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INTERPRETING GAINS MOMENTUM. WORDS – THE NEW WEAPON  
OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Interpretând câștigurile din impuls.  
Cuvintele- noua armă a secolului XXI

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**Abstract:** *Whether referring to negotiation in diplomacy or trade – local and international, to partnerships and relationships between different organisations, communities and countries, to mass media, humanitarian intervention and even – or mostly – to local and international armed conflicts, words seem to be the raw material to work with. Interpreters are among those people whose mission is to “melt down” this raw material and give it the appropriate shape in various contexts and for particular purposes; similar in a way to the job of an engineer in the glass or metal industry. Words, however, are invisible – unless they are written or recorded, in which case they attain materiality – and they can often turn into dangerous weapons, for both their producers and their receivers. The present research shall try to highlight the role of interpreters in conflict situations, in the sense of acknowledging their presence and input. This acknowledgement allows for a double perspective, namely that of the interpreters themselves and that of the users of their services, contractors and beneficiaries. It is to no surprise that there are significant gaps between the two perceptions, given that they involve a two-angle approach. Nonetheless, access to both points of view is necessary: interpreters have to be aware of their influence upon the development of events and act accordingly and their users should acknowledge the importance of interpreters in order to provide them with all the necessary conditions in order to facilitate a satisfactory professional performance. The data for this analysis comes from a corpus of online interviews and articles, specialised journals, reports and literature containing the opinions and experiences of interpreters who dealt with conflict situations and of other parties they interacted with. This will enable us to start from one objective common point – the interpreting situation – and compare the two emerging approaches – of the interpreters and of their users – in an attempt to provide possible solutions for a higher quality in interpreting, both in terms of process and product.*

**Keywords:** war, diplomacy, interpreting, armed conflicts.

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The present research shall try to highlight the role of interpreters in conflict situations, in the sense of acknowledging their presence and input. This *acknowledgement* allows for a double perspective, namely that of the interpreters themselves and that of the users of their services, contractors and beneficiaries. It is to no surprise that there are significant gaps between the two perceptions, given that they involve a two-angle approach. Nonetheless, access to both points of view is necessary: interpreters have to be aware of their influence upon the development of events and act accordingly and

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The main focus shall be on the reality of interpreters in war theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan and this for two reasons: one – it provides us with an extreme example of the profession, and second – the present international context makes room for conflict to emerge at all times and across the globe and asks for prompt, efficient measures.

***Interpreters – a breed apart:***

In order to better grasp the image third parties have developed on interpreters helping them to carry on their activities in conflict theatres, we shall observe it from three angles: before, during and after the conflict itself. This will allow us to have a cause-effect approach in that the anticipated linguistic difficulties and the measures taken – or not – to cope with them influenced the situation during the conflict and during its aftermath.

***Before conflict stage. Language–the wrong place in the equation:***

In our mother tongue, we mould our language to our ideas, whereas in a foreign language we mould our ideas to the language. When forced to speak in the language of the other, we are put, by all means and in all circumstances, in a situation of inferiority.<sup>1</sup>

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are cases in point of a Babel Tower situation. With the existence of so many languages and dialects (Arabic and Kurdish – Iraq; Pashto and Dari – Afghanistan; Persian – Iran; Urdu, Pashto, Sindhi, Punjabi, etc. - Pakistan), the Middle East resembles a melting pot of languages.<sup>2</sup> The wave of foreign media, NGOs, international organisations and peace-keeping forces only added to this linguistic diversity and made the need of linguistic mediation and, implicitly, of translators and interpreters a burning issue on the daily agenda of participating countries.

However, the USA faced the striking reality of monolingualism, which in this case translated into a dearth of Arabic linguists. Given that at the present moment the United States occupies the leading position in terms of economic power, it seems only natural that others will learn English and not necessarily the other way round, which is

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<sup>1</sup> Danica Seleskovitch, „Introduction, in *Traduire 116 (Faut-il sauver les langues nationales? Rôle de la traduction et de l'interprétation)*, Didier érudition, Paris, 1986, p. 5, our translation): “Dans sa propre langue, on plie sa langue à sa pensée, dans une langue étrangère on plie sa pensée à sa langue. Être forcé de parler la langue de l'autre c'est à tous égards et en toutes circonstances être mis en situation d'infériorité”.

