Life in Conflict: A Series of Narratives by Locally-Recruited Interpreters from Afghanistan

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Abstract: Although irregular warfare (IW) is considered the oldest form of warfare, the war scenarios have considerably changed in the 21st century. Nowadays, IW seems to plague much of the non-Western world (White, Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare) and, consequently, new actors, strategies and approaches have been brought into play, resulting into a new balance between State and Non-State organizations. Accordingly, and considering that “winning the war has ceased to mean only the annihilation of the enemy, but also transforming civilians into allies in the theatre of war” (Cumming, Influencing the Population: 43) collaborations between civilians and military personnel – based, among others, on new warfare tactics such as Petraeus’ Cultural Awareness concept – have been adopted. This may bring up, however, numerous concerns, including communication challenges when there is no common language. The interpreter in conflict zones (ICZ) funnels two or more realities in such contexts. This paper draws on five narrative interviews with five local ICZs from Afghanistan who supported and worked for the Spanish troops deployed in that country until the end of 2014. The main objective was to explore the life stories of these five locally-recruited interpreters who were born and raised in a war-torn country, and to understand their perceptions regarding a series of aspects that, besides being closely related to their human nature – identity, culture, ideology and loyalty – tend to enhance, as per our initial hypothesis, the danger inherent in the local interpreter’s “otherness”, leading to a number of dilemmas including autonomous vs. heteronymous (see Cronin, The Empire Talks Back), civilian interpreter’s involvement vs. mistrust, or traditional enemy vs. irregular actors. The conclusions of this research study highlight a series of regularities among ICZs’ narratives with regard to how they experienced war, loyalty, and role as ICZs, all analysed from both the personal and the professional dimensions.

Keywords: conflict, warfare, interpreting, life stories, Afghanistan

Introduction

War, etymologically deriving from Old High German werran (to confuse), can be understood as a type of social interaction (Greenhouse, Cultural Perspectives on War). Some authors, in fact, believe it is the continuation of politics by other means (Von Clausewitz, On War) and such means, in conflict scenarios, are characterised by collective and organised violence resulting from a series of very particular socio-political, judicial and economic factors.

The ubiquity that characterizes war makes the concept of conflict a generalized and universal experience for all living beings (Van der Dennen, The Origin of War). Since 3600 B.C. it is estimated that more than 13,600 wars have taken place around the world (Rummel, Understanding Conflict and War). The 20th century is considered the most murderous in recorded history, with a total estimate of 187 million deaths (Hobsbawm, War and Peace in the 20th Century: 25). Conflict continues to be a reality nowadays – the world, at war since 1914, is a planet dominated by unbroken
conflict that even civilization, education, literacy or mushrooming anti-war movements have been unable to abate (Rummel, Understanding Conflict and War).

There are, however, certain differences between the wars that took place in the 20th century and those happening in the 21st, including the existence of new actors with enough power to declare war, which means that official Governments have lost the monopoly to that. As a matter of fact, “most military operations since [the Cold War] have been conducted not by conscript armies, but by quite small bodies of regular or irregular troops, in many cases operating high-technology weapons and protected against the risk of incurring casualties” (Hobsbawm, On Empire: 18). In other words, the traditional monopoly has changed, and irregular warfare has brought – to all kind of war scenarios – new actors with access to warfare equipment and means of financing non-state warfare (Hobsbawm, War and Peace). As a result, a new balance between State and non-State organizations has been created, resulting in States losing power over certain parts of their territory, because they are unable to eliminate small unofficial armed groups (Hobsbawm, On Empire: 36) that are fighting for “legitimacy and influence over the relevant population” (Department of Defense, Irregular Warfare: 6), as it is the case in Afghanistan. This conforms to Bernard (War and its Causes), who claims that war can be considered a sort of continuous conflict among collectives that may be capable of arming and organizing themselves with the intention of carrying violent struggle for the pursuit of some sort or public or quasi-public objective. The novelty, according to Hobsbawm (War and Peace), “may be indicated by the fact that the most powerful state on the planet [USA], having suffered a terrorist attack, feels obliged to launch a formal operation against a small, international, non-governmental organisation or network lacking both a territory and a recognisable army [the Taliban]”.

Such changes in war monopoly have affected the warfare balance in conflict zones, creating what it is known as “irregular warfare” (IW). IW is defined by the US Department of Defense as “form of warfare [that] encompasses insurgency, counterinsurgency, terrorism, and counterterrorism, raising them above the perception that they are somehow a lesser form of conflict below the threshold of warfare” (Department of Defense, Irregular Warfare: 6). IW “plague[s] much of the non-Western world, and they will increasingly claim the Intelligence Community’s attention” (White, Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare), as it has been the case in Afghanistan for more than 17 years now. It is, hence, worth to note the fact that IW has brought not only new actors into play, but also strategies, such as NATO comprehensive approach, (see Jeppson and others, NATO’s Approach to Irregular Warfare) and new components to the emergent postmodern military culture, allowing for “softer skills” development (Hajjar, Military Warriors as Peacekeeper-Diplomats: 652). Consequently, new key cultural tools, such as the cross-cultural competence, have appeared among the military, allowing them to acquire certain “knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural repertoire and skill sets that military members require to accomplish all given tasks and missions in situations marked by cultural diversity” (652). This, in our opinion, should be considered crucial skills among the troops, bearing in mind that “winning the war has ceased to mean only the annihilation of the enemy, but also transforming civilians into allies in the

theatre of war” (Cummings, *Influencing the Population*: 43). As a result, considering that the resolution of 21st-century conflicts requires that efforts “go outside of the employment of purely military measures” (Jeppson and others, *NATO’s Approach to Irregular Warfare*: 28), building up communication and rapport with local population – military and civilian – has become one of the key aspects of military stratagem in conflicts. In this vein, new approaches to warfare tactics such as Petraeus’ Cultural Awareness concept have been adopted in order to emphasize how important is for international troops to collaborate with local actors, particularly considering that “effective counter-insurgency, for example, demands an understanding of those cultural environments in which troops are to be deployed” (Kelly, *Languages at War*: 233).

