contacts with US

The difference here is not just the frequency but also the probable extension over time: in a few years, the Taliban will still be there, but the US won't, so the first presence is more serious than the second. Contacts with US forces are not problematic in themselves if and when they prevent attacks by those same forces, but they could become extremely problematic if the Taliban perceive them as collaboration or cooperation with the US. This is thus a risk matrix where there is remarkably little to be gained from communication with the US sergeant, and much to be feared from that communication being picked up by the other side. In short, the villagers have no logical interest in the encounter, and they logically disappear. Like a jilted lover, the sergeant really has no way of entering into meaningful conversation. He has to learn to accept that communication is really no longer possible.

Now, what about the village elder? Why does he tell this ant-and-wheat parable? It is actually a story about risk management: the Taliban are present, they do take some resources (like ants nibbling at wheat), but at the end of the day they are high-frequency and low-impact. With respect to his possible communicative actions, the old man's risk distribution might look something like the following:

	High impact	Low impact
High frequency	Tell the Taliban the truth	Be mistrusted by the Taliban
Low frequency	Tell the US the truth	Be mistrusted by the US

The elder cannot tell the Taliban that he has a rational interest in cooperating with the US, just as he cannot tell the US that he has a rational interest in cooperating with the Taliban, but the former risk is greater than the latter. His only interest in talking to the sergeant is that it might prevent an attack from the US, yet he knows he cannot cooperate with them in any more open way, and at the same time he cannot tell them clearly *why* he cannot cooperate. Somehow he has to convey a message without actually saying it. The parable, in this case, is a highly efficient and astute communicative solution. The only problem with that solution is that it is of no interest to the interpreter.

Now for the interpreter's risks. They could look like this:

	High impact	Low impact
--	-------------	------------

High frequency	Lose trust of US	Lose trust of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan
Low frequency	Be seen as a traitor by the Afghans	Be translated by foreign reporters

Since the interpreter has chosen sides in a war zone, risks abound: he works for the US, so some of the Afghan population will inevitably see him as a traitor. That, however, is a risk he is prepared to run, since to lose the trust of the US, to lose his source of income and chances of future mobility, would be an even greater risk. A lesser risk is then the possible loss of trust in his dealings with ethnic groups other than his own, and in this encounter we assume that he is not of the same group as the people in the village (at the beginning he says “I can only speak Pashto”). He is obviously prepared to live with that particular risk: the villagers have no alternative interpreter to turn to, apparently no way of checking on what he is saying in English, and very probably no relation with this interpreter after the US troops leave. So why should he care about them? In this situation, the interpreter’s rational course of action is to do everything possible to maintain the trust of the US. Hence, logically, his decision to omit the parable, to invent a piece of ostensibly useful information (the Taliban are “over that hill”), and to stress to his employer that he has nothing at all to do with the people in the village. One would like to imagine that his astute misrepresentation of unimportant players has since earned him a passage out of the country, but perhaps not.

Of course, there was one small risk that the interpreter forgot about, probably because it was rare, almost certainly because he thought the impact would never touch him. A film crew was present and they had the Pashto dialogue translated into English. He clearly did not count on that; he did not imagine that there would be a second translator somewhere, and that the second translator would be trusted more than he would be (but why should we trust the second translator, who writes, perhaps from a safe office in a safe country? – a point I will return to). In this case, the interpreter’s risk management in this case might have cost him dearly. Then again, the film crew took the messages away from the spoken time frame; the second interpreters was rigorously not present; in the here-and-now where the encounter took place, the interpreter certainly survived.

There is much to discuss in this kind of analysis. The basic point is that some communicative situations are structured in such a way that the motivation for cooperation (Grice’s “cooperative principle”) is very low. This is an encounter that had to happen, since the sergeant needed to seek information and the villagers did not want to be attacked by him, but neither side had very much to gain from it. In such a situation, extreme and asymmetric on many levels, the interpreter can scarcely be blamed for pursuing his own interests, no matter how unprofessional or unethical they may seem. “Best practices,” here, are a sad illusion.

So, too, is the principle of dialogism, in this case. All parties were affirming and deploying their images of the others, but no one was interested (or able) to check that any understanding had been attained. Indeed, one might surmise that all actors left the encounter with precisely the same understandings of the other that they had when they arrived. Like a minor rite, this was communication that had to be performed in order to confirm positions.

