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Interpreting in conflict zones: the users' point of view. A case study

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A case study.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

Interpreters in conflict zones bridge the linguistic gap during a conflict and are often locals with no previous experience of interpreting. This particular category of interpreters will be analysed in this research project but from the users' point of view. In this inductive qualitative case study, two members of the Dutch army have been interviewed regarding their experience with local interpreters when they were deployed in Afghanistan. The aim of this study is to find out their impressions on the interpreting service and, more specifically, if they believed that the interpreters' background was more an advantage or a disadvantage, if the interpreters were ever at risk and if the interpreters' jobs were financially worth these potential risks. By comparing the users' different experiences, this study shows how the type of working and personal relationship between the user and the interpreter has a tangible influence on the interpreters' working conditions, perceived trustworthiness and security.

Key Words: interpreting, conflict zone, users, working conditions, safety, Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

"There will always be war". This is what Wilhelm Frick, a Nazi official, revealed to Leon Goldensohn, the author of *The Nuremberg Interviews* (1946). If Frick was right and wars are as constant in our history as they will be in our future, it is still safe to say that there will always be, as there always have been, mediators who will play a key role during these conflicts.

Interpreters in conflict zones (ICZ) are the link that make up for the linguist gap during a conflict (Stahuljak, 2000): in international missions, they help troops that come from different countries communicate amongst themselves, but they also provide help to members of these armies when they need to talk to the locals. In this research project, the main focus will be on local interpreters hired by the military. This particular category is comprised of civilians who are usually "identified by chance or circumstance" (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2018: 15) by the armies deployed on the ground. Local interpreters are usually new to this profession and do not have experience as interpreters.

When analysing the role of interpreters within conflict zones, many authors have covered different conflicts, pointing out the unique qualities of each conflict with regards to the interpreters that worked in that particular conflict. Dragovic-Drouet (2007) studied the working conditions of interpreters during the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and has highlighted several different issues, from the inadequate level of linguistic knowledge and skills of the interpreters, to the issue of subjectivity when interpreters were personally involved or related to parties in the conflict. Baker C. (2010) and Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud (2018) looked at the same conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina but from two different perspectives: Baker C. (2010) focused on the ambiguous positions of local interpreters, highlighting how this is reflected in their working conditions; whereas Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud (2018) analysed interpreter training in the Bosnian conflict and came to the conclusion that both users and interpreters needed training. Stahuljak (2009; 2010) analysed the role of interpreters within the Croatian conflict and their role as intermediaries: more specifically, she analysed their need to bear witness and how their role as neutral mediators sometimes clashed when working in a conflict situation. Todorova (2016) looked into the work of interpreters in Kosovo and Macedonia, drawing from her own experience as an interpreter during this conflict in the late 1990s and early

2000s. She focused specifically on the issue of interpreters' neutrality and the relationship of trust that was built between the parties involved in the communication, thanks to the mediation of the interpreter.

In this paper, the focus will be on the most recent phases of the Afghan war. This particular conflict, and the interpreter's role within it, has been analysed by many authors, providing crucial insights. Anderson (2014) interviewed local Afghan interpreters who worked for the U.S army, focusing on: their working conditions, their relationship with the troops, the dangers they had to face on the job and the difficulties encountered when they required a VISA permit to leave their country. Cummings (2012), on the other hand, examined the duties assigned to Afghan interpreters, highlighting that not only did interpreters have to translate, but they also had to play the role of cultural advisors and were considered a source of intelligence. Gómez Amich (2017) examined the way in which the Afghan interpreters worked, and the potential repercussions on their invisibility and neutrality. To achieve this, she interviewed five Afghan interpreters who served for the Spanish army, specifically on how they perceived their role.

As most of the studies on interpreters in conflict zones published in the field of Translation Studies focus on the self-perception of interpreters in conflict zones and on their accounts regarding their experience and working conditions (Bernabé, 2013; Carville, 2012; Gómez Amich, 2017; Snelmann, 2016; Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz, 2017), this research will instead focus on the perception, attitude and experiences of users of interpreting services in Afghanistan.

It is important to note that very few authors in this field have interviewed the users: Palmer (2007) interviewed seventeen British and French journalists who made use of interpreters in Iraq, whereas Baker (2010) interviewed more than 30 local and international officers who were involved in the peacekeeping operations and had worked with local interpreters in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Finally, Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud's (2018) research analysed interviews with seven members of the forces' personnel working in the peacekeeping operations in the Bosnian war, focusing on their experience with interpreters working for them.

In this inductive qualitative case study, the interviewees are two members of the Dutch army who used interpreting services when they were deployed in Afghanistan. The first

user interviewed is a captain who served for two tours in Afghanistan (the first one in 2009 in the Uruzgan province and the second in 2015 in Mazar-i-Sharif), whereas the second user is a full colonel who served for one tour in 2009 in the Uruzgan province. The aim of this study is to find out if, according to them, the local interpreters were more useful because of their cultural background, if they believed their interpreters were ever at risk (and if so, why) and if their jobs were financially worth the risk.