In these lines, when it comes to influencing local population against insurgents and gaining their support, being able to speak the local language is a must. In the case of Afghanistan, gaining the locals’ trust has proved to be a key aspect of certain military missions. For instance, such trust-building relations have allowed the international troops to successfully complete advisory missions with their Afghan counterparts (see Hajjar, *Effectively Working with Military Linguists*), as well as to fight insurgency propaganda (Barrantes Olías de Lima, *David Petraeus*) which, in Afghanistan can be particularly complicated due to high levels of illiteracy, traditional tribalism and religious fanaticism. For military-civilian collaboration, however, the figure of the interpreter in conflict zones (ICZ) is crucial, as international troops and local population rarely share a common language, especially in the case of Afghanistan. The ICZ, hence, is considered to be “the funnel for all coalition interactions with Afghans at all levels” (West, *The Wrong War*: 176), representing the only connection to the Afghan population (Cummings, *Influencing the Population*: 43) characterised for their persistent love for oral traditions (Ruiz Benítez, *Sistemas de lecciones aprendidas*: 12). In these lines, the ICZ will be the figure capable – in principle – of funnelling two or more realities in such contexts, performing an essential role in every aspect of war (Stahuljak, *The Violence of Neutrality*; Baker, M., *Translation and Conflict*; Moser-Mercer and Bali, *Interpreting in Zones of Crisis and War*; Hoedemaekers and Soeters, *Interactions Rituals and Language Mediation during Peace Missions*; Baigorri-Jalón, *Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters*; Baker, C., *Civilian Interpreting in Military Conflicts*; Footitt and Tobia, *War Talk*; Alonso-Araguás, *El intérprete en los conflictos bélicos contemporáneos*; Ruiz-Rosendo and Persaud, *Interpreting in Conflict Zones throughout History*).

The figure of the ICZ, however, “is as interesting as it is elusive to the rest of the profession and academia” (Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, *Towards a Typology of Interpreters in War-Related Scenarios in the Middle East*: 182). The reason is that the figure of the ICZ is a relatively recent one with regard to studies and research. Although the last years have witnessed an increase in the number of studies and publications regarding certain aspects related to interpreting in conflict zones, the literature published to date is not comparable to other interpreting settings. Similarly, there is also a notorious lack of research studies that focus on the ICZs’ lived experiences in the form of life histories/stories, and their resulting narratives. Consequently, and given that “the right to narration is not merely the right to tell...
one’s story, it is the right to control representation” (Slaughter, *A Question of Narration*: 430), one cannot help but wonder: why are certain narratives collected and publicly presented with a resounding impact, while others remain hidden and silenced with no manifestation?

This paper, therefore, seeks to provide a much-needed contribution to our knowledge in this particular field. With this in mind, evidence in the form of narratives was collected through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with five locally-recruited interpreters that worked for the Spanish troops deployed in Afghanistan between 2003 and the end of 2014. The objective is to explore the testimonies and life stories of five locally-recruited interpreters who were born and raised in a war-torn country, and to understand the perception they might have regarding a series of aspects that, besides being closely related to their human nature – identity, culture, ideology and loyalty – tend to enhance the danger inherent in the local interpreter’s “otherness”, leading to a number of dilemmas resulting from paradoxes such as autonomous vs. heteronymous (see Cronin, *The Empire Talks Back*), civilian interpreter’s involvement vs. mistrust, and interpreter’s agency vs. neutrality, that will be up for discussion in the upcoming pages.

**On the biographical method, the life story and the narrative interview**

All narratives presented in this paper have been extracted from a much larger research project (Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de los intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*) whose main objective was to explore and analyse, from an interpreter-centric vantage, the world of five local interpreters from Afghanistan – with special focus on the perception they have regarding their own role, as well as on any patterns and regularities across the sample with regard to such perception.

As mentioned a few lines earlier, the study sample consisted of five local interpreters from Afghanistan who offered their services to the Spanish troops deployed in such country between 2003 and the end of 2014 as part of the NATO ISAF mission. Although no sampling technique was applied, it is worth noting that all study subjects shared a homogeneous profile: male, Muslim, born and raised in Afghanistan, younger than thirty years of age, able to speak Spanish (at different levels of proficiency) and had previously worked as interpreter for a minimum of one year for the Spanish troops in Afghanistan. In regard to the size of the sample, I hasten to point that my research project is a case study and, as such, never aspired to establish universal truths, but rather to present a descriptive analysis interweaving evidence that would provide some insights and would contribute to a relatively unexplored field. Therefore, the final sample size seems to be appropriate when it comes to in-depth analysis intending to provide detailed data (Mason, *Models and Methods in Dialogue Interpreting Research*: 226).

The collection of narratives took place through semi-structured interviews that were inspired by the social research method known as “biographical method”, which seeks “the collection and analysis of an intensive account of a whole life or
portion of life” (Miller, Biographical Method: 15). This qualitative-research method backs to Thomas and Znaniecki (The Polish Peasant in Europe and America) and emphasises the placement of a particular individual within his life history, i.e. “within a nexus of social connections, historical events and life experiences” (Miller, Biographical Method: 15). This particular sub-stream known as “life history”, which relays not only on interviews but also on supplementary information sources in the shape of personal documents (Bassi-Follari, Hacer una historia de vida: 135), allows researchers to look into the “subject’s world” (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, Historias de vida del oficio de panadero: 167) and to explore certain social structures.

