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Interpreters in Conflict Zones: A Survey-Based Study

ABSTRACT

Arab countries in general have been facing conflicts since forever. This is why interpreters, translators, and translation teachers must be able to face challenges and find ways to overcome them. The current study is a survey-based analysis of some interviews held by the researcher with some interpreters who worked in conflict zones in some countries in Asia and Arab world. The study aims to analyze the statements made by the interpreters in question to learn about the challenges and solutions they faced during their work in conflict zones.

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المترجمون الشفويون في بؤر النزاعات: دراسة استقصائية

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الخلاصة:

تواجه الدول العربية عموماً أزمات منذ الأزل. ولهذا السبب يجب أن يكون المترجمون الشفويون والتحريريون واساتذ الترجمة قادرين على مواجهة التحديات وإيجاد الحلول للتغلب عليها. إذ تعد الدراسة الحالية دراسة تحليلية استقصائية عن تحليل قائم على الاستقصاء اجراها الباحث من خلال تنظيم لقاءات مع بعض المترجمين الشفويين الذين عملوا في بؤر النزاعات في بعض الدول العربية وآسيا. وتهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل وجهات النظر التي أدلى بها المترجمون المعنيون للتعرف على التحديات والحلول التي واجهوها أثناء عملهم في بؤر النزاعات.

الكلمات الدالة: التحديات، بؤر النزاعات، المترجمون الشفويون، الحلول

1. Literature Review

Translation in general and interpreting in particular are considered important means of communication among people in the world on various aspects of life. Interpreting mode (simultaneous or consecutive) is mostly needed within the process of communication because it is carried out during the process of source language speech delivery by the speaker. It is even more vital when it comes to interpreting in conflict zones due to the difficult circumstances—wars, killings, bombardments, the spread of violence, or insecurity—that interpreters might face within the process of interpreting. These circumstances make the interpreter's job next to impossible because he or she is already under heavy pressure because of the nature of the mode of communication, and the circumstances make it more difficult to carry out the process smoothly. The study will review the literature of some related studies and present background knowledge about interpreting types. It will dedicate a part for the methodology of the study, which is based on interviews held by the researcher with some interpreters to speak about their own viewpoints about the interpreters' role in conflict zones. Then, the study applies the methodology to their interpreters' statements to be analyzed to learn about the major challenges that interpreters could face during the interpreting process in conflict zones and means of overcoming such challenges. Finally, the study presents conclusions. Several studies were conducted in areas that focused on interpreters' roles in conflict zones. This highlights these available studies to learn more about such a topic. The first selected study is titled *Interpreters in the Time of Crisis: Borders and Barriers*, carried out by researcher Ahmed Moneus, and it was published in the *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences* in December 2021. It sheds light on the nature of the work of interpreters on the frontlines. Those interpreters should be armed with top-notch skills and competencies, not to mention resilience, to arrive at a better product. Conflict zone interpreters' must be

ready to face risks. Among the challenges that interpreters face in such zones are cultural and linguistic barriers, and the most challenging situation is the hostile nature of the place where interpreters are involved. Moneus counted on an open-ended questionnaire to highlight the roles of Yemeni interpreters in these circumstances. The findings of the study showed that Yemeni interpreters face multiple challenges, including linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological challenges. Also, they encounter the pressure of the work and security threats. Moneus advised interpreters to be aware of cultural sensitivity to avert tension as well as psychological pressure. The selected study is *An Investigation into the Interpreters' Challenges in Conflict Zones: the case of the Darfur Region in Sudan* conducted by three researchers—Holi Ibrahim Ali, Awad Alhassan, and Ishaq Burma, and is published in the *Arab World English Journal for Translation and Literary Studies*, August 2019. Their study is concerned with investigating the challenges faced by language assistants and local interpreters who work for United Nations Peacekeeping Missions operating in the Darfur region of Sudan. The study presents some questions: “What are the linguistic, social-cultural, mistrust, and communication-related barriers that are encountered by interpreters and language assistants in conflict zones, and how do they cope with these challenges?” and the second question is “What could be done to train them to handle such challenges and difficulties?”. The researchers applied quantitative and semi-structured interviews to collect the data for analysis. The interview data was transcribed, coded, and finally analyzed. The findings of the study showed that participants experienced many challenges, like cultural-specific issues of the region in question, threats including physical attacks, verbal attacks, hostilities, and communication barriers.