<sup>2</sup> <http://middleeastcouncilnc.org/home/MECC-languages.php>, accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

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in a way a form of self-sufficiency and, eventually, of self-destruction. Moreover, through its long-lasting relationship with Israel, the United States made sure it had a reliable partner in the Middle East, which constituted a binding element with the region's countries and made superfluous the knowledge of their languages and dialects. Second and residing from the first explanation, the secondary educational system in the US is of such nature it does not cover the full need of Arabic languages.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Flaws at the level of language preparation and intelligence gathering:***

Senator Rockefeller makes reference to the Graham-Feinstein amendment, which is partly "*aimed at Arabic, Farsi, Urdu or maybe not Farsi but Pashto*" and in fact at "*the whole panoply of languages*". He also admits that "We are not teaching any longer in our schools. America is in a sense withdrawing from the world" (*S. 1448, The Intelligence to prevent Terrorism Act of 2001 and other Legislative Proposals in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks* 2002). In addition, the report highlights the importance of developing translator networks and, thus, of overcoming physical problems such as time and space, which hinder the translation of highly important documents. Such a project could be very well implemented in what concerns interpreters as well, though, on a conflict background, remote interpreting does pose more difficulties than in the case of translators.

Along the same line, an *Asia Times* article, from November 2003, pointed out to the fact that "*In terms of linguistic and cultural capacity, the US today commands what may be the lowest-quality clandestine service of any great power in history*" (Spengler, online article, emphasis added). The US *Joint inquiry* supported this idea, pointing out to the shortage of language specialists and language qualified field-officers and evaluating the level of readiness to deal with the most critical terrorism-related languages at about 30% (2002).

The same report highlighted the necessity of a "*pool of interpreters*" in terrorism-related intelligence gathering and analysis, including colloquial "*terrorist languages*" and dialects.<sup>4</sup> It also illustrated the difficulties such an undertaking involves. The Intelligence Community relied in fulfilling its mission on a limited reservoir of qualified persons, which included persons with military experience, university students, and those with native background or extensive experience in particular countries. Nonetheless, according to statistics, in 2002, the American colleges and universities granted *only 6 degrees in Arabic*, far from enough in the context of pre-war intelligence gathering and on the verge of the 2003 bursting of the Iraq armed conflict.

### ***Foreign linguistic resources:***

Apart from the few local Americans who learn Arabic, there are also the university students from Islamic countries, who come to perfect their education in the US and in other Western countries. They, however, pose a problem to the United States. The stake for the latter is to make allies out of them, but this seems to be quite difficult: these students, belonging to the upper class in their countries of origin and

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<sup>3</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *Irak in Translation — De l'art de perdre une guerre sans connaître la langue de son adversaire*, Éditions Jacob-Duvernet, Paris, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

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enjoying more than satisfactory financial resources, are rather reluctant to adopt the Western culture and leave out their own ideology.

On top of this, out of the Muslim students, the Arabs seem to be overtaken in terms of noteworthy results and prizes by their Indian and Chinese counterparts, which triggers the resentment of the former towards the West.<sup>5</sup> In this situation, the United States are leading a war against terrorism, but also a linguistic and cultural war and losing the last two automatically means losing the first.

The importance of linguistic skills was evident from the very beginning in fighting the terrorist threat. The declaration of the Director of Central Intelligence for the *Joint Inquiry* shed light upon a strategy of attack against Bin Laden and al-Qa’ida, called “The Plan”, in which professional linguists were considered to be indispensable: “*We sought native fluency in the languages of the Middle East and South Asia, combined with policy, military, business, technical, or academic experience*”.<sup>6</sup>

This project conjures up another *plan*, namely “*Plan Z*”, a Japanese document intercepted by the Americans and crucial for them in winning the Second World War. Key-elements in this case were the so called *Nisei*, Americans of Japanese origin, who were trained by the American army as translators and interpreters. These American-Japanese underwent a thorough training program of six months aimed at turning them into useful resources in the oncoming war and did not pose problems in terms of loyalty biases, unlike their American-Iraqi counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

The problem in Iraq appears to have been of a different nature: the United States did think of the benefits of having professional linguists in the field, but they failed to envisage the consequences of a lack or misuse of trained translators and interpreters. And as far as these consequences are concerned, they went as far as losing the war in Iraq.