This paper is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, the role of the ICZ is analysed, taking into consideration all the main aspects which must be born in mind when studying this professional category. Firstly, the history of interpreting in conflict zones will be examined, including the "frequent invisibility of interpreters" (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016: 1), in order to understand why, despite their importance, there are few proofs of their existence in historical records. Following on from this, categorisation is taken into consideration. An initial division is made based on the different stages of war: preparatory stage, warfare and end of conflict (Baigorri-Jalón, 2011). After this first analysis, the three categories identified by Allen (2012) are described and presented: military linguists, humanitarian interpreters and local interpreters. The focus will be on the latter, exploring all the different characteristics and issues associated with local interpreters including: recruitment, employment contracts, job description, training (or lack thereof), reasons to accept the role, equipment, risks, positionality, professional ethics, neutrality and protection after the conflict had ended (i.e. granting of VISAs and/or refugee status).

Chapter 3 is centred on Afghanistan: its population and recent history will be analysed in order to better understand what is like to live and work there. In the second part of this chapter, the local interpreters in Afghanistan will be analysed from two different angles: firstly, through the work of Gómez Amich (2017), who interviewed five local Afghan interpreters who currently live in Spain after working for the Spanish army. Secondly, through the work of Anderson (2014), a filmmaker and journalist who has filmed a documentary for VICE news on Afghan interpreters. The focus in his documentary is on those interpreters who still live in Afghanistan after working for the U.S. Army, and who were not granted a VISA to leave their own country after the U.S. troops left.

In Chapter 4, the methodology and the results of the interviews will be presented. The experiences of the two users interviewed will then be compared and analysed. Finally, Chapter 5 will present the conclusion of this paper.

This preliminary study provides an original contribution to the literature. In fact, few researchers have focused their attention on the users of interpreting services, as it is a hard-to-reach population of study. This study provides insights into the user's perception of interpreting services in conflict zones. It focuses on the particular relationship that is built between the user and the interpreter and on the repercussions it has on the interpreters' working conditions, trustworthiness and security. The limitation of a small sample hinders the possibility of generalising the results of this research. However, based on the findings, some interesting points were raised and could be the starting point for further research.

2. Interpreting in Conflict Zones

2.1. The role of interpreters in conflict zones

Clausewitz (1930) defined war as an act of violence intended to compel the opponent to fulfil one's will. This act of violence, according to the philosopher, can be caused by instinctive hostility or hostile intention. It is a use of force aimed at destroying the enemy. For the purpose of this study, however, the perspective will be enlarged in order to consider not only wars but conflicts in general. The word 'conflict' describes numerous types of hostilities: it can describe mere contradictions that can lead to violence, but it can also be used both for an actual war and for all the phases that follow its de-escalation (Moser-Mercer, 2015).

According to Brahm (2003), there are different phases of a conflict that are worth mentioning. According to him, the first phase of a conflict is the latent phase, where the preconditions for a conflict are present, but there is an ongoing stalemate between those involved. The situation remains unchanged until an event triggers the "emergence" or beginning of the conflict. This phase can be followed by either a settlement or by an escalation: the first leads to resolving the conflict, the second to the outbreak of the war. After this "destructive phase", which could last indefinitely, there are two possibilities: another stalemate, a situation in which neither of the parties at war can win but only increase their casualties. The other possibility, the ideal one, is the beginning of a negotiation, followed by a peace settlement and a peacebuilding process.

During any type of conflict and any phase of the conflict, some sort of mediation is always necessary, because there is still a need to communicate (Pöchhacker, 2015). Moreover, throughout history, many conflicts have involved nations that did not share a common language, a common history or a common culture. Yet, the conflict was still possible because linguistic or cultural boundaries were never enough to avoid an outbreak of a war (Moser-Mercer & Bali, 2008).

Linguistic mediation is possible thanks to the interpreters working in conflict zones. This professional category still lacks a proper definition (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016) and the term includes different types of interpreters. The interpreters working in conflict zones are of invaluable help for the armies that hire them: not only do they help troops coming from different countries to communicate, but they also help foreign troops

understand the locals, their culture and their needs during the conflict and during its aftermath (Baigorri-Jalón, 2011).

According to Juvinall (2013), U.S. troops sent to Iraq were almost blind without their interpreters: they could not make sense of what was happening around them. As Ruiz Rosendo and Persaud (2018) explain when analysing the situation of local interpreters in the Bosnian War, it was because of the presence of interpreters that troops are able to communicate with locals. These locals possess useful knowledge and are able to explain what is happening in their country. Interpreters are therefore crucial when it comes to making up for this linguistic gap (Stahuljak, 2000).

Despite their importance, however, interpreters in conflict zones are rarely cited in archives and proofs of their existence are few and far between (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016). This could be due, as Probirskaya (2016) explains, either to the nature of the profession itself, which requires the interpreter to be almost invisible, or to the nature of the archives that have been organised and written in order to avoid mentioning the presence of the interpreter. The invisibility of the interpreter throughout history could be due, as Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud (2016) point out, to various reasons. First of all, it could be because of the primacy of the written over the spoken word: this could be why chronicles usually report the activity of translators, but rarely mention interpreters. Another possible reason could be related to either the interpreters' social status (historically they were enslaved women, war prisoners or displaced people), or to their secondary role in important historical events. However, despite this invisibility, the importance of the role they have played during conflicts throughout history is indubitable (*ibid*).