This article, however, focuses on a second sub-stream of the biographical method, i.e. the life story whose central task is to naturally collect narratives constructed by the narrator (interviewee) regarding one or more episodes or events from their life (Bassi Follari, Hacer una historia de vida: 152). One of the main concerns to researchers who work with narratives “is the possibility to embellish, distort or make up stories” (Fujii, Shades of Truth and Lies: 234). However, it is worth noting that, according to Fujii, the importance of narratives does not always lie on their accuracy (234). On the contrary it is the value and the meaning that each narrator endows to events or experiences contained in such narratives that is valuable to the researchers intending to understand the speaker’s mind, perception, emotions, essence, aspirations, concerns and desires.

The interviews carried out for this research project were influenced by the post-modernist perspective (Miller, Biographical Method: 16), which elicits an interview through the technique known as “SQUIN”, i.e. Single Question to Induce Narrative (Wengraf, The Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method). This was, precisely, the technique chosen for my study, due to the fact that the narrative interview, supported by a subsequent semi-structured interview made of conceptual questions in our case, allows for the collection and analysis of spontaneous narratives (Rodríguez, Las historias de vida en la investigación: 122) in regard to, for instance, the perceptions that the study subjects may have about a particular topic. Within Translation and Interpreting Studies, narratives obtained through in-depth interviews are particularly useful when it comes to exploring the perception that interpreters may have regarding a number of aspects (Baker, M. Translation and Conflict; Salama-Čarr, Interview).

In these lines, my study, inspired by certain phenomenological concepts such as “lived experience” and “lived meaning”, (see Van Manen, But is it Phenomenology?), seeks to explore the life stories of five local interpreters regarding their perception of certain aspects related to conflict zones, including the concepts of war, conflict, fear, ethnicity, identity, family, education, friendship, ideology, work and loyalty, among others, all contextualised within the protracted Afghan conflict.

The collected data was organised, codified and subsequently analysed with the support of NVivo 11Plus software, a very useful programme that allows for the application of the analysis technique known as “concept mapping” (see Trochim
and Linton, *Conceptualization for Planning and Evaluation*). Following this analysis technique, I processed the input, i.e. the collected data, and generated maps of ideas and concepts, in order to identify the relationships between all the narratives that the interviewees had previously shared with us. In this way, concept-mapping allowed us to create the representation of ideas in the form of thematic clusters (see Jackson and Trochim, *Concept Mapping as an Alternative Approach*: 312) that were named according to the concept contained therein. For instance, some of the clusters created for this study project were named as “ethnicity” “family” “war memories” “trauma” “friendship” “loss” “loyalty” “neutrality” “role perception” “religion”, “values” and “capital”, understood as knowledge and skills in Bourdieu’s sense on the term (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*). Once the data codification was completed, I compared all details across the sample with the aim to analyse the subjects’ perceptions and opinions regarding a particular issue or concept. Some of the key narratives and results will be shared in the upcoming sections.

**Local interpreters’ life stories – lived experiences in war**

Daoud, Ghous, Karmal, Lemar and Maqsood, whose ages varied from 19 to 29 at the time of the interviews (2015), were born between 1985 and 1995 in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Although all are natives of different provinces (Faryab, Parwan, Kandahar, Badghis and Takhar) the life of each and every one of them has been scarred by the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. All five interviewees were born and raised a in a war -torn country and suffered through one or more of the conflicts that have devastated their homeland for over the last thirty years, i.e. the Soviet invasion, the Afghan Civil War, the Taliban regime, the US-led war in 2001, and the subsequent international conflict.

When I was born, the situation was awful. Russian troops were around, fighting the jihadists [...]. I was born in the middle of a war, that is why my grandfather chose my name, [real name], which means “there is too much war in our country”. (Maqsood, in Gómez-Amich, *Estudio Descriptivo de la Autopercepción de los Intérpretes en Zonas de Conflicto*)

When I was a child, as far as I remember, Taliban were in control and there was a very bad war that all Afghans have suffered. We are still at war, and we have lost so many things, we have lost too many things... even our friends. I have lost my friends because of the war, my friends are dead, and also some relatives and family friends, all because of the war. (Lemar)

When I was born, Afghanistan was a poor country at war, and people did not enjoy [a good] economy. There were no schools, and the majority of children did not study. I, myself, did not attend school for many years because of the war, the conflicts, and the civil war among different ethnic groups within Afghanistan. And many others as me, many other children, are still uneducated. Economy was very bad and there was no Government, only fighting groups that would control a particular area. (Ghous)

In spite of the common suffering resulting from war – or maybe as one of the consequences of such – the sense of belonging to a very particular ethnic group seems to be recurrent in the narratives of certain interviewees, regardless of their family economic and social status.