***During conflict stage. The interpreter – victim or villain?:***

The categories of interpreters activating in the war theatre in Iraq have different origins. On the one hand, we have the local Americans, who are however so limited in number they could almost be put out of the equation. On the other hand, we have the American-Iraqis. They are: 1. the Muslim students we mentioned above, 2. the expatriate members of the Christian community, Assyrians and Chaldeans, who fled the Baathist regime of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, 3. the Iraqis who fled their country and went to the US during the 1980’s war between Iran and Iraq – Shiites, Kurds and Sunnites –, 4. the Turkish mercenaries brought to Iraq by the coalition forces. Last but surely not least, there is a third category of interpreters, namely the locals.<sup>8</sup> The American-Iraqi interpreters and especially the third category, add the problem of divided loyalties to that of lacking or insufficient training.

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<sup>5</sup> Spengler, “Why America is losing the intelligence war”. Web 01.06.2013. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/EK11Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EK11Ak01.html), accessed in 05. 06. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Joint Inquiry* (review) , 2002, p. 231, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.* Ellen Ruth Moerman, “Interpreters under fire”, 2013. Web 01.06.2013. <http://aiic.net/page/2977/interpreters-under-fire>, accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

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This created the proper milieu for accusations of treason and cooperation with the enemy to hover upon interpreters, while others maintained that the job of translators and interpreters was essential to the coalition forces.

According to Guidère, *“Without interpreters, the Americans in Iraq resemble a blind man lost in the desert, but one who, on top of everything, is also deaf”*.<sup>9</sup> He is undoubtedly right if we are to consider that the majority of American intelligence officers are unable to pose the simplest questions and ask for example for coffee.<sup>10</sup> Could they be then able to conduct a house search or an investigation without the help of professional interpreters, knowing that Arabic dialects are of such nature that the slightest distortion in the utterance of a word, even at the level of intonation, can completely alter its meaning?

Even more, fluency in English on the part of the locals and in local dialects on the part of foreigners can be seen as a weakness and can lead to accusations of treason or collaboration with the CIA, the Israeli spies or any other opposing party.<sup>11</sup> In this context, interpreters are often used not only for linguistic purposes, but also act as a *“useful human shield”* for foreigners.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, *“these war translators [...] are in fact translators at war, whether they want it or not”*.<sup>13</sup>

### **Back-up solutions:**

As we have seen above, one of the foreigners' main concerns had to do with languages. Ill prepared at dealing with this problem, they had to come up with quick and efficient solutions. While the measures taken were indeed rapid ones, their efficiency remains doubtful. Swamped with demands of language services in the theatre, the United States tried if not to replace, at least to back up human translators and interpreters with automatic translation machines. The results were nonetheless rather disappointing: on the one hand, the expectations formulated in the laboratories failed to meet those in the field and, on the other hand, elements such as pronunciation and intonation, essential in the process of interpreting, were poorly rendered.<sup>14</sup>

This being the case, the coalition forces turned once again to the human element. In this respect, the American government sought help with subcontractor companies in providing the necessary linguistic services. This also implied a transfer of responsibility from the State to private collaborators, which means that, in case of injury or death, the State was exempt from financial compensations. The exclusivity

<sup>9</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *op. cit.*, p. 25, our translation. “Sans interprètes, les Américains en Irak ressemblent en effet à un aveugle perdu dans le désert, un aveugle de surcroît sourd-muet.”

<sup>10</sup> Judith Miller, “A Battle of Words Over War Intelligence”, 2003. Web 01.06.2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/22/books/a-battle-of-words-over-war-intelligence.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>, accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

<sup>11</sup> See more on: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2084123/Iran-sentences-U-S-Marine-accused-CIA-spy-death.html>, accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Beverley Curran, “The Embedded Translator: a Coming Out Story”. in Salama-Carr, Myriam, *Translating and interpreting conflict*. Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam-New York. NY, 2007, p. 241.