As such, it is a long way from the glorious and intimate dangers that one would like to find like potholes along the history of interpreting. Yet there is still danger, and that is enough.

Presence as proximate alternative action

I briefly return to my original problem. What was the role of presence in this particular example? The principle of dialogism, of mutual checking through feedback, seems not to be very telling in this case, as indeed it is not entirely felicitous in numerous large-scale encounters. Would the Afghanistan encounter be any different if it were in writing, conducted across an ocean, perhaps from some kind of policymaking desk at the Pentagon?

There *is* a difference, I suggest, and it is not particularly dialogic in itself, although it certainly underlies why people might engage in dialogue. Surely, even witnessing the encounter from the outside, one senses the danger, the imminent possibility that failing dialogue may lead to another kind of action, to more outright threats, to shots being fired. This proximity of alternative action – to give a dangerous thing a technical name – is surely something that is not so characteristic of written communication, of exchanges across time. Why this should be so is not hard to imagine: in the situation of relative presence, there is greater visual awareness of all actors and their possible interactions. When people are in front of each other, they are concerned not just with what is said or not said, but also with what could be *done*, physically.

The Swiss linguist Charles Bally made an intriguing if unwitting contribution to performative linguistics when he proposed that a series of utterances and actions can be functionally equivalent to each other, and that the function can be rooted in action. Here is an English translation of his prime example (1932/1965: 41):

1. I want you to leave.
2. I order you to leave.
3. You have to leave.
4. You must leave.
5. Leave the room!
6. Get out!
7. Out!
8. [Gesture toward the door and facial expression indicating irritation.]
9. [Throwing the person out.]

Bally observes that the series moves from the explicit to the implicit, and this is certainly something that would generally characterize a shift from the written to the spoken: distance from the situation requires greater linguistic explicitness, particularly of the linguistic persons and their interrelations. What is more engaging, however, is the way in which Bally sees non-linguistic action (at levels 8 and 9 in the example) as being functionally equivalent to the increasingly oral utterances. The further we are from that kind of alternative action, the more written the language. Indeed, the written language might be produced in order to *prevent* movements towards the alternative action.

Could that proximity to alternative action, the imbrication in an event marked by presence, possibly be what characterizes orally mediated encounters?

In the case we are studying, this is not an uninteresting question to ask.

Best practices for US counterinsurgency?

These particular encounters are covered by a fairly well-developed communication policy, available online in the US Army's booklet *Counterinsurgency* (2006). This document outlines the way the US aimed to "win hearts and minds" in Afghanistan, and how interpreters ("linguists") were supposed to help them do it. This is a fascinating text, where some gifted policymakers learn a little from Paul of Tarsus and Mao Zedong, do some wonderful theorizing about cultural alterity, and then get it all wrong because they forget about language.

The key element in the counterinsurgency strategy is to communicate with the people on the ground – this is what the US strategists learned from Mao Zedong, the great theorist of insurgency. That does not mean that villagers should actually *like* US soldiers, we are told: "*Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts.* Over time, successful trusted networks grow like roots into the populace. They displace enemy networks [...]" (2006: A5, italics in the text). If you present the facts, give the numbers, the people will understand. This presentation of facts occasionally assumes Star Wars proportions, as in the admonition to convince locals "that the force can protect them and that resisting it is pointless" (2006: A5). Yes, it is easy to make fun of the ideology, yet other parts of the same document are extremely apposite, and interestingly contradict the assumption that pure force will be enough. For example:

Cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency. American ideas of what is "normal" or "rational" are not universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have *different notions of rationality*, appropriate behavior, level of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender. Thus, what may appear abnormal or strange to an external observer may appear as self-evidently normal to a group member. For this reason, counterinsurgents — especially commanders, planners, and small-unit leaders — should strive to avoid imposing their ideals of normalcy on a foreign cultural problem. (2006: 1-80; italics in the text)

Other sections highlight the key role of women in "traditional societies," identifying ways in which women-to-women encounters might bring about change (and further contradicting the notion that a show of force will be enough):

In traditional societies, women are hugely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. When women support COIN [counter-insurgency] efforts, families support COIN efforts. Getting the support of families is a big step toward mobilizing the local populace against the insurgency. Co-opting neutral or friendly women through targeted social and economic programs builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually

undermine insurgents. Female counterinsurgents, including interagency people, are required to do this effectively. (A-35)