As we say, Tajiks in Afghanistan are the good people in Afghanistan. We are a very ancient ethnic group in Afghanistan, formerly called Daria. We used to own many empires, the Persian Empire; the famous Persia with a major history. That is why, all Tajiks living in Afghanistan take pride in being Tajik, in the famous language from Persia that we speak [...]. We also say that Tajiks were the first to settle down in Afghanistan. We are very good people, very educated, we know how to live well, we are open, very well cultured. (Daoud)

The thing is that Tajiks... how can I say this? Many of us... how can I explain this? Tajiks are good people, and in Afghanistan, nowadays, there is a big war, which is what Pashtu population always enjoy. (Maqsood)

Belonging to a particular ethnic group, however, in the case of the five interviewees did not ensure certain economic benefits or social status. The two interpreters quoted in the previous narratives, for instance, are both Tajiks with families that, however, appear to live in completely different economic, cultural and social spheres, at least during the interviewees’ childhood and adolescent years. According to the narratives shared by Daoud, his family belongs to the highest class, attending university and having posts in Court. On the contrary, Maqsood – as well as Ghous – claimed he lived his childhood years in severe financial problems, a common situation in a country that is placed 168 out of 188 on the Human Development Index (UNDP, *Human Development Reports*). Karmal and Lemar also recalled some economic trouble during their life in Afghanistan, especially the latest, who claimed that the death of his father was the reason for his family to suffer financially – a claim that correlates with the reality in Afghanistan, where male adults are the breadwinner in the family.

My full name is [name withdrawn]. I was born in 1988, in Faryab province, in Maymanah, near the famous city known as Mazar e Sarif, Northern Afghanistan. I was born in a cultured and educated family, with a high social status, a good family. My father used to be the Chief Justice in my province, my mother was a teacher, my whole family holds university degrees, all of them studied, including myself, the youngster. My elder brothers studied Law, my sisters chose their own B.A., and I chose my B.A. in Spanish [because] I enjoyed it. (Daoud)

[…] there was a bad war. We did not have jobs and we were a very poor family. There was always war, the Taliban were attacking us, and so were the Soviets. Life was very bad. It was very bad. […] When I was little, I used to work with my dad, as a carpenter. […] And my mom was a housewife, she doesn’t have anything, nor does anything. […] Two of my sisters studied up to Secondary school but the other two are illiterate. (Maqsood)
Such economical disadvantages experienced by some of the interviewees, however, did not prevent them from acquiring cultural capital, i.e. pursuing education throughout their life, three of them graduating from Kabul University in Spanish language. Before their university years, and despite the fact that conflict zone conditions are not always the most favourable to ensure access to education, the five subjects of our study sample attended school or madrasas over several years. The Taliban’s rise to power, however, further complicated the situation. Nevertheless, and despite the discrepancy among members of the same family with regard to the importance of education (see Maqsood’s narratives), the interest and attitude towards learning displayed by the interviewees is commendable, especially when they recall their childhood years.

I have many bad memories, but the worst one is the year I was unable to attend school. When the Taliban took our city, they closed down all the schools. I was always crying, because I couldn’t go to school. My father, my mother and my family said that the worse memory is the day that our school was set on fire, with everything inside. The children went out and witnessed how our school was on fire. We all were very sad, and said, “they burnt our books, our classroom”. That was the worst day. [...] Then I registered in a school run by the Taliban, called madrasa, with many fundamentalists lessons, very close-minded and strict [...]. You would not think that was a school; it was like a prison. (Daoud)

[My best memory is] my first school day. That was a very special day for me. [...] I will never forget it. My elder brother registered me. My father told me, “go with no stress, no shame, just go”. Because I was scared the first day, I don’t know why. I was registered, and I started my studies until I completed them. I completed them after 12 years. [...] My father taught me many things, how to be a strong man, a good man. [...] I wish I could be like my father, known as a good man, with no flaws. We used to go for walks, to drink coffee and I used to tell him everything, my complaints, my sorrows, and he would give me advice, “You have to be like this, do like that. Study.” (Lemar)

We used to study in tents, full of dust, very noisy, and our teachers were not well trained, they did not know much about Maths and the like. [...] My father did not study much. He did not study Secondary. [...] To be honest, my father did not appreciate that I studied in the school when I was little, he did not like that I would go to school to study. He wanted me to work with him, to be with him at home. [...] But my mother, she wanted me to study, to go to school, to grow my knowledge, to study at the university. [...] My worst memory is the day my father unregistered me and said, “Enough, you are going to work with me, I don’t want you to go to school”. He dragged me home and I missed three years. When my brother, who was studying in a different province, found out, he sent me back to school. I was 12 years old. (Maqsood)

In the context described in Maqsood’s narrative, it is not realistic to expect local interpreters to have the training that is usually required to work as a professional interpreter. In conflict zones, unemployment is ubiquitous, and any work opportunity becomes a social, cultural and economic capital source (see Baker, C., The Care and Feeding of Linguists). This may bring along the chance to support yourself and your family, even though your life may be at risk, not only because of

the dangers intrinsic to a conflict, but also, in the case of Afghanistan, because interpreters are considered to be traitors because they are working with the foreigners. This kind of public accusations, according to some authors (Fujii, Shades of truth and lies: 232) “can lead to reprisals from neighbours, rejection from family members, or repression by the State” and a number of other vicissitudes resulting from their years of support and work for the international troops.