When the conflicts became worldwide with the two World Wars, the need for interpreters during the different stages of the conflict became more and more impellent. In the period from 1914 until the Nuremberg Trials, the profession of the conference interpreter as it is known today began to take shape (Gaiba, 1990; Baigorri-Jalón, 2014; Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016). Meanwhile, during the same period, the profession of the interpreter in conflict zones also evolved and acquired different characteristics. However, these characteristics varied according to the type of conflict, the country where the conflict took place or who the employer was.

2.2. Different types of interpreters

Interpreters in conflict zones are not all of the same kind: their working conditions, their contract and what is required from them can change. Baigorri-Jalón (2011) describes how the profession changes along with the different moments that characterise a conflict. The first stage is the preparatory process: diplomacy and intelligence are crucial in this moment and interpreters are needed to mediate between the two parties that are on the brink of a war. At this point, the negotiations are more delicate than usual and the interpreters hired are usually very-well trained professionals. The employer requires complete loyalty from the interpreter, and both parties during these types of negotiations need to have complete trust in their interpreter.

The second phase described by Baigorri-Jalón (*ibid*) is the warfare: when the war has been declared and the operations on land take place. Here the military personnel speak different languages or have to interact with the locals. In this stage, many of the activities that take place need the help of interpreters: propaganda, psychological warfare, contact with prisoners of war, control of occupied territories, evacuation of non-combatants, etc. In this phase, it is possible that the interpreter is asked to perform numerous tasks, not all strictly related to the tasks normally required from an interpreter (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016). This phase may also include the possibility of a foreign invasion (when a country is occupied by a foreign force); an example of this is when the Nazi party occupied France during World War II. In this case, interpreters have to mediate between locals and foreign troops, even with all the ethical dilemmas that this may involve, as Baigorri-Jalón (*ibid*) points out.

During the final phase, the interpreters are needed for the peace negotiation process, but also in the rehabilitation and reintegration of combatants in civilian life and then during the armistice negotiation and signing. In some cases, interpreters may also be required to work in military tribunals in the settlement for responsibilities (*ibid*: 178). Post conflict scenarios, like peace-building and peacekeeping operations, also require interpreters in order to carry out many different tasks. As carefully described by Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz (2017: 185-186) these tasks vary from "mediating between the troops or military observers (…) [to] fact-finding missions and other investigations involving local governments, special envoys, representatives of victims' associations and NGOs" etc.

Another type of classification frequently used is the one described by Allen (2012) who identifies three types of interpreters in conflict zones: military linguists, humanitarian interpreters and local/contract interpreters. Military linguists are soldiers who happen to speak several foreign languages and provide interpreting services to assist their fellow soldiers during field and intelligence operation. What is important to understand about this category is that these interpreters are "first and foremost soldiers" (Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz 2017: 188): they wear a military uniform, they carry weapons (Snellman, 2016) and they receive training (both linguistic and military). According to Allen, (2012) armies are investing more and more on this section of the military since they are useful when it comes to conflictive languages such as Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Urdu and Farsi. However, other languages are also considered useful, like Spanish, Portuguese and French.

The second group, humanitarian interpreters, is composed of interpreters that are employed by international aid and news organisations. They work on the field in case of a conflict and/or a disaster (earthquake, flooding or a hurricane) and are needed to help NGO's and international organisations during the complex logistics that this type of aid requires. These interpreters work in a very fragile environment, are exposed to situations of human suffering and can rarely rely on an institutionalised professional community or a standardised code of ethics.

The third category identified by Allen (2012) is the focus of this research: local interpreters. In the next subsection, this category will be analysed: in particular, their professional profile and skills, their tasks, their training (or lack of), the reasons why they accept the job, their positionality and the dangers they have to face (and how the army takes care of their protection) will be examined. Subsequently, their code of ethics, how they deal with the neutrality that is usually a crucial feature of interpreting, and their level of trustworthiness will be analysed. The final part of this subsection will look into what happens when the foreign troops leave the conflict zone and how these interpreters live the aftermath of the conflict.

Before moving on to this section, however, it is worth mentioning, as observed by Ruiz Rosendo and Muñoz (2017), that there are two more types of interpreters working in conflict zones: UN language assistants and staff or freelance conference interpreters.

The first group is made up of civilians hired by the UN to work in the context of the UN peacekeeping operations. They work on the ground and are highly proficient in local languages and an international language (which has to be one of the official UN languages). Their recruitment process takes into consideration their proficiency in the working languages, their qualifications, their problem-solving skills and their capacity to work rapidly and accurately. They also perform other functions, such as writing minutes of meetings, translating documents and carrying out administrative tasks.

The other group, staff and freelance conference interpreters, work mainly for international organizations and go on field missions. They have a high language proficiency, they are extremely well trained and have past experience in interpreting. In the exploratory research carried by Ruiz Rosendo and Muñoz, who interviewed eight staff and freelance interpreters who had worked in the Middle East, it is shown how the fact that they are part of an international organization makes them more aware of the need for their neutrality and impartiality.

2.3. Local interpreters

Local interpreters provide the majority of interpretation services in conflict zones. They are usually untrained civilians (see Allen, 2012; Baigorri-Jalón, 2011; Gómez Amich, 2013; Fitchett, 2012; Inghilleri, 2010; Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz, 2017; Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016; Moser-Mercer & Bali, 2008; Todorova, 2016), hired locally (Baker 2010) and sometimes informally (Moser-Mercer, 2015). They perform several tasks: from escorting the troops on the field to interpreting in meetings between foreign troops and the national army (Allen, 2012).