The current study will count on interviews as the method of data collection. It will transform their verbal statements into written ones. Then, it will analyze

their statements to highlight the major challenges faced by conflict zone interpreters and solutions for such challenges by presenting qualitative analysis in the discussion and a table of the quantitative analysis.

2. Background

There are two major types of interpreting. The first one is consecutive interpreting (CI). It is a mode of interpreting where the speaker delivers his speech in the source language (SL) for a while and stops, then the interpreter renders his speech into the target language (TL). During the process of listening, the interpreter has to take notes on the most important elements of the speaker's speech, such as proper nouns, statistics, dates, cities, etc., so as to link what he heard with what he wrote to produce a suitable product in the TL (Russell & Takeda, 2015). Speaking of the second mode of interpreting, it is defined as simultaneous interpreting (SI). It is a process of receiving the speech from a speaker in the source language SL (live speech or recorded one), processing it, and producing it in the target language TL (Gile, 2018). There are many types of SI; they are as follows: conference interpretation, whispered interpretation, online interpretation, and television program interpretation. Another type of interpretation highlighted by the researcher is called field interpretation.

As for the first one, it is concerned with interpreting speeches for high-ranking officials, diplomats, and scholars. It is a less difficult type of interpreting in comparison with the rest because the speech delivered in such events will be known to the interpreter, not to mention that the language employed is formal and the intended listeners will be able to comprehend the language easily. On top of that, the environment will be comfortable for the interpreter because such events are usually convened in big halls (Ibrahim, 2022).

Speaking of the second type, the researcher says that whispered interpreting is concerned with closed-door meetings between VIPs where the interpreter might be sitting behind the official and interpreting for him or her into the target language. It is described as one of the more difficult types because the interpreter may be asked to render the speaker's speeches from SL into TL and vice versa.

In other words, it will be a double-task process (Tri, 2019). Besides, the topic of the speech could be gravely sensitive. This is why the interpreter must be careful when interpreting every single word from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL) so as not to be in trouble.

While the third one is about online interpreting, it is described as a very difficult type because of the circumstances associated with the process of interpreting. As the name suggests, it is carried out online via online platforms such as Zoom meetings, free conference calls, Google Meet, etc. It has become well known to the public, especially to Iraqis during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason why it is very difficult is because the internet service might be weak, which will undermine the outcome, not to mention the bad quality of the voice (Gile, 2018).

The fourth type deals with television interpreting; it is one of the nicest ways of interpreting speeches and is usually employed by TV stations to interpret live broadcast speeches made by VIPs, politicians, etc.

Finally, the fifth type of interpretation is discussed here is called field interpreting. In other words, it is the process of interpreting a speech simultaneously, whether the interpreter is on the battle field, a refugee camp, in the desert, etc. It is defined as the most difficult type of interpretation for a number of reasons, including the following: the environment might not be safe, and the weather could not be helpful. In other words, the interpreter may be uncomfortable,

and the language employed during the interpretation process must be taken care of because the interpreter might interpret for uneducated people, battered children, women, and old people. In other words, their linguistic competence is not that rich. Therefore, the interpreter in question has to make use of the simplest vocabulary to convey the message easily, and he must never treat them as experts; otherwise, the situation could be jeopardized entirely. I believe that resorting to colloquial Arabic is sometimes helpful in the process of simultaneous interpretation for people like refugees (Tri, 2019).

3. Methodology

The researcher will hold interviews with four available professional interpreters selected on the basis of availability and diversity in different areas of the Asian continent. Then, their interviews are transformed into written statements. After that, he will analyze their viewpoints qualitatively and quantitatively to know more challenges that conflict zone interpreters could face during the interpreting process and means of overcoming such challenges.