<sup>13</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *op. cit.*, p. 22, our translation, emphasis added. *“Ces traducteurs de guerre [...] sont en réalité des traducteurs en guerre, qu'ils le veulent ou non.”*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

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was held until 2006 by the giant company Titan, with a field experience of more than twenty years. The need was urgent and the contract big – in April 2005, the company’s revenue had gone up by a record 23%, \$559 million that is<sup>15</sup> –, but the company did not dispose of the required resources in Arabic languages and dialects. It therefore launched a massive recruitment campaign.

At first, there were hard-to-meet prerequisites but, with special situations asking for special solutions, expectations plummeted and “linguists” were chosen among former taxi drivers, pizza boys, sushi sellers, pseudo-artists and failed or poor students. Out of 4 200 selected agents, almost none had special formation in languages or translation. In 2006, DynCorp took the lead in providing translators and interpreters for the American army, but the situation did not and could not improve, given that the demand was even greater and the resources narrower.<sup>16</sup>

It was the moment for local translators and interpreters to enter the scene. They were important for several reasons. First, by resorting to local personnel, the coalition forces could limit the exposure of their own people to dangers. Second, they were a cost effective solution: the locals received merely a fifth of what was given to their American counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Third, being out of their geographical and jurisdictional borders, the foreign authorities were not legally bound to ensure the safety of their local field translators and interpreters in terms of healthcare, working conditions, disability benefits, pensions and so on. As for human rights lawyers, they defend the idea that this should not have been an excuse for governments to elude their responsibilities, given that geographical borders do not constitute a limitation in terms of legal rights and responsibilities.<sup>18</sup>

***Prerequisites for the selection of interpreters:***

In broad lines, the basic requirement for translators and interpreters was to be *bilingual* and *bicultural*. This expectation is ever the more reasonable in the context of a clash between two very different cultural and linguistic poles, namely the West and the East. A question such as “*Where do you live*” could be asked in such a way as to indicate a demand for information, an aggressive interrogation or sarcasm with respect to the interlocutor’s home place<sup>19</sup>. In a normal, everyday situation, and in a different place, the consequences of such nuances might not be that relevant, but in a war-stricken Iraq or Afghanistan, when in everyone lies a potential insurgent or terrorist, they make a huge difference.

It is why the Americans rather sought for interpreters who were fluent in Arabic languages, more than in English. This explanation lies in the natural instinct one has in his/her mother tongue, an instinct which was vital in the given circumstances. This aspect was very well emphasised by Dejean Leféal, who believed

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Krane, “The most dangerous civilian job in Iraq. Dozens of translators for U.S. military have been killed”, 2005. Web 01.06.2013. <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/7911356/#.UVaaPpbTBUp>, accesed in 04. 05. 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>18</sup> Ellen Ruth Moerman, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *op. cit.*

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that: *“In an acquired language we do not have the support of instinct, the basic sense of language which guides us and dictates, as if by magic, the most appropriate way of expressing our thoughts. This instinct is not just creative; it is also corrective in the sense that it alerts us to every defect of form. When one is speaking in one’s native tongue and when one has, for whatever reason, constructed a sentence poorly, one immediately feels ill at ease at having expressed oneself incorrectly or awkwardly”*.<sup>20</sup>

One of the main drawbacks of interpreters in Iraq resides in the fact that they were neither fully bilingual, nor fully bicultural. On the one hand, there are the Americans who possessed linguistic knowledge but were ill prepared for the cultural realities awaiting for them in the field and, on the other hand, there are the local Iraqis who had acquired English knowledge in an artificial, educational environment. Neither of the two categories was fully prepared to cope with the linguistic and cultural subtleties of the other party. Even more, a third category added to the two already mentioned, namely the Arab immigrants to the United States. This third category were initially sensitive to the realities of the Arab world, but after years of living in America, they had losses in terms of both their mother tongue skills and their national culture and ended being suspended between two nations.<sup>21</sup>