As Moser-Mercer (2015) points out, often these interpreters are not employed and have to work without a legal contract. This (see section 2.3.10.) often puts them at a great risk because working outside a regulated framework of labour law does not provide them with the protection they would need (Pöchhacker, 2015). This is especially true if one considers that the enemy is not the only threat to fear: because of the help they provide to foreign troops, they are, in fact, often considered as traitors (Wang-Chi Wong, 2007; M. Baker, 2010; Pöchhacker, 2015; Gómez Amich, 2013; Moser-Mercer, 2015) or are the subject of envy on the part of local communities (Bartolini 2009).

2.3.1. *Professional profile and skills*

Local interpreters are recruited because they know both the local language(s)/dialect(s) spoken in the conflict zone and the language spoken by the troops hiring them. It must be highlighted that they are not professionals, and the primary reason for their employment is their knowledge and proficiency in the languages required by the army. That said, they do not, at least, start into this profession with the proper professional skills usually required of conference interpreters (Baigorri-Jalón, 2011).

Before we move on to the description of the specific tasks of locally hired interpreters, it is interesting to notice that armies nowadays have started to hire more and more civilians, according to Kelly & Baker (2013), since military linguists have begun to decline this position. Seemingly, military linguists would rather accept more military roles, with opportunities of career advancement, than accept an additional interpreting assignment. This may be one reason as to why the military turned to civilians that could "keep open, *tant bien que mal*, the communication channel" (Baigorri- Jalón, 2011:177).

2.3.2. *Tasks*

Interpreters in a conflict zone are usually asked to undertake more tasks than just translating verbal elements from one language to another in a meeting. According to the job description provided by the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Career Exploration Program (ASVAB CEP) of the U.S. Department of Defence, interpreters in conflict zones have to:

- Identify, translate and summarise communications;
- Conduct escort interpretation;
- Perform written translations;
- Train the military personnel in order to familiarise them with the local language and raise cultural awareness;
- Collect, evaluate and combine data from multiple sources using language processing tools;
- Collect, translate analyse and report intelligence information;
- Monitor, identify and process communications involving activities of interest (Careers in the Military, 2004).

Baker M. (2010) identifies some other tasks, such as conducting negotiations between the army and local military or civilians authorities but also performing inspections or delivering materials or aid. As it appears to be clear, the work of an ICZ is extremely different to the one of a conference interpreter: the duties that they have to perform go far beyond what is usually asked of an interpreter outside a war zone (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016).

As far as the interpretation is concerned, it is interesting to analyse the point of view of some users interviewed by Palmer (2007) regarding their expectations and general level of satisfaction regarding the interpreting services. Although the users did not require a word-for-word translation and could generally settle for a summary, they did consider the mistranslation and/or omission of significant material to be a risk when dealing with local interpreters. In order to overcome this, they would ask similar questions several times to see if the answer was always consistent.

2.3.3. Training

Local interpreters do not receive training when they are hired by the armies. They are therefore key players in the communication and yet remain non-professional linguists, (Fitchett, 2012) hired just because of their functional bilingualism (Baigorri-Jalón, 2011). This lack of training would be inadvisable in any other sphere, as Gómez Amich (2013) suggests; in interpreting in conflict zones, however, the law of supply and demand applies (Baigorri- Jalón, 2011; Gómez Amich, 2013). As there is often a poor understanding of the profession amongst the users of interpreters in conflict zones (Moser-Mercer, 2015), the hiring of untrained interpreters in conflict zone is extremely widespread (Allen, 2012).

The problem of the lack of training is well known by professional interpreters who worked in conflict zones in the Middle East. In an exploratory study carried out by Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz (2017), a group of professional interpreters with ample experience and who work mainly for international organisations were interviewed in order to learn more about the work they carried out in the field. These interpreters declared that in order to work in such multi-cultural, stressful and dangerous environment adequate training is crucial. This is particularly the case if we consider that the messages to send across are filled with cultural clues that could severely influence the negotiation, as Todorova (2016)

explains. The interpreters interviewed by Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz (*ibid*) noticed that those interpreters who work in conflict zones are rarely prepared or qualified for the job: they lack specialised knowledge in law, economy, diplomacy and human rights. Even if they had this knowledge, the general opinion of the interpreters who participated in this study is that not everyone is cut out for this job. Very few of the local interpreters have the psychological strength to work under such circumstances, and not having a code of ethics to support their work only makes it harder.

Cappelli (2014) proposes additional training that focuses on the psychological aspect: mock interpreting sessions about testimony or reports of torture, violence etc. with actors impersonating victims. The presence of a psychological counsellor is also advised since it could help interpreters (and users) reduce their emotional involvement and start the process of emotionally dealing with the brutality of war in order to maintain impartiality. This could be a solution to achieving the strength and professionalism necessary in such a context. The risk of not being strong enough to deal with a stressful situation is that one may not be able to control one's emotions; the danger of not being professional, however, is that one might not be able to establish limits in order not to be used as an instrument for one of the parties (see section 2.3.7.).

Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud (2018) analysed this matter and have concluded that both parties would actually require training. In fact, not only do interpreters need to be better prepared to work with military forces, the members of the armies themselves also need to know how to deal with interpreters properly. Baker M. (2010) adds that, in order for an efficient working collaboration to occur, specific guidance is needed on how to relate with one another. Soldiers need to be told about their responsibilities towards civilians and about the needs of an interpreter in order to improve their working conditions.

2.3.4. Motivations to accept the job

We have analysed how ICZ are often lacking the necessary skills to carry out the job, a job which takes place in dangerous environments. Yet these local interpreters still appear to have enough reasons to accept the job. Many authors have looked into this matter (Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz, 2017; Baigorri-Jalón, 2011; Baker M., 2010; Gómez Amich, 2017; Inghilleri, 2010; Anderson, 2014) and found out that there are several reasons for this that are worth analysing.

The main reason is financial: these interpreters, as locals, live in communities where the labour market has essentially come to a stop because of the war and even a small revenue is still an improvement in their living conditions. However, not all local interpreters believe that what they earned was enough and that it was worth the risk (see section 3.3.2.). Another frequently mentioned reason is the will to do some good: some interpreters do believe that through their actions they are doing something to improve the lives of their fellow citizens and are helping those who came from far away in order to save their nations. Finally, another reason that is often mentioned is the possibility of obtaining a VISA to leave the country. This is a common procedure for foreign armies: they promise an "escape plan" after some years of service. This could be provided for through the attainment of a VISA permit or by granting the refugee status. Even in this case, however, the procedures are not always that quick or easy and there are several cases of interpreters being left behind (Bernabé, 2013; Carville, 2012; Anderson, 2014).

2.3.5. Positionality

Local interpreters are insiders, as they belong to the local communities and share the common culture of the country where the troops are deployed. This entails, as Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud (2018) noticed, both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, they have the capacity and the knowledge to guide the users of interpreting services through the maze of cultural and social practices, they advise them on the correct behaviour when communicating and on the non-written rules of their society. On the other hand, their closeness to their own culture could also be perceived as a disadvantage if the interpreter is not capable to show objectivity or if s/he takes things for granted in a communicative situation.

Their job makes them face situations that may show the misery of their own community in need (Dragovic-Drouet, 2007). The fact that they experience the harshness of the war so closely and that they have to live through traumatic and stressful situations (Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz, 2017) inevitably makes it hard to maintain cold professionalism for the sake of the mission (Dragovic-Drouet, 2007).

Moreover, it has to be considered that their position is also ambivalent: they are in fact insiders working for outsiders (the foreign troops), and they might, as such, build

personal relations on both sides of the war (Baker M., 2010). They are, as Palmer (2007: 14) says, "suspended bodies between cultures and languages".

2.3.6. Safety and security

Local interpreters live the reality of the war very closely: this makes them face a very dangerous situation where their lives are often at risk (Inghilleri & Harding, 2010). The fact that they work for military forces does not signify that they are part of these forces, as they did not receive a military training, and they do not receive the same type of protection and safety that the soldiers they work for do (Moser-Mercer, 2015).

An important factor regarding the interpreters' protection is indubitably their uniform and/or equipment. Regarding this matter, the situation is not homogenous. In Afghanistan, as Moser-Mercer (2015) points out, non-governmental organisations and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mostly recruited local interpreters. These interpreters were not allowed to carry anything that could identify them as employed by ISAF, in order to reduce the risk of them being targeted by Taliban. However, it is unclear if this refers to them not wearing a uniform when working or to them not carrying any identifying objects or badges outside of working hours.

On the other hand, Baker C. (2010) has observed in Bosnia-Herzegovina that many interpreters were given military uniforms: this, of course, blurred the usual distinction between civilians and soldiers. However, according to an Army linguist interviewed by Baker C. (*ibid*), this was deemed necessary as interpreters would have been targeted if they did not look like regular soldiers. This is understandable, but one has to take into consideration that, even though they might look like soldiers, they still are not military personnel. In fact, they do not carry weapons and they are not trained to respond properly to any security threat, as a soldier would do. This entails additional security measures in order to ensure their safety since they are not capable of, nor expected to defend themselves, as any trained member of the military could do.

A fact-finding report was produced by the Danish Immigration Service (2012) to shed light on the actual situation of the asylum seekers from Afghanistan, as it is the largest single nationality among asylum seekers in Denmark. The study collected information on various issues from past asylum cases in order to provide additional information on

typical cases (conflict with the Taliban, extramarital relations, land disputes etc.) and improve the process of granting/refusing refugee status. When analysing the case of people working or who had worked for the US military, they found out that local interpreters employed by the US army were high targets. One of the sources of this study (who asked to remain anonymous) declared that, because of this, most of them kept their jobs a secret.

Interpreters have to face many risks when working in a conflict zone: Talpas (2016), citing the work of Pah (2009), has analysed the different types of risks involved with this job. There are three types identified: military risks, environmental risks and social risks. The military risk is due to the obvious presence of weapons, explosives and ammunition possessed by both parties at war and to the fact that interpreters often have to escort soldiers on all their missions, without enjoying the same kind of protection (Moser-Mercer, 2015).