4. Data Collection

The researcher selected four interpreters from Asia, three from the Arab World (Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria), and one from Kazakhstan. They are chosen on the basis of diversity and availability. All of them expressed their opinions about interpreters' roles in conflict zones, challenges, and means of finding solutions to such challenges in statements. The interpreters' details are presented below.

Table 1

Interpreter's Details

| No. | Country | Academic Degree in Translation or Linguistics | Gender | Job Title |
|-----|------------|---|--------|--|
| 1 | Iraq | PhD in Translation Studies | Male | University Professor and Freelance Interpreter |
| 2 | Lebanon | MA in Translation Studies | Female | Freelance Interpreter |
| 3 | Syria | MA in Translation Studies | Female | Media Industry |
| 4 | Kazakhstan | MA in Conference Interpreting | Female | Conference Interpreter |

5. Participants' Statements Regarding Interpreters in Conflict Zones

The study presents four statements made by four interpreters expressing their opinions about interpreters in conflict zones; they are highlighted below.

5.1. Interpreters in conflict zones: (Iraq as a model)

This essay was written by an interpreter who comes originally from a conflict zone during the time of the occupation of ISIS to Mosul city. The work of the interpreter in these areas is not an easy task; and the difficulty in this is not related to the level of the linguistic knowledge that the interpreter should have. These difficulties can be linked to other extra-linguistic factors that may seem to be very difficult to pay attention to while doing the task of providing interpreting services to the client. The first issue that the interpreter may face is the security measures that normally start from the moment of driving to the place from a safe zone into another one that is classified as a dangerous area.

Form the beginning, the security team will inform all the passengers including the interpreter that they are heading to a dangerous area and all of the team members should follow the instructions of the security team from the moment

they mount the armored vehicles that will transport the whole team members including the interpreter. In addition, the security supervisor of the team briefs the passengers in case there are some unexpected accidents like a road side bomb or any possible gunshot in the area that the team is going to be there and what is needed to be done in order to avoid any possible casualties. All these issues may lead that the interpreter is going to be stressed and not being able to focus on the task assigned to him. Along these issues, there are other factors that may affect the quality of the interpreting service like the individual whom is getting benefit from this interpreting service. Normally these individuals are vulnerable and their level of education is very low and as a result to that; the interpreter has to explain in detail each sentence and the interpreter her may use longer sentences and also has to use a more colloquial language in order to make sure that the individual/ s is completely understanding what the speaker is saying. In addition, such kinds of interpreting are happening in an unofficial setting due to the critical situation of the place and normally the interpreting services cover the basic needs related to that specific place where people are in need for specific purposes mainly food and shelter.

At the end, the work of interpreters in these conflict zones is not an easy task and it requires the interpreter to be vigilant all the time.

5.2. Interpreters in conflict zones: (Lebanon as a model)

When interpreters work in conflict zones, one must remember that they are mostly natives of this zone. They come with their background, their baggage, their experiences, in addition to their languages and skills. This adds to their challenge of keeping neutral and serving all the parties ethically and professionally. As a Lebanese interpreter, I have been to refugee camps, to interviews for refugee

repatriation abroad, and to other settings where the skills we were trained at were put to the test. Our mission is to convey the message of both parties. This is what matters the most. We are not there to demonstrate, to "make a point". We are at the service of our clients and our beneficiaries. A lot of people are dragged into this against their will, and my job is to make things easier for everyone, not harder. We have to be part of the solution, not the problem.

5.3. Interpreters in Conflict Zones(:Syria as a model)

The interpreter is considered one of the vital elements in crises and wars, as he faces great challenges that affect his performance and experience. Interpretation becomes more complex and difficult in the context of crises and wars due to the harsh conditions and psychological pressures associated with these circumstances. One of the most prominent challenges an interpreter faces in crises and wars is securing access to important information. Damaged infrastructure and power or communications outages are common in conflict areas, making it difficult to obtain up-to-date and reliable information. Even the restrictions imposed on freedom of the press and media reflect negatively on the interpreter. The challenges are also complicated when dealing with multiple and diverse dialects, and the interpreter must be familiar with them and also with the different languages used in the affected area. For example, in Syria, there are 14 governorates, and each governorate has several dialects that differ from the city to the countryside.