This is great theory. Of course, it is destined to flounder as soon as you consider what language the woman-to-woman discussion is going to take place in, and who the interpreters are likely to be (the sex of interpreters is strangely absent from the theory – the available reports mention a “chronic shortage” of women interpreters¹). For that matter, the recommendation that men like our sergeant in the village “should strive to avoid imposing their ideals of normalcy on a foreign cultural problem” similarly shrivels as soon as you consider the linguistic mediation required in order to understand the problem in the first place. If you can’t trust your interpreters, you are not going to win many hearts and minds, no matter how sophisticated your cultural theory.

So what does the document say about interpreters? Rather little. In fact, it seems to admit that the US will suffer a perpetual handicap: “insurgents hold a distinct advantage in their level of local knowledge. They speak the language, move easily within the society, and are more likely to understand the population’s interests” (1-125). The one effective recommendation is “patience and tolerance when dealing with language and translation barriers” (5-86). And why should patience and tolerance be required? Because, the document tells us, there are three kinds of linguists:

Category I linguists usually are hired locally and require vetting. They do not have a security clearance. They are the most abundant resource pool; however, their skill level is limited.

Category II linguists are U.S. citizens with a secret clearance. Often they possess good oral and written communication skills. They should be managed carefully due to limited availability. Category II linguists interpret for battalion and higher.

Category III linguists are U.S. citizens with a top secret clearance. They are a scarce commodity and often retained at division and higher levels of command. They have excellent oral and written communications skills. (C 2-4)

The interpreter on the ground, the one we have witnessed here, is Category I, recognized as requiring vetting (of what kind? how?) and as having “limited skills.” In short, the policy document does not presuppose any particular trust in this intermediary. Trustworthiness increases as one moves up the hierarchy, away from the battlefield, and implicitly from spoken to written mediation (“written skills” are only mentioned for Category II and Category III). Indeed, this structural mistrust of the interpreter becomes even clearer the 2009 document *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, where leaders are now advised to use more than one source of information: “Know your linguist; use more than one to double-check the integrity and accuracy of information and reliability of linguist” (2009: 5-119). In our example encounter, of course, the nature of the interpreting is revealed precisely by a second translator, albeit not one in the employ of the beleaguered sergeant. A similar kind of checking process is implicit in the way two interpreters are

¹ There have been women interpreters in Afghanistan, but I have been unable to find out how many. The shortage was so great that Heela Nasser, the US military interpreter who previously managed a Victoria’s Secret store in Los Angeles, is reported as having changed jobs for considerable money: “Nasser’s yearlong contract pays her six figures” (*Stars and Stripes*, January 28, 2011: <http://www.stripes.com/news/american-interpreter-takes-a-stand-in-afghanistan-1.133124>. Accessed June 2, 2014.

recommended when preparing for a meeting: “One actively interprets while the other observes body language and listens to side conversations in the audience” (2009: 7-69). Body language and side conversations, the stuff of oral encounter, are clearly important because what is interpreted up-front is not going to be trusted in itself.

Monacelli and Punzo (2001), commenting on the use of interpreters in the Italian military, note that trustworthiness increases as one goes up the chain of command. “Equivalence,” they note, is not authorized by the interpreter on the field but by a superior working at a desk. That is, paradoxically, the further the translation moves from the scene of the encounter, the more “equivalent” (and the more written) it becomes, contrary to what one might expect (the person closest to the situation should ideally have the most information about the situation). That kind of paradox is not out of place in the US hierarchy of linguists, where the entire counterinsurgency strategy depends on trusting interpreters on the ground, but the hierarchical structure implicitly does not trust those same interpreters. Thanks to this simple paradox of language and trust, the strategy was destined to fail: not many hearts and minds were likely to be won.

Proximate action and where history lies

Some years ago, in Prague, I gave a lecture on what I thought was a suitably intellectual topic, and a mildly heated discussion ensued. Then, as we sensed the exchanges were drawing to a close, an interpreter suddenly burst from a forgotten booth, stormed up the stairs, and shouted, looking back at me: “You are 200% abstract!” or words to that effect.

I take the point. I apologize for abstraction. I beg forgiveness for not having spoken in a way accessible to interpreters. I am truly sorry we were carried away by the debate. I have tried to be careful about such matters ever since.