The second type of risk is environmental: these interpreters have to work in an environment where the climatic conditions are often difficult, especially since they do not have military training and are not used to strenuous physical activity as soldiers are. "Resilience to discomfort is an inalienable aspect of the military subjectivity" (Baker C., 2010: 143) but, as we said, interpreters are civilians, not soldiers.

The third risk is the social one: these interpreters may be seen as traitors from their own community (Baker C., 2010; Bartolini, 2009; Gómez Amich, 2013; Moser-Mercer, 2015; Pöchhacker, 2015; Wang-Chi Wong, 2007). Because of their status as interpreters, they receive death threats (Baker C., 2010; Bernabé, 2013; Carville, 2012; Gómez Amich, 2013; Talpas, 2016), not only directed to them but also towards their family members, as they are seen as "collaborating with the enemy" (Juvinall, 2013: 206).

2.3.7. Professional ethics

As has already been seen, ICZ do not receive training. This factor, however, does not only influence their performance and accuracy, but it also raises doubts regarding their professional ethics. Being trained as interpreters provides trainees with the tools and the skills that are necessary to interpret but also, and above all, professional ethics (Dragovic-

Drouet, 2007). Professional ethics is crucial when dealing with crisis management in a stressful environment (Moser-Mercer & Bali, 2008).

A code of ethics set by professionals in a specific profession is important because it sets out the rules to abide by but it also provides protection to the worker (Li, Tian & Huang, 2016). The code of ethics provides guidelines that protect the integrity of a profession and dismisses individuals who, because of their unprofessional behaviour, risk endangering the profession itself and its credibility, honour and effectiveness (*ibid*). When a professional works knowing the code of ethics of his or her profession, it is clear to him or her how to tackle tough situations that might arise (Rok, 2014). Moreover, a code of ethics gives clear orientation on how to determine if a certain conduct is crossing the line, or if it might lead to a conflict of interests: it is easier to determine which "action or conduct is most appropriate or justified" (Kalina, 2015: 66).

Nevertheless, creating a code of ethics for ICZ is not an easy task: first of all, there is no professional association or community of interpreters in conflict zones that could enshrine these guidelines in regulations regarding professional and/or ethical conduct. According to Fletcher (1966), this impossibility to set shared rules, gives the interpreter the right to violate rules and principles under some circumstances. This is the so-called "situation ethics" (Fletcher, 1966). Such ethics change between wartime and peacetime and even interpreters who work in the same country during the same war, if they have different national identities and political ideologies, may have different situation ethics (Li, Tian & Huang, 2016).

It is therefore of particular interest to analyse why professional ethics and situation ethics conflict with each other when it comes to interpreting in war zones. First of all, it is due to the dual identity of the interpreters: civilians, who were born and raised in a country and who are influenced by the mainstream culture of their own society (Li, Tian & Huang, 2016), are employed by foreign armies. Their principles, values and personal beliefs are deeply rooted in them and they may come into play on a subconscious and instinctive level (Rok, 2014). However, on the same note, one might wonder if an interpreter with no bonds at all, nor any ethical or cultural attachment to the conflict, could still be considered as actually qualified for the job (*ibid*). Conflict interpreters are therefore meant to have an ambiguous position (Moreno Bello, 2014).

2.3.8. Neutrality

All the characteristics that we have analysed until now can also be seen as challenges that the interpreter has to face not only related to ethics but also to neutrality (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016). Baker M. (2010) believes that local interpreters, because of their origins and ethnicity, can be seen by the military forces that hire them as either victims or villains, as allies that can be trusted or as potential risks. They cooperate with the foreign troops, with journalists and international organisations; they even end up building personal relationships with them, winning over "their sympathy and respect" (*ibid*: 217). However, the employers do not forget that they are still locals and are afraid that the interpreters' first allegiance may be to their own local community (Moser-Mercer, 2015): this creates a general sense of mistrust.

Neutrality in their case is a question of violent internal conflict because the interpreter is torn between two parties: on the one hand, the native country strained by the conflict, a dangerous place where misery and atrocities abound; on the other hand, their employers who are foreign, but provide security, money and a sense of purpose (Stahuljak, 2000). The interpreter's neutrality could be called into question, as he appears to be duplicitous and neither the armies nor the locals know if they can trust the interpreter (Inghilleri & Harding, 2010). However, it must be considered that even if interpreters are (like any other human being) embedded in or raised by one specific culture, they can still be capable of working without being influenced by it (Baker M., 2009). This means that proper training could lead to them respecting the neutrality of the profession, without letting their origins or beliefs influence their work.

Another aspect that could influence the interpreter's neutrality is witnessing abuse of human rights and other atrocities, something that is a possibility given the environment in which they work. According to Salama Carr (2007), untrained interpreters could see their capacity to act in a detached manner shattered after bearing witness to acts of violence and abuse. Moreover, their ability to observe strict impartiality and unobtrusiveness could be undermined by the harshness of war. Cappelli (2014) interviewed interpreters and translators in conflict zones (both military and civilian interpreters/translators) and found out that 21% of interpreters and translators

recognised that sympathy for victims might have biased their performance, even though only two of them actually admitted it happened.