There are also several nationalities. In one region, which increases the complexity of the issue. The interpreter must be prepared to render vocabulary and phrases related to wars and crises. And he should know that he will face difficulty in accurate translation and his own understanding of the meaning at the same time, especially in emergency situations that require quick and accurate interaction.

Added to this are the psychological and emotional challenges that an interpreter can face. Working in the context of crises and wars may expose him to shocking scenes and tragic stories, which affect his mental and psychological health, and he may be forced to deal with pain and suffering on a daily basis. In addition, he may be exposed to personal danger while performing his duties, such as facing threats from hostile parties or being targeted due to the nature of his work as an interpreter for “the army or humanitarian organizations,” which increases the level of risk and the stress that the interpreter bears. In the end, anyone who wants to work as an interpreter during war must realize that there are many challenges he will face and that his work requires physical and mental strength, high flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changing and difficult circumstances. He also needs to develop his skills and experience to deal with these challenges effectively and to know how to request the necessary support from the authorities to provide the appropriate conditions to perform his work effectively and safely.

5.4. Interpreters in Conflict Zones(:Kazakhstan as a model)

Simultaneous interpreting (SI) is defined as one of the modes of interpretation where the speaker delivers his or her speech in the source language (SL) and the interpreter paraphrases it in the target language (TL) almost at the same time. In other words, the decalage between the speaker’s speech and the interpreter’s production should be between 1 and 3) seconds. Speaking of consecutive interpreting, Aciele defines it as another mode of oral interpreting where the speaker speaks 40–45 sentences, then the interpreter renders his or her speech into TL. This mode of interpreting requires taking notes to write down the most important points raised by the speaker during the listening part. After that, the interpreter counts on what he or she heard from the speaker and what he wrote on the paper to produce a well-knitted product in the TL. Interpreters could be

involved in particular jobs in conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Gaza. They are assigned to carry out interpreting services under critical circumstances like bombing, killing, the spread of violence, and insecurity. This is why their jobs are fraught with a lot of risks, and this might impact the nature of their work if they are not going to control themselves. The situation of conflict zone interpreters could be worse if they do not gain the status of official aid workers for international organizations because they could be killed or even prosecuted easily. It is advised that such interpreters must gain the status of official aid workers to work in good condition from a psychological standpoint, and this will reflect positively on the nature of interpreting services. Finding solutions for such challenges is not an easy task. Therefore, a lot of studies are needed to learn about such challenges and the means of curbing them.

6. Discussion, Qualitative, and Quantitative Analyses

All participants demonstrated their viewpoints regarding interpreters in conflict zones. They highlighted the nature of the task shouldered on them, the challenges they face, and some possible means of overcoming such challenges.

The first participant in the survey-based study says that an interpreter's task in conflict zones is fraught with risks due to the nature of the circumstances in the area in question. He mentioned that difficulties the interpreter could encounter are not confined to linguistic factors only but also to extra-linguistic factors as well. It means that their work is always associated with insecurity and threats. And the interpreter in question must follow the protocol given to him by the security detail responsible for his safety to be on the safe side. The linguistic factors are also significant because the intended receivers of the interpreting services are mostly locals of the conflict zones, and they are not always well-versed in language and education. This means that the interpreter could resort to the addition strategy

during interpreting and explain the source language speaker's goals clearly to them, as well as employ local dialects to make them understand the entire interpretation.

The second participant cites that major challenges that interpreters of conflict zones are neutrality and following ethical and professional factors during the process of interpreting because the majority of such interpreters are from the very conflict zones. She also highlights

that the most important message we should convey is to render the speeches of all parties clearly to everyone and never be bias to any party involved. Interpreters must be part of solutions not problems.