Then again, isn’t heated debate precisely the kind of event one goes to conferences for? And wasn’t the interpreter’s reaction, rash and physical and overheated, also part of that same event? One senses that her frustration had been building over time, as she struggled with unprepared terms, changes of speakers, mixes of bad English, people interrupting each other. All the things that created the event also built up that tension, which was released in the outburst.

The interpreter’s loud complaint, I suggest, is a further example of how proximate action informs the event. Such things rarely happen, but they *could* always happen, and much is (or should) be done in the interpreted encounter in order to prevent them. If the outburst, the physical action, were not possible, the exchanges would be otherwise. This effect of the proximate action can only be seen in the situations where the physical action can occur, or is felt to be close. That is a reason for analyzing extreme cases.

In the extreme cases, but not only there, we see why there can be a history of interpreting.

History might be no more than the acting out of the huge forces that shape our thoughts and actions: the configuration of capital, the relation of military forces, the advances and deployments of technologies, the imposition of old and new forms of domination, the creation and undermining of cultural prestige. History is all that, and those things do indeed inform the frame in which mediated encounters take place. Our

historiographers might then do nothing more than perpetually confirm the narratives of large-scale forces, as if they were all we needed to know.

And yet, what happens in the interpreted encounter, thanks to the tensions of proximate action, can lead to unpredicted outcomes, and thus to a different kind of history. No one really knew how the Afghanistan encounter was going to end – if one did, there would be no need for risk analyses. There is in this the truth of the event rather than of representation (Badiou 1988), action within the immediacy of situation (Varela 1999). In that very unpredictability one senses an experiential reality that cannot be reduced to laws or norms, and yet a mode of history that might not entirely escape comprehension in terms of multiple risks.

Postscript: So why a history of interpreters?

I find an odd note in an ambitiously announced “Prolegomena for the Establishment of a General Theory of Translation,” which never got beyond the stage of a prelude, perhaps because of the tragic death of the author Edmond Cary in 1966:

The distinction established today between “translating” (written texts) and “interpreting” (oral) is recent. It was the Renaissance which enthroned the book in our civilization. So much so that the written word has supplanted the spoken word and “translation” has come to be considered as a higher species and “interpreting” as an inferior activity. (Cary 1962: 104).

The note sounds strange because, at least in most of our current training institutions, “interpreting” tends to be reduced to be “conference interpreting” and is systematically regarded as a *superior* activity. After all, it commonly has higher entrance qualifications, more rigorous exams, a far more effective system for signaling professional status (there is nothing like the AIC for translators of the written word), significantly higher pay per hour, and appeals to a heroic age where prodigious interpreters (including Edmond Cary) performed magical linguistic feats in the name of various illusory shades of global justice. The chip on the shoulder that conference interpreters might once have had is no longer in evidence. Indeed, Cary himself adds a footnote where he wondered, in 1962, whether the rise of audiovisual media was announcing a second Renaissance, this time of the spoken word.

These various claims remind us, first, that the very constitution of our central concepts is profoundly historical: the “interpreter” has emerged from a very particular part of history, and continues to take shape as an independent figure that can aspire to professional status. The second message is that the emergence itself is enmeshed in power relationships, ideologies, and struggles that cannot be understood without co-reference to the written word: a history of interpreters that excludes written translation risks hypostatizing its object at the same time as it misunderstands its own historicity. To separate interpreters from wider translation history might be tantamount to self-delusion, of at least a precarious assumption that the road to professional independence has somehow been reached, best practices reign, and there is no more history to tell. We are not yet there.

For all that, the more problematic scission would now appear to run not between the written and the spoken, but between conference interpreting and the array of lesser activities variously known as “public service interpreting,” “community interpreting,” “dialogue interpreting,” and probably more. Attempts to push all modalities of spoken mediation into the one professional space sometimes reveal more disparities than common ground. For example, a North American survey by Kelly et al. (2010) presents myriad graphs and tables of a unified profession that brings together both conference interpreters and public-service interpreters, but when you look closely at the salary distributions (2010: 35, 43), there are two humps, for two different salary ranges, and few can really pretend that conference interpreters are really in the same boat as the others (in this case mostly medical interpreters). The report never really draws out the reasons behind the disparity in salaries, and thus tends to miss the power dynamics that are operating within its only apparently unified object of knowledge.