2.3.9. Trustworthiness

When an interpreter does not abide to a code of ethics and has no professional training, one could wonder if s/he can be trusted or not. Of course, there is no general rule, but only different opinions on the matter. According to the testimonies collected by Palmer (2007), the users trusted their interpreters with their own lives. Similarly, as reported by Baker M. (2010) who interviewed soldiers who worked with interpreters in Iraq, most of the members of the army she spoke to affirmed that they trusted their interpreters with no reservations. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. Interpreters in Roman times were often suspected of being spies (Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud, 2016). Nowadays, things have not changed much: they are often accused of being double agents, (Inghilleri, 2010) or seen as potential enemies (Baigorri-Jalón, 2011) who could feed the soldiers false information (Palmer, 2007) and are not to be trusted (Baker M., 2010).

Gaining the trust of their employers is not the only battle they have to win, however. The relationship with the local communities is also very complicated for these interpreters. It can be difficult for them to come back to their own community, to be accepted again by their own compatriots. As Gómez Amich (2013) highlights, they have helped and served foreign troops who, according to the locals, are the ones responsible for the bombing and killing of their own people, friends and families. The locals see the soldiers as men with inacceptable values. Any interpreter who helps them is someone who is now using their own language as a weapon to be used against them, making demands for the enemies (Baker M., 2010). These interpreters may also be the subject of envy (Bartolini, 2009; Fitchett, 2010) from the local communities because of the financial advantages and privileges they receive for the job they carry out. Being perceived in this way along with the risks that come naturally with being involved in military operations or being close to military targets, increases the danger of being personally injured (Bartolini, 2009).

2.3.10. The employer's duty to protection

According to Fitchett (2010), between 2003 and 2008, amongst the interpreters that worked for the U.S. troops in Iraq, 360 were killed and 1200 were injured. These numbers

clearly reveal that these interpreters do not receive adequate protection even if they should, because the employer has the duty to protect its employees, and in this case protect interpreters who play such a crucial role for the army every day (*ibid*).

The first kind of protection would be a regular contract that would move them out of the informal economy (Bartolini, 2009; Moser-Mercer, 2015; Pöchhacker, 2015) and of course professionalisation through training (Pöchhacker, 2015). However, legally speaking, as Bartolini (2009) points out, interpreters are not really protected: The Additional Protocol 1 to the Geneva Convention (art. 79) of 1977 protects journalists but does not include interpreters (even though they could be included in the category mentioned in this Additional Protocol of "associated personnel"). This lack of mention in International Law and the fact that these interpreters work in zones where, most often, the Rule of Law has been suspended, often leaves them in a legal vacuum (Moser-Mercer, 2015).

It is clear that conflict interpreters who have to work in a high-risk environment need special protection: not only during the conflict, but also after (Fitchett, 2012). General Bias, former Major General of the Italian Army, has declared that local interpreters may even be subject to an even greater risk when they are left behind the troops they once helped (Fitchett, 2010).

Some interpreters give up their linguistic activity once their work for the army is over (Baigorri- Jalón, 2011); however, this does not mean that the risks for them are over too. According to Inghilleri (2010), once they relinquish their role, they are even more exposed to dangers and, as Bartolini (2009) points out, to the possibility of retaliation as well. This is why many of them seek asylum abroad or in the same countries they interpreted for (Anderson, 2014; Bartolini, 2009; Bernabé, 2013; Carville, 2012; Fitchett, 2010; Gómez Amich, 2013; Inghilleri, 2010; Moser-Mercer, 2015) in order to escape their own communities who do not accept them anymore. Some of them, thanks to the personal bond that they had built with soldiers, as Baker (2010) references, received help when it came to the process of obtaining a VISA: when soldiers came back from Iraq and Afghanistan they pressured their governments and expedited the process in order to make it easier for their former interpreters to escape their country of origin.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case: many interpreters are left behind and do not manage to receive a VISA to leave their own countries (Anderson, 2014; Bernabé, 2013). Carville (2012), who interviewed some Afghan interpreters who worked for the New Zealand Army, reported that they felt that they had been used and then abandoned "to certain death" by the New Zealand army (*ibid*).

However, interpreters have to face the same difficulties that many asylum seekers encounter when seeking protection, as obtaining a VISA is not always an easy matter. As Bartolini (2009) carefully highlights, a VISA can be granted only to those who can physically reach the host country. As Anderson (2014) has reported in his interviews with Afghan interpreters, this is not always possible: some of them said that going to Europe illegally, for example, is extremely dangerous, and, according to them, taking an illegal ship to reach the European shores meant a 50% chance of dying during the journey. Some others said that even the legal way, by airplane or other means of transport, was not feasible, as it could cost up to $25,000, an amount that they did not have.

Moreover, Bartolini (2009) adds that those requesting a VISA are subject to standard legal requirements to obtain such permission and they also need to prove if and how they are victims of persecution or violence in their own country (*ibid*). This type of proof is not always easy to find and therefore many interpreters often see their VISA request refused.

3. Interpreting in Afghanistan

Before analysing what it means to be an interpreter in Afghanistan, it is important for the reader to understand the social composition of this landlocked and troubled country, its population and its recent history: from the Soviet invasion, through the Taliban's rise to power until the appearance of IS (Islamic State). Being aware of a country's social background will give the reader the right perspective when it comes to analysing the interpreters' profile, their connection with the Afghan tribes and the importance of the mediation between the Afghan culture and the Westerners' culture. Knowing about Afghan history and Afghanistan's current situation will shed light on the risks that interpreters have had to face when they were working there.