I worked with the Spanish troops for two years. During this time, I went to my province twice, to visit my relatives. There, many people knew I was working with the Spanish troops, and they have a bad opinion when it comes to Americans, Spaniards, and other foreigners. My life was at risk in my own province. They threaten me, “Why are you working with infidels?” [...] They believe being an interpreter is a bad job, because you are sharing insights with foreigners. [...] I was threatened, they sent me one text message saying, “We will find you, and we will kill you; we will cut your throat”. [...] My brother was also threatened, so I want to take him out of there. His life is also at risk. (Maqsood)

There are certain areas where you do not want to be recognised. You do not feel safe there. They insult you and say that you have become a foreigner. They call you “infidel” and that makes you feel bad. [...] And I would answer that I am not an infidel, I am just working, I am helping. But there are people who doesn’t understand. Some of them still support the Taliban, the bad guys, and do not even accept the Afghan national army. [...] I was just honest and worked, and they called me “traitor” or “collaborator”. I used to get upset at the beginning, but then I realised the bad guys were actually them, they were wrong. My aim is to support and help my country. (Ghous)

Consequently, locals who are able to speak a foreign language and who enjoy certain wastah (contacts), end up working as interpreters for the international troops, even though this kind of job may not be related in any case to their original training and they could have never anticipated that they would end up using the foreign language they once learned (see Baker, C. Civilian Interpreting in Military Conflicts). This adaptation, resulting from tragic situations (see Baigorri-Jalón, Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters), may be the surviving instinct that characterises the Afghan population, considering that “in a land so hostile from every point of view, these people have developed unthinkable conducts and strategies. [...] You either adapt or you die” (Aguirre, 300 días en Afganistán: 16).

While studying for my B.A. in Spanish language, the last year, our department contacted the Spanish Embassy in Kabul. They needed translators for their troops in conflict zones. I was introduced to them, I passed the interview, and I was selected. (Ghous)

We used to have a teacher called [name withdrawn] who lives in Madrid now. He used to teach us and one day he came and said, “We need interpreters”. He picked two or three students from our class. (Maqsood)
I was watching TV at night and I saw that the Americans were in need of interpreters. I went for an exam and I was successful. I worked for the Americans for a year, and then I heard that my friends were working for the Spaniards [...]. I went to the Spaniards and they hired me. [...] The Spaniards were in contact with the Americans, who informed them about me and gave them all my details. (Karmal)

The five interviewees that participated in this study underwent different hiring procedures, which is already a contradiction itself, considering that all of them were applying for the same position. All five study subjects, however, were invited to interviews in the target language, in order to explore their personal and family background, as well as to understand their motivations to become an interpreter for the Spanish troops, which can be the result of multiple interests including improving their financial situation, helping their country and practising the foreign language.

I wanted to improve my language skills and learn, and gain some experience, but when I started working as a translator, I got interested in many other things: learning about customs, languages, and other motivations, such as helping my country as a translator between Afghans and Spaniards. I felt I was able to help, with my degree, help my army, my country, and my people. [...] I always took pride in working as an interpreter. (Ghous)

Q: Do you feel that you are helping your people, working as an interpreter?
A: No.
Q: Why not?
A: Because helping is solving the problems of the Afghans and the Spaniards, but I only work for the money. (Karmal)

They [the Afghan population] used to think I was also a foreigner, because in their eyes I did not look like an Afghan translator. They used to say, “Here come the infidels”, in Pashtun. And one day I replied, “I am not an infidel”. To them an “infidel” is anyone who is not a Muslim. And I said, “I am not an infidel”, that was all I said. But they replied, “Look, this infidel can speak Pashtun” and I repeated, “I am not an infidel, I am an Afghan. I am also a Muslim. Do not think I am an infidel”. And they asked, “You are an Afghan? Why are you collaborating with the infidels?” And I replied, “I am helping my country, my people, my national army. You can think whatever you want. Bye”. (Daoud)

In this vein, it is also interesting to analyse what motivations urged the international troops to hire local interpreters instead of military interpreters (military personnel) whose loyalty to the army can be easier to take for granted. The results of this study seem to point at the fact that the capital owned by locally-recruited interpreters, i.e. their inside knowledge about cultural, historical, political, geographical and linguistic aspects of Afghanistan tend to be more valuable than the insights that military interpreters deployed from abroad might be able to share with the troops. Such in-group characteristics that can actually be transformed into economic capital for the ICZs, however, tend to also highlight the
“outsider” nature of the local interpreters, regardless of which, the ICZs interviewed for this study appeared to feel part of the team.

I always felt as a member of the team, on all occasions, in everything. They used to take me along, as a friend, smiling at me, inviting me to all their parties, drinking with me, taking me to the military operations as well. They didn’t think I was an outsider, neither did I feel out of place. (Daoud)

[…] I would always pay attention to the military personnel, always translating accurately, and passing the message – and the troops were happy with me. […] Our relation was good. I always had the same kind of relation with them. It was a friendly relation. […] I feel I was a member of the team and they trusted me. […] The military personnel used to tell us, “you are part of our team”. They always respected us. We are still valuable for them. […] That is why they helped me to move to Spain. (Ghous)

[The relations with] the Spanish army were good, because they came to Afghanistan to help the Afghans. However, some Afghans did not treat the Spaniards properly, because some of the Spanish advisors did not do anything [for us]. […] I always felt I was a member of the team. (Lemar)

Regarding training, it is worth to note that the vast majority of local interpreters are not required to have any training or previous experience, which was the case in this particular study. Considering that the living conditions described in the narratives reveal the challenges to receive certain (levels of) training in a conflict zone, the international troops should then offer some training to the interpreters they hire. However, this is not the case, which in my opinion seems particularly alarming, considering that some of the demanding functions assigned to the role of the local ICZs include interpreting during mine-clearance activities and joint military operations against the Taliban, as well as at high-level meetings between foreign commanders and their local counterparts. In addition to this, the presence of danger and fear is a constant, which makes their work even more challenging, if possible.