Similar sleight of hand works in an opposed sense in Jean Delisle’s editing of Ruth Roland’s *Translating World Affairs* (1982), originally written “as a tribute to both translators and interpreters” (1982: vi; italics in the text). Delisle re-baptized the same text as *Interpreters as Diplomats. A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics* (1999), adding a preface that only talks about interpreters and thereby flying in the face of the evidence clearly inscribed in the book: well into the nineteenth century, most diplomatic corps made no distinction between translators and interpreters (1999: 36) – and for that matter, the US military’s use of the term “linguist” in my example above similarly combats the oral/written distinction to which others seem inexplicably attached. We thus impose our present academic distinctions on a past (and part of a present) that has been singing from a different hymn-sheet.

In our histories, our attempts at empowerment too easily confuse the powerful with the powerless, attempting to impose the same standards on all and sometimes precariously drawing out shared lessons on agency. There is historicity even within the idea of such an attempt. And that historicity cannot be grasped unless we tell stories of more than the spoken, preferably of all the ways in which the problems of cross-cultural communication have been addressed. When we talk about interpreters, I think we are doing translation history. And when we study interpreters, I think we are doing Translation Studies. This is not to impose the written on the spoken: I use “translation” as a superordinate, as it has been for many centuries (“mediation” would be more exact, but it is a harder sell), and I am not well disposed to the couplet “Translation and Interpreting Studies” – one would also have to add “localization” and “audiovisual translation,” at least, in a perverse construal of unity by extendible list. The need to consider all media together can be seen in our example above: the oral rendition is inferior to the pronouncements of the written “linguist,” and here are undone by a written translation in audiovisual format (the film-maker’s subtitles). If you refuse to look at all the media, you risk not seeing those dynamics.

Across numerous case studies and willful misrepresentations, however, there does seem to be at least this one constant: *interpreters have historically moved towards greater professional identity*, in the sense of reducing the extent to which their tasks are combined with other forms of mediation between cultures. That identity may in some cases be no more than an aspiration; in others it could be an attribute imposed from outside the profession, often as partial recognition of guilt or innocence. Through all the

variants, there is still this constant, I suggest. Even if no more than one instance of the historical division of labor, a logical consequence of increasing social complexity, the tendency is profound and worth reflecting on. Further, the rise in professional status, with controlled signals of status, could constitute a historical solution to the kind of perverse risk management we have seen in our example here. Any sociology of professions will tell you that the emergence of a new profession requires something like “collective identity” (Houle 1980) or “a culture or formal network of practitioners” (Witter-Merithew and Johnson 2004). Often these things are tied to the development of a code of ethics, of the kind that is really applied in practice. Yet the development of a distinct “identity” or “culture” also requires substance in time, a sense of continuity, a history.

Why do the history of interpreters? Only part of the answer can be to document and describe the rise of a profession. The other part, perhaps more honest, must recognize that the writing of the history itself is one way of actually constituting the identity and culture necessary for the profession. In that sense, historiography is a performative act; it does not just describe professional status as its object, it helps enact it. And I think that can be a very good thing.

Why should professional status be desirable? Just consider the Afghan interpreter. Imagine how different the situation would be if he had training, a serious rank, a pay grade, relations of trust from both sides (as much as possible). All those factors would distribute and thus mitigate the personal risks; they would reduce the interpreter’s need to act for the sake of his personal interests; they would also logically increase the value of what could be lost if he were discovered to be betraying trust. Professional status significantly reconfigures risk distribution; it is the basis of anything like a best practice. In that imaged best-practice scenario, the US sergeant might even have heard the story about wheat and ants. He could even have understood it. And some degree of cross-cultural understanding might have been achieved.

Appendix

The following transcript of *Lost in Translation - Afghanistan* has been taken from <http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=58930&tmpl=transcript>.

VOICEOVER: This is what happens in a rocket attack. We’re all in the command center. Charlie Company has been hit by nearly 200 Taliban rockets over the past 12 months.

SOLDIER: You got a problem with that.

SOLDIER: Once we are in the zone we will cover all three grids.

SOLDIER: Gunline! Cancel. Do not load.

VOICEOVER: The Americans are hitting back.

SOLDIER: Platoon! Cancel. Do not load.