The third participant mentions that the work of interpreters in conflict zones is more challenging because it is always accompanied by harsh conditions and psychological pressures. The major challenge is how to access important information for people living in areas where infrastructure is damaged and there is no electricity. And the other challenge is the restriction imposed on the freedom of the press that reflects negatively on the interpreter, not to mention the emotional and psychological challenges regarding war scenes. Also, the interpreter could face hostilities and threats that impact his personal safety. Speaking of the linguistic challenges, she says that the diversity of dialects constitutes a big challenge for interpreters in conflict zones, and those interpreters must be aware of such dialects to produce a suitable TL product. Finally, the participant presents some solutions for those who want to be conflict zone interpreters. They have to be armed with physical and mental strength, high flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. On the other hand, he must improve his skills and experiences, as

well as learn how to request assistance from authorities, in order to perform his duties effectively.

The fourth participant highlights the interpreter job in critical situations, as in countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Gaza, witnessing killings, bombings, the spread of violence, and insecurity. It means that interpreters are under heavy pressure due to the nature of the circumstances in the region, and their work is fraught with risk. Then, their product in the TL will be critical if they do not gain the status of official aid workers working for international organizations, because such status will mitigate the tension and conflict they face. Then, their TL product will be better. Finding solutions for such challenges requires specialists to conduct a lot of studies to learn about such challenges and the means of overcoming them.

Table 2

Quantitative Analysis of Participants' Statements

| Participants | Linguistic challenges | Extra-linguistic challenges | Solutions to linguistic challenges | Solutions to extra-linguistic challenges |
|--------------|--|------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | -Low level of education | -Road side bombs -gunshot | -Addition strategy -Employment of local dialect in the TL | -Security protocol to be on the safe side |
| 2 | -Bias in conveying message -Ethical | _____ | -Neutrality in conveying to all parties involved in an ethical and professional | _____ |

| | | | |
|---|-------------------------|--|---|
| | challenge | manner | |
| | -Professional challenge | | |
| 3 | -Diversity of dialects | -Psychological pressures -Harsh circumstances -Access of information in conflict zones -Restriction imposed on freedom of press -Threats | -Mastering dialects of the conflict zones involved in. -Physical and mental strength -High flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. -Assistance from authorities in question to perform his work effectively |
| 4 | _____ | -Killings -Bombings -Spread of violence -Insecurity -Psychological pressure | -Gaining the status of official aid work to mitigate the pressure mounted on interpreters. -A lot of studies are needed to be conducted to learn about such challenges and means of overcoming them. |

7. Conclusions

The conclusions of the study are divided into two major parts: challenges and solutions.

7.1. Linguistic Challenges and Solutions

a. Challenges: Interpreters are faced with people with low levels of education, and this issue hinders the communication process. They can be biased in rendering the oral message from SL into TL. They can be associated with professional and ethical issues with regard to language use. Sometimes interpreters deal with multiple dialects within the same area due to the diversity of the place.

b. Solutions: interpreters can resort to the addition strategy to explain vague points to receivers. Interpreters can make use of local dialects when the standard language is difficult to understand by local receivers. They must be neutral in conveying the SL message to TL receivers ethically and professionally to serve all parties involved equally. They have to master all the dialects of the area they work in to be able to know all the meanings of every term they hear from the locals.

7.2. Extra Linguistic Challenges and Solutions

a. Challenges: in conflict zones, interpreters could face roadside bombs, gunshots, psychological pressures, harsh circumstances, difficulty accessing information, restrictions on freedom of the press, threats, killings, bombings, the spread of violence, and insecurity.

b. Solutions: interpreters must follow a security protocol to be on the safe side. They have to have mental and physical strength. Interpreters must be able to adapt to changing circumstances to produce a well-knitted piece without any glitches. They have to request assistance from the authorities in question to perform their work well. In cases where interpreters work for international organizations, they

must be given the status of official aid workers to mitigate the tension mounted on them. Finally, a lot of studies are needed to learn about challenges and ways to curb them.

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