The international military troops do not know Afghans, how we speak. If we as interpreters see someone suspicious, that something is happening, we tell the troops because we know better than them. These are our customs, our people, and our responsibility is to notice certain things. That is how we used to help. […] There was about to be an attack and one of our colleagues saw something and said, “Look, that soldier looks suspicious, he is going to attack”. That is our function as translators, as interpreters. Interpreters do not only translate, you have to be many other things, it depends on the job. (Lemar)

My aim is to do my job, to translate, to win the trust, to behave well and to fulfil the aim of the commanders. […] As a translator, I was a messenger between two nations, two armies. I believe I was a great help for both Spaniards and Afghans. Without me, they wouldn’t be able to share messages, to speak, to communicate. We are a key element of all armies. (Ghous)

We had some issues with fear, security, incidents. When we were out of the base, we were scared because of war, conflict, mines, and so on. I was scared but I made the effort to work efficiently [...]. Conflict zones are very difficult but working as part of a good team makes it easier. Your work is easier because you get support. If you need something, they help you, which makes work easier. But in a conflict zone, with fear and no support, you will find your work very difficult, very tiring. (Daoud)

You do not feel at ease in a conflict zone. You are scared, and you lose your language and interpreting skills, and it is hard to concentrate [...]. In peaceful settings, you only focus on your translation, but in a conflict zone you are thinking of your safety, and then your translation. (Ghous)

They [the Spanish troops] told me that an interpreter must do many things, “When we go out patrolling, you must come with us; when we are fighting, you must fight with us; if we need to go out at night, and you must come with us”. [...] “You must come to the frontline, and patrol with us, and always be with us. You mustn’t tell what we are doing to anyone.” [...] (Maqsood)

The functions assigned to the ICZs, however, were not specified in the contracts analysed for this research project. As a matter of fact, such contracts seem to be considerably vague, expecting interpreters to offer services “in a broad sense [...] as demanded, according to instructions” (genuine contract). But, what instructions? Who gives them? How can a line be drawn and by whom? Consequently, the perception that the interviewees had of their own role as interpreters significantly differed from the role traditionally assigned to interpreters, exceeding all limitations imposed to such.

Who controls the principals? The interpreter, he solves problems. [...] If they [principals] fight, it is the interpreter’s fault. [...] I have seen it with my own eyes, two parties fighting and the interpreter translating. No, no, you must not translate [...] You must mediate. You must sort things out. (Lemar)

Afghans and Spaniards would say swear words, but I used to omit them, because if I didn’t, a conflict would start, and I always kept the peace between the two groups. Sometimes the commander is upset and says some swear words in person or on the radio, but it is not necessary to translate everything. You must omit those words and explain them that it is not acceptable, that they must treat each other nicely. [...] When the commanders or someone is angry, the translator has to lower the volume, speak very calmly, speak as though he were a friend, not a translator. (Ghous)

Afghans speak too much. For example, they say four or five sentences but one is enough, so we were summarizing one sentence or two, that’s all, because some sentences are no use. If someone speaks too much, you summarise in two or three sentences. You have to cut them short, we have to abbreviate. (Maqsood)
We have to translate so that people feel good, so that they are interested in talking. Some people speak too fast and leave in a rush, but you must translate to make people feel good, so that they are interested in talking to you. [...] We have to be very calm when we interpret. If the person is too serious, we need to fix that. (Lemar)

The above narratives portrait the five interviewees as interpreters who position themselves considerably far from the role proposed by Hale (Controversies over the Role of the Court Interpreter: 114) as “faithful renderer of others’ utterances”. However, after careful consideration, my study results appear to suggest quite the opposite, i.e. these five interpreters seem to perceive their role as that of active agents who are aware of the importance in offering faithful translations, keeping in mind that it is crucial for such translations to be socially and culturally accepted within the Afghan context.

Interpreting is not just about translating, it is many things, it depends on the job. Military work is very complicated. [...] Customs are very different [...] When they said strange things, I did not translate. [...] because if I do, something bad is going to happen. [...] You have to translate as they want but following our customs. (Lemar)

The ICZ, therefore, is caught between a series of – potentially – divergent expectations resulting from myriad natures of in-group rules, such as west vs. east, foreign vs. local, and military vs. civilian (Hoedemaekers and Soeters, Interactions Rituals and Language Mediation during Peace Missions: 348). This pressure, therefore, “may cloud the judgment of others” (Beebee, Shoot the Transtraitor: 295) in regard to neutrality, loyalty, expectations, functions, invisibility and a number of other aspects intrinsically related to interpreting as a service. These dilemmas and others closely related to the narratives collected for this research project will be discussed in the next pages.

Discussion of dilemmas around the locally-recruited ICZs
A general taxonomy of the ICZ figure can entail quite a few challenges (Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East: 186) and as a matter of fact, only three publications, to my knowledge, have done the effort to categorize the figure of the interpreter in conflict zones (see Inghilleri, Translation in War Zones; Allen, Interpreting in Conflict Zones; Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, Towards a typology of interpreters in war-related scenarios in the Middle East). According to Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz, myriad aspects are to be taken into consideration when categorising this particular figure, including the stage of the conflict in which they work, the stakeholders involved, the interpreting situations, and the tasks carried out by the interpreters in question. In this case study, the interpreters are categorized as locally-recruited interpreters who carried out a series of tasks within advisory missions, as well as in civil-military operations.