VOICEOVER: This is where they think those rockets are coming from. This is [“MANG-grow-tay”], a small Afghan frontier village just a couple of miles from Pakistan. Taliban fighters sneak across the border and launch their attacks from here. The Americans are edgy as they approach; they’ve been ambushed here in the past. And the people who live here? They’re powerless and terrified, caught between America and her enemies. That’s why they’ve disappeared.

SGT. ADAMS: This is like every other town. Everybody disappeared.

VOICEOVER: The soldiers ask to speak to the village elders, but everything gets lost in translation.

SGT. ADAMS: They’re in their house? Where?

TRANSLATOR: Yeah, the elders...

SGT. ADAMS: Where?

TRANSLATOR: In the house.

SGT. ADAMS: They're sick? Is that what he said? What did you say?

TRANSLATOR: No, no. They are not sick. They are in the house.

SGT. ADAMS: Okay. Ask him to go get them. We want to talk to him.

VOICEOVER: As quickly as he appeared, the man is gone. He never returns. Sergeant Adams is desperate to speak to someone, anyone.

SGT. ADAMS: So that guy, when he told me to get the elders, walked that way, and that kid walked that way. What's the kid doing? He's full of shit, that's what it is. Pretty much just out of respect for the uh, Muslim faith, we're not supposed to go into mosques, unless they're shooting from us, at us from. Then we'd go in. I don't care how many come. I just want one that's got some sense about him. Ah! That's him. Yeah.

VOICEOVER: Finally, an elder appears in the distance.

SGT. ADAMS: Fat guy with the red beard, that's him. Alright. Come over here. Have him sit down. Relax.

VOICEOVER: Again, everything here hinges on the translation, the subtleties of Pashtun English.

TRANSLATOR (SUBTITLED TRANSLATION): [Come over here and sit with us on this log.]

SGT. ADAMS: Yeah. Take a load off.

VOICEOVER: The translators have become unexpected power-brokers in all this, and sometimes they just don't translate everything they hear.

SGT. ADAMS: Tell him: how has things been here?

VILLAGE ELDER (SUBTITLED TRANSLATION): [I can only speak Pashto.]

TRANSLATOR (SUBTITLED TRANSLATION): [That is ok. How is the security here?]

VILLAGE ELDER: [There is no security.]

TRANSLATOR (SUBTITLED TRANSLATION): [No - what I mean is how's the security situation here?]

VILLAGE ELDER: [I just told you! There is no security here. We've yet to see any security around here.]

TRANSLATOR (ENGLISH): We are fine. They have no problems here.

VOICEOVER: Is it any wonder that the Americans feel battled in these situations and the ordinary Afghans feel ignored?

VILLAGE ELDER: [I agree with you on the cooperation; the Taliban are over there - not far away. I would like to tell them a story. In our country, we grow wheat and we have ants. There is no way we can stop the little ants from stealing the wheat. There are so many little ants it is almost impossible to stop them. I've told this story to help the Americans understand the situation in Afghanistan. Yes, the Americans built this road and they would do more to help us if we cooperate with them. Of course we know that! And we would like to cooperate with them. It's just that we can't!]

TRANSLATOR (ENGLISH): Okay. He's giving many examples. The main point is that, he said, if you want to get every ACMs [anti-coalition militia], they are behind this road pardon me, sir, behind this mountain.

VOICEOVER: Adams wants to know when the village elder last saw the Taliban. He doesn't receive the answer he's looking for.

SGT. ADAMS: When was the last time they saw them?

TRANSLATOR (ENGLISH): I ask him. He says one year ago.

SGT. ADAMS: One, year? Oh, for fuck's sake. Are you kidding me? Hey, hey, tell him he's full of shit, first of all. One week ago, we took four rockets from a hilltop 800 meters from here. They didn't see that? Didn't hear it?

TRANSLATOR (ENGLISH): One week ago, sir?

SGT. ADAMS: Yeah. It was a week ago, right? What'd he say? What'd he say?

TRANSLATOR (ENGLISH): They are afraid. Two months ago they [the Taliban] came to our village and took all the young guys and started beating them.

SGT. ADAMS: Ask him if he's got any guns here. I don't want to take them; I just want to know why he didn't shoot them in the fucking face.

~~~~

SGT. ADAMS: Like shit. It's the same thing again. You know, they're afraid of the ACM, and no matter how many times you tell them or how you tell them, they don't seem to want to understand that until they put their... . I mean, they're allowed to have an AK per household. If they put an AK in dude's face and

shot him, knowing he's a bad guy, Taliban an ACM, whatever you want to call it, they will stop coming here. And he won't understand that. So they basically support the ACM by not supporting anyone.