### ***The interpreters – possible moles?:***

As for biculturalism, the locals were at the same time an asset and a handicap for the coalition forces. This was a result of their potential hidden ideologies. According to Major in the Territorial Army Anderson, *“You’ve got to try and figure out who’s real and who isn’t and who’s got an agenda and who hasn’t”*, which was quite difficult since the interpreters were recruited by *“word of mouth”*. He added that *“you’ve got to get out there and just pad the pavements”* in order to recruit interpreters.<sup>22</sup>

The issue became even more delicate given that the tasks of the interpreters extended from interpretation proper to translation of secret intelligence, to assistance during witness interrogations and house searches or field operations. They even went as far as interfering in the chain of commands. As Guidère puts it, they had a *“life and death power over suspects and intercepted persons”*.<sup>23</sup> The *“traitor”* label came from both parties: the Americans and the Iraqis and was given momentum by Saddam Hussein who used it when addressing the interpreter who assisted the Americans at his capture.<sup>24</sup>

Besides quality, interpreting was deficient in terms of quantity as well. According to Guidère, in Iraq there was an average of one translator for 150 soldiers.<sup>25</sup> However, the situation of other military camps was even more critical, lacking translators and interpreters altogether. On these grounds, many of the American

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<sup>20</sup> Leféal K. Dejean, “Perfecting Active and Passive Languages”, in *Conference Interpretation and Translation* 2, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> BBC Radio 4, 2007. Transcript : Face the Facts - 20 July 2007. Web 01.06.2013. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/facethefacts/transcript\\_20070720.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/facethefacts/transcript_20070720.shtml), accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17, our translation: *“un pouvoir de vie ou de mort sur les personnes recherchées ou interpellées”*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

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soldiers appreciated the presence and help of local interpreters. Former Army captain Mark Zambarda spoke gratefully of his Afghan interpreter: “As a platoon leader, this guy was my right-hand man because he was my voice”. He was of the opinion that “*These guys aren’t just another Afghan. They’re heroes, just the same. They did a lot of stuff for our country and they did a lot of stuff for theirs*”.<sup>26</sup> Another Afghan interpreter was described by an American officer as “*a role model to his fellow citizens*”, while another underlined his role as a “*strong supporter of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan*”.<sup>27</sup>

Harding<sup>28</sup> also insisted on the role of fixers for the war correspondents in Iraq: “*Fixers, of course, share the same risks as war correspondents. But they don’t get any of the glory*”. It is why interpreters turned into a principal target for the local insurgents. Army Captain Joseph Ludvigson linked this to the importance such aides had gained for the armed forces based in Iraq: “*They were important to our mission, and terrorists were trying to hurt us by hurting them*”.<sup>29</sup> Referring to two killed Iraqi interpreters, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division Major Derik Von Recum argued that “*The two we lost were like family to us*” and regretted not having been able to provide them with better protection.<sup>30</sup>

In a future issue of the magazine we shall pass on to discussing the role of interpreters in the after conflict stage and then have a look at the interpreters’ own perception of their input, rights and obligations in and outside the theatre.

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<sup>26</sup>Monica Campbell, “Now at Law School. Veterans Work to Bring Those Left Behind to US”, 2013. Web 01.06.2013. <http://www.theworld.org/2013/02/now-at-law-school-veterans-work-to-bring-those-left-behind-to-us/>, accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Sieff, “Alleged terrorism ties foil some Afghan interpreters’ U.S. visa hopes”, 2013. Web 01.06.2013. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/alleged-terrorism-ties-foil-some-afghan-interpreters-us-visa-hopes/2013/02/01/3d4b80fc-6704-11e2-889b-f23c246aa446\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/alleged-terrorism-ties-foil-some-afghan-interpreters-us-visa-hopes/2013/02/01/3d4b80fc-6704-11e2-889b-f23c246aa446_story.html)> accessed in 04. 05. 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Luke Harding is an award-winning correspondent for the Guardian, who also covered wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lybia.

<sup>29</sup> Jim Krane, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem.*