The autonomous vs. heteronomous dichotomy proposed by Cronin (*The Empire Talks Back*) for similar contexts comes into play herein, as the troops need to hire an “outsider” and, paradoxically, give them access to sensitive information owned and regulated by their military institution. As briefly mentioned in previous pages, the main reason behind the recruitment of outsiders (i.e. locally-recruited ICZs vs. military interpreters) is what Bourdieu (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*) refers to as the “capital”, i.e. the knowledge, the skills, and the power that a certain person owns in order to move within a particular field of social life. In other words, the knowledge, the skills and the power (in the form of contacts, for example) that local interpreters may possess – and that “qualify” them to work in very particular contexts – is significantly more valuable for the international troops than the capital generally owned by a military interpreter who has been deployed from abroad. In spite of such capital – or maybe as a result of such – international troops tend to draw from the premise that the local interpreter’s loyalty will primarily be with their own communities (see CALL, *Interpreter Ops*: 12). The pervasive sense of mistrust that characterizes interactions in conflict zones tends to accentuate the fact that local interpreters, in fact, belong to the country, and sometimes, the community of the enemy.

Nevertheless, local ICZs are expected to wear the foreign troops’ military uniform (see Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de los intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*), which brings up myriad dilemmas, including the intrinsic link between wearing a uniform and supporting a particular ideology, as well as the discussion in regard to whether local interpreters are safe(r) – or not – wearing the uniform of those international troops that are, precisely, the target of the insurgent groups, especially considering that, at least in the case of this research project, ICZs are not allowed to carry weapons to defend themselves, neither are they trained in survival techniques. However, the uniform is, undoubtedly, a visible symbol of ideology and allegiance, which disconnects the interpreter with the idea of “in-between” that characterises their role. As a matter of fact, wearing a uniform implies the sense of belonging to a particular group. In these lines, the interpreters who participated in this study wore the Spanish military uniform and claimed to feel part of a team, some of them stressing the good and friendly relations that existed between ICZs and the Spanish troops, besides the “outsider” nature that tends to characterise locally-recruited interpreters. This sense of belonging, in their opinion, made their work easier, especially in this kind of contexts in which fear and danger are a constant. This aligns with Hajjar’s claim (*Effectively Working with Military Linguists*) that highlights the importance of good military-interpreter relationships in order to effectively work in certain missions.

Nevertheless, the public narratives on the figure of the ICZ as part of military teams appear to be quite different, as per the articles published about the complex and highly bureaucratic procedures that former interpreters are expected to go through. This seems to be contradicting the ancient “Leave no man behind” warfare motto, especially considering that the local interpreters working for international troops have already passed certain levels of clearance. In spite of that, interpreters in certain parts of the world are potentially perceived by all sides as...
possible traitors, because besides belonging to local communities, they are working with the foreigners who, being their employers, tend to expect the interpreter to be loyal to their cause and avoid any hidden agendas resulting from patriotism, political or religious ideologies, and personal, financial, social or family-related needs. However, conflict zones involve several distinctive features capable of altering the invisibility and neutrality that, in theory, is expected of interpreters, regardless of the context in which they work. In such complex scenarios, where is the interpreter’s loyalty? With their local communities? With their employer? With “the people you are interpreting for [and] are trying to kill you, while others are trying to save your life”? With the “group that is paying you to interpreter [who] bombed a village where your grandmother lived, killing her in the process”? (Kelly and Zetzsche, *Found in Translation*: 39). Maybe with their own personal interests?

It seems, therefore, that in this type of extreme situations “interpreters can scarcely be blamed for pursuing their own interests, no matter how unprofessional or unethical they may seem”. (Pym, *Risk Analysis as a Heuristic Tool in the Historiography of Interpreters*: 255). Consequently, certain theoretical concepts such as neutrality and invisibility seem to be more complex than in other settings of interpretation, especially if survival in these settings is a matter of “life-saving gestures of neighbours, friends and strangers” (Fujii, *Shades of Truth and Lies*: 231) and you are interpreting the atrocities inflicted to the conflict victims (see Stahuljak, *The Violence of Neutrality*; Spahic, *Interpretar en situaciones bélicas y posbélicas*; Gómez-Amich, *Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de los intérpretes en zonas de conflicto*) who happen to be your own countrymen, neighbours, friends, or even family (see Hasan Nuhanović during the Srebrenica genocide). Additionally, local interpreters may have suffered such atrocities themselves, leading to post traumatic experiences and stress, being forced to relive such traumas while interpreting and, consequently, altering their neutrality and invisibility, which at times “may actually be more efficient to conflict resolution” (Todorova, *Interpreting Conflict Mediation in Kosovo and Macedonia*: 119). In this vein, some authors have interestingly pointed out to the concept of “posttraumatic growth” in interpreters (Johnson and others, *Non-Western Interpreters’ Experiences of Trauma*) and how trauma resulting from injustice, loss, displacement, and pressing psychosocial needs can actually help interpreters to be in a unique position and reflect on certain aspects affecting all parties involved in the interaction. This may lead interpreters to what some authors considered “the most ethical position” (Cronin, *The Empire Talks Back*: 59), in other words, “to be utterly “unfaithful” in interpreting in the name of another fidelity, a fidelity of resistance [...as a] strategy for survival” (Ibid.) The position that interpreters may take will be the result of their perceptions regarding the parties, the event, and, of course, their own role within the interaction. Sometimes, however, close contact and engagement can be “subsequently perceived as fraternization with the enemy” (Beebee, *Shoot the Transtraitor*: 302), causing trust levels to dramatically plunge if certain decisions and moves by the ICZs are (mis)understood in a particular way.

It is worth to note again that such role, as mentioned in previous pages, is vaguely specified in contracts, which allows clients to “use” their ICZs as

intelligence sources, lie detectors, coordinators, advisors, and subject matter experts (Cummings, *Influencing the Population*). Consequently, interpreters who work in conflict zones, including the subjects that participated in this study, appear to execute considerably higher levels of agency and latitude in comparison with other settings of interpretation. In these lines, our results evidence how these five interpreters played the gatekeeper role on several occasions, resorting to their creativity and intuition, adjusting their “old” habitus into a new one in order to work with foreigners as well as within the military institution, and applying a series of strategies resulting from a context and risk analysis, which was based on myriad conditions including the nature of the interpreted event, the parties, the subject matter, the cultures/religions involved, as well as a number of other features that may influence the interaction in question.