~~~~

SGT. ADAMS: What's he saying?

TRANSLATOR (ENGLISH): I hate these people, sir! When I ask him something else, they give me wrong answer.

SGT. ADAMS: I fucking hate this town.

~~~~

TEXT ON SCREEN: One week later

SOLDIER: The rocket hit the wire. Is it still standing?

SOLDIER: Oh, we just took two rockets that came up from the eastern ridge towards the Pak border.

SGT. ADAMS: About no more than what? Eight hundred meters away from ["MANG-grow-tay"], the village we were at with the big, fat, red-haired, bearded guy. The guy's full of shit. I feel like basically cleaning the town out. I don't know.

## References

- Badiou, A. (1988). *L'Être et l'évènement*. Paris: Seuil.
- Bally, C. (1932/1965). *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*. Quatrième édition revue et corrigée. Bern: Francke.
- Brown, S. (2002). *Do interpreters translate? Results of an e-mail survey of AIIC members to determine if interpreters also work as translators*. Consortium for Training Translation Teachers. <http://isg.urv.es/cttt/cttt/research/browncorrected.pdf>. Accessed April 2014.
- Cary, E. (1962). Prolegomena for the Establishment of a General Theory of Translation. *Diogenes* 10 (40), 96-121. Spanish translation by A. B. Gómez as Para una teoría de la traducción. *Diógenes* 103-128. The English text is co-signed by Sidney Alexander; the Spanish version is not. Here I cite from the Spanish.
- Guardian Films. (2008). *Lost in Translation. Afghanistan*. John D. McHugh, Teresa Smith, Alex Rees, Michael Tait and Lindsay Poulton. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2008/jun/11/afghanistan.johndmchugh> (accessed 2 June 2014).
- Houle, C. O. (1980). *Continuing Learning in the Professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kelly, N., Stewart R. G., Hegde, V. 2010. *The Interpreting Marketplace. A Study of Interpreting in North America*. Lowell, MA: Common Sense Advisory.
- Monacelli, C, and Punzo, R. (2001). Ethics in the Fuzzy Domain of Interpreting: A 'Military' Perspective. *The Translator* 7 (2), 265-282.
- Pym, A. (1998). *Method in Translation History*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Pym, A. (2007). On Shlesinger's proposed equalizing universal for interpreting. In F. Pöchhacker, A. L. Jakobsen, and I. M. Mees, eds. *Interpreting Studies and Beyond: A Tribute to Miriam Shlesinger*. Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur Press, 175-190.
- Roland, R. A. (1982). *Translating World Affairs*. Jefferson NC, London: McFarland.
- Roland, R. A. (1999). *Interpreters as Diplomats. A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics*. Ed. Jean Delisle. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Shlesinger, M. (1989). *Simultaneous Interpretation as a Factor in Effecting Shifts in the Position of Texts on the Oral-Literate Continuum*. MA thesis, Tel Aviv University.

- Supreme Court of the United States (2012). *Taniguchi v. Kan Pacific Saipan, Ltd., DBA Marianas Resort and Spa*. Opinion of the Court, May 21, 2012: <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/11pdf/10-1472.pdf> (accessed 2 June 2014).
- Tseng, J. (1992). *Interpreting as an emerging profession in Taiwan. A sociological model*. Masters thesis. Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan. [http://www.est-translationstudies.org/research/2011\\_DGT/references/1992\\_Tseng.pdf](http://www.est-translationstudies.org/research/2011_DGT/references/1992_Tseng.pdf) (accessed 2 June 2014).
- United States Department of the Army (2006). *Counterinsurgency*. Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army. <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf> (accessed 2 June 2014).
- United States Department of the Army (2009). *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*. Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army. [http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR\\_pubs/dr\\_a/pdf/fm3\\_24x2.pdf](http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/fm3_24x2.pdf) (accessed 2 June 2014).
- Witter-Merithew, A., and Johnson, L. (2004). "Market disorder within the field of sign language interpreting: Professionalization implications". *Journal of Interpretation* 19–55.
- Varela, F. J. (1999). *Ethical Know-How*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.