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## **Translating and Interpreting in Danger Zones**

### **Introduction to the special issue of *Journal of War & Culture Studies***

Wine Tesseur\*

University of Reading and Ghent University

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4882-3623

The role of languages in contexts of war and conflict has previously generated some interest in the cultural turn in War Studies, particularly through research conducted as part of the AHRC-project ‘Languages at War’, led by Hilary Footitt and Michael Kelly (Footitt and Kelly, 2012b, 2012a; Kelly and Baker, 2013). The project’s contributions to this very journal have helped to establish a place for languages in cultural analyses of war and conflict (Baker, 2010; Footitt, 2010, 2016; Tobia, 2010), yet the process of translation has not yet found a central place in war and conflict research. Footitt (2016), in this journal, argued that because the on the ground encounters of war take place in ‘transnational spaces’, War and Culture Studies should place the notion of ‘translation’ at its core to be able to fully understand the cultural products found in these inevitably multilingual spaces. Translation Studies, Footitt argued, should become a leading contributor to War and Culture Studies, and the key notion of translation should be incorporated in analyses of war and culture, because translation in the linguistic sense ‘is not an optional extra, something useful to have in selected areas, but a project central to our future understanding of war and culture’ (2016: 218).

In response to Footitt’s call, as well as to Debra Kelly’s (2016) acknowledgement of its importance for the journal, this special issue explores the role of translation and interpreting in transnational encounters in ‘danger zones’. If we understand ‘zone’ according to Pratt’s (1991) conceptualisation of a contact zone, i.e. as ‘the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power’, then a danger zone is one where such relations can cause, or have caused, a threat or a perceived danger to some of the actors in the contact zone.

This special issue brings together five contributions that are based on a series of papers delivered as

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part of the 'Translating in Danger Zones' seminar series that I organised in the Department of Modern Languages and European Studies at the University of Reading in 2016-2017.<sup>1</sup> Each of these papers explores a different type of danger zone, including multilingual encounters in police settings (Gallai), interpreting in peacebuilding contexts (Baker), language mediation in the working spaces of humanitarian organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency and the International Committee of the Red Cross (Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche) and those of UK-based international development NGOs such as Oxfam GB and Save the Children UK (Tesseur and Footitt). Finally, these academic perspectives are complemented by an interview with the non-profit organisation Translators Without Borders (TWB), which provides language assistance in crisis situations, such as the Ebola health crisis and the recent cyclone disaster in Mozambique. Like the other contributors, TWB delivered a seminar at the University of Reading in 2016, which provided an opportunity for staff and students at to hear stories from TWB's volunteers about the challenges involved in working in crisis translation contexts. The interview in this special issue was purposefully conducted to present an up-to-date practitioner-informed view of the linguistic challenges that people living in danger zones may face, of the (increasingly technological) solutions that may exist to counter these, and of the issues that aid organisations working in these contexts continue to face. Finally, the interview aims to reflect on the relationship between TWB and Higher Education Institutions in the context of present and potential future collaborations for training and research.

Together, the articles in this Special Issue make a clear case as to why acts of language mediation are never neutral. The contributions demonstrate that acts of translation can influence the outcome of transnational encounters in ways that have a lasting impact on people's lives and safety. Indeed, Translation Studies has long contested the view that translation is a neutral act of mediation between source and target text and culture. Since the 1990s, translation research has emphasised a view of translation as linked to ideological and institutional factors. Increasing influence from cultural studies, sociology and postcolonial studies has further paved the road for research on the relationship between translation and power (Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002), and on the role of translation and interpreting in conflict and danger situations (Baker, 2006; Salama-Carr, 2007b; Valero-Garcés, Vitalaru and

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López, 2014; Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud, 2016). Traditional assumptions such as those ‘that [translators and interpreters] are positioned comfortably in the middle’ (Salama-Carr 2007: 3) have been questioned particularly in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the War on Terror, which renewed the interest in the role of ethics in translation and interpreting (Salama-Carr, 2007b; Inghilleri and Harding (eds), 2010). Translation and interpreting scholars have emphasised the gap between translation and interpreting training and the reality of practice in conflict situations, where ‘entrenched ethnic and religious loyalties and allegiances’ inevitably influence a translator or interpreter’s performance’ (Salama-Carr, 2007a: 3; Baker & Maier (eds), 2011). These discussions from Translation and Interpreting Studies (T&IS) are relevant for an intercultural understanding of war that recognises the complexity and hybridity of the transnational spaces in which war and conflict take place. This special issue continues discussions that are ongoing in T&IS on issues of translator/interpreter ethics, agency and power relationships. It deliberately aims to demonstrate that bringing conscious considerations on the practice of translating and interpreting in danger situations into research on war and culture can help increase our understanding of these events and of the impact of language mediation on the interaction taking place and on its outcome.

Although the concept of ‘translation’ in this special issue first and foremost refers to interlingual translation, covering written translation and oral interpreting practices, the contributions underline an understanding of translation as always involving more than purely linguistic mediation. In line with Baker, translation is seen as ‘the mediation of diffuse symbols, experiences, narratives and linguistic signs’ (2016: 7). The articles in this special issue emphasise the complexity of the danger situations in which translation or interpreting take place, drawing attention to the interaction between the different roles that translators or interpreters can take, and the rules that shape the transnational spaces in which they work: who is able to speak which language, who is allowed to speak when, and when one should be silent. In these moments of multilingual encounter, all kinds of debates collide: the material, the spatial, political, cultural, the physical and the emotional. Contributions by Gallai, Delgado-Luchner and Kherbiche, as well as Baker reveal the ‘messiness’ of the reality of transnational encounters, and again challenge traditional views of the translator or interpreter as a neutral machine or as invisible.

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The brutal effects of asymmetrical power relationships being negotiated and performed are laid bare.

Several contributions emphasise the need to bring the ‘human’ back into practice by looking beyond existing professional codes of ethics for translators and interpreters. Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche as well as Gallai argue that doing so will allow language practitioners to negotiate an ethical approach that is appropriate to the specific danger situation or local context in which they are working. For academic research, efforts to look beyond codes of ethics and official micro-contexts of mediated interactions mean that analyses are widened to also include the many informal ways of negotiating cultural reproduction, and the diversity of voices influencing danger zones, as shown in Baker’s and Tesseur and Footitt’s contributions.

Finally, one of the key aims of this special issue is to make a start at what Footitt (2016) has referred to as designing our ‘academic hybridity in a more purposeful way’ by bringing together work on translating and interpreting in danger zones by a mix of practitioners and academics, both from within and outside of Translation and Interpreting Studies and working in and outside Anglophone contexts. The articles alternate theoretical and methodological perspectives with insights from current practice. The special issue is a deliberate attempt to take research that would traditionally find its place more easily in Translation and Interpreting Studies outside of its disciplinary comfort zone, in order to open up a space for interdisciplinary discussions on language, translation, conflict and culture, and for potential future collaborative research and shared theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the seminar series with access to the video recordings is available at [http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/modern-languages-and-european-studies/Translating\\_in\\_Danger\\_zones-abstracts\\_and\\_video\\_links.pdf](http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/modern-languages-and-european-studies/Translating_in_Danger_zones-abstracts_and_video_links.pdf) [Accessed 10 April 2019].