Such strategies – carried out in situations as diverse as intelligence-gathering activities, frontline battles, interactions with the local population, or advising missions with local armies – included among others, summarising the original message, adapting the language register, omitting swear words, explaining cultural aspects, and adding religious references, terms of respect or jokes. All these strategies, according to the interviewees, were carried out in order to fulfil what they thought to be the parties’ expectations, including but not limited to making parties be interested to communicate with each other, creating a relationship of trust between parties, helping their employers fulfil certain aims, and ensuring that each interaction follows the cultural norms applicable to social encounters in Afghanistan. In consequence, following Hajjar’s metaphor for military advisors, we could compare the interpreter in conflict zones with a Swiss Army knife, as this seems to be a fitting symbol for the toolkit that resilient interpreters must deploy in such setting (*Effectively Working with Military Linguists*). In other words, the features of conflict zones require of interpreters a series of skills, attitudes, open-mindedness and cross-cultural competences that extend beyond linguistic expertise. This role identity has been constructed on the field, through daily experiences, rather than based on the professionalization of a particular job. This, in our opinion, opens a number of research lines that can be quite interesting to pursue, including the design and the creation of opportunities for training programmes aimed at both military personnel and ICZs to efficiently work with one another, studying the sense of professional growth and experience among ICZs and their sense of identity once they stop working as such, re-evaluating the limits traditionally imposed to the interpreter’s role and analysing how applicable those are to interpreting in conflict zones, tackling the discrepancy between prescribed neutrality and real-life needs, and, finally, exploring ways to support the professionalization of this role in order to understand if the figure of ICZ is a role whose main task is not only interpreting but just one of a number of functions.
Conclusions
Interpreting in conflict zones seems to be the result of a random and tragic situation (Baigorri-Jalón, Wars, Languages and the Role(s) of Interpreters), in particular for those locally-recruited interpreters who are suffering the horrors of the war in a country torn by conflict. These interpreters, who usually lack all sort of training in interpreting skills as well as in survival techniques, are locally hired by international troops in need of linguistic and cultural support. The capital of locally-recruited interpreters represents their main value for the international troops, as their insight knowledge regarding the geography, the history and the languages/dialects of the country in conflict, as well as the wastah (contacts) that they may possess, is, precisely, what will allow the troops to successfully complete their missions while deployed.

Their profile is, however, what distinguishes them from the international troops, and their origin, ethnicity, and religion, as well as other aspects that are intrinsic to their personal nature, will contribute to maintaining the ubiquitous mistrust that characterises conflict zones, especially in the case of interpreters in conflict zones who are potentially perceived by all sides as possible traitors. Paradoxically, the interpreters interviewed for this research project felt as members of a team, and closely worked and lived with the Spanish troops deployed in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014 as part of the NATO ISAF mission. As a result of that, one would assume, the troops allowed them to have considerably higher levels of agency and latitude in comparison with other settings of interpretation. The results of my study evidence how the five interpreters who participated in this project undertook the role of the gatekeeper, and how they resorted to their creativity and intuition in order to transform their habitus into a new one that would allow them to work with foreigners, in a militarised context, and under challenging conditions with no provision of training in any of the skills required to perform their complex role, and no functions clearly specified in their contracts.

Professionalization and training could empower ICZs to fully contribute with their skills and agency to the process in question. ICZs are the experts in this particular field, some of them having worked in this setting for years, with a number of challenges and their subsequent strategies and solutions. Consequently, I believe they have quite a lot to teach providers, scholars and researchers from other interpreting settings, including how to effectively work in dangerous scenarios, how to stay focused under pressure, how to creatively resort to certain strategies based on contextual risks analysis, how to deal with trauma, and how to balance between mediation and neutrality in extreme situations. Research studies focusing on life stories shared by local interpreters, can, therefore, contribute with first-hand information to our knowledge in a field that offers a number of stimulating aspects to be yet explored.
References


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*Close Encounters in War Journal, 1:* “Close encounters in irregular and asymmetric warfare” (2018)
As mentioned in previous lines, the literature published on the figure of the contemporary ICZ, and particularly on its ontological narratives (see Baker, M., Translation and Conflict), is considerably inferior in number in comparison with the amount of published work studying other interpreting settings, such as conference interpreting and community interpreting.

The names used in this paper are aliases for the five interpreters, who used Spanish language during the recordings, which were transcribed following the naturalized transcription method (see Bucholtz, The Politics of Transcription: 1439).

All the narratives have been extracted from Gómez-Amich, Estudio descriptivo de la autopercepción de intérpretes en zonas de conflicto. All of them have been translated by the author from Spanish into English.

My translation.

Certain narratives in this study use the terms interpreter and translator interchangeably.

Contracts analysed for this study are private between each ICZ and the Spanish Army and therefore cannot be included in the Reference List at the end of this paper.

The work of these five interpreters was overseen by the “Leader Interpreter” (the most-skilled and trustworthy local interpreter within the team), who reported to the Captain or Major in charge of each ASPFOR at that particular time [Afghanistan Spanish Force]. There was no relationship whatsoever between the locally-recruited interpreters in Afghanistan and the Translation and Interpretation Section run by the Chief Staff of National Defense in Madrid.