3.1. Afghan Population

The Afghan population is divided into tribal or ethnic groups, also known as *qawm*. Every person is loyal primarily to his or her own kin and then to their village tribe or ethnic group. There are many *qawm* in Afghanistan, the same term is actually very flexible and expandable, but if one had to outline the most principal *gawms* they would be Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Aimaqs. Ethnic groups are not fixed nationalities: they are based on different criteria (lineage, place of origin, common language etc.). In order to differentiate one ethnic group from the other, Barfield (2010) suggests considering this rule of thumb: one group remains distinct from another as long as its members have an "identity that outsiders recognise and respond to" (*ibid*: 21): in other words, if people identify themselves as belonging to a specific *qawm* and their neighbours agree, then they belong to that *qawm*.

Geographically, these ethnic groups are not bound to specific areas, but can be found dispersed throughout the country living amongst other ethnic groups. However, some ethnic groups live in isolation from others due to geographical boundaries, such as steep valleys and hillsides, and therefore have minimal or no contact with other ethnic groups.

An important feature of some of these groups is tribalism. Some of them, in fact, define their membership through the unilineal descent from a common ancestor, real or assumed, through the male line. In a tribal group the clan name is defined by lineage so it

is usually inherited. These are to be considered as the tribal groups. By contrast, nontribal ethnic groups make no claim of genealogical relationship among their members.

Since asking about clan membership is prohibited when taking the census, it is impossible to have concrete data to determine the exact number in each tribal group. Nevertheless, Pashtuns are believed to be the most predominant tribe, even if this claim often came from Pashtun dominated governments. It is estimated that this group represents forty percent of the Afghan population (Blood et al., 2001). Historically, the word 'Afghan' was actually synonymous with Pashtun and 'Afghanistan' could both be translated as land of the Afghans or as land of the Pashtuns. Only more recently, Afghanistan has acquired a more national character, especially because of the outside world that labels the people living in the Afghan territory as Afghani, regardless of their ethnic origin. The common ancestor of Pashtun is Qais. Its lineages unite into larger clans grouped in four maximal-descent units: Durrani, Ghilzais, Gurghusht and Karlanri. In addition to descent, the Pashtuns define themselves by their code of conduct, the Pashtunwaly, and their ability to speak Pashto. Most of them are subsistence farmers, but a minority of them are nomads.

The second ethnic group, representing thirty percent of the Afghan population, are the Tajiks. They are a nontribal Persian-speaking group of Sunni Muslims. They live mainly in the northern part of the country: its population is spread in Kabul, Herat and Mazar but also in the mountains of the northeast. They mainly speak Dari, however not every speaker of Dari can be automatically considered a member of this ethnic group (Blood et al, 2001). They practice subsistence farming but those who live in cities have historically been merchants, bureaucrats and members of an educated clergy. They are literate in Persian, which is the language used by the government administration and when establishing or fostering foreign relations. This gave them a powerful role, no matter who was ruling the country.

The third group is the Hazaras. They constitute fifteen percent of the Afghan population. Their homeland is in the central range of the Hindu Kush, the Hazarajat. They are Shia Muslims who engage in alpine subsistence agriculture and livestock breeding. Their language is a dialect of Persian but they descend from the Mongol armies that conquered Iran, and they therefore often display strong Mongoloid features. Historically, they have been victims of prejudice on religious and racial grounds and social mobility for them has

always proven to be very difficult. They rank at the bottom of Afghanistan's ethnic hierarchy and were systematically excluded from almost all government positions and educational opportunities by the Pashtuns-dominated governments. They were particularly targets of persecutions by the Taliban and only recently have they achieved parity with other groups under the 2004[1] constitution, which specifically recognised the legitimacy of Shia legal practices.

Another ten percent of the country's population is represented by Uzbeks and Turkmen, Sunni Turkish-speaking groups that descend from nomadic tribal confederations that arrived in a series of different waves from central Asia. The Uzbeks in Afghanistan are an extension of the Uzbek population across the border in Uzbekistan. A large number of them fled from there to Afghanistan after the Russian revolution and later during the Stalinist period. The related Turkmen tribes are found in the northwest on the borders with Turkmenistan and Iran. They remained much more nomadic than the Uzbeks and often raided northern Iran and northern Afghanistan for slaves and other loot. This continued until the nineteenth century, when the Russian conquest of Khiva and Merv ended their autonomy. A number of Turkmen groups moved to the Afghan territory after this, particularly following the establishment of the Soviet Union. They are closely related to the larger Turkmen population in Turkmenistan and Iran. They play an important economic role because they produce Afghanistan's famed carpets and karakul sheepskins, both of which are major export earners. After being an invisible minority, especially during the Soviet war period and the civil war, they regained considerable autonomy and once again became a political force in the north.

A smaller group is represented by the Aimaqs, a tribally organised Sunni Muslim group who makes up for five per cent of the population. They speak Persian but are sometimes said to be of Turkish descent. Historically they occupied the mountainous territory east of Herat and west of Hazarajat, the ancient territory of Ghor. The term *aimaq* is actually a generic Turkish idiom for tribe. In rural areas, they are seminomadic and they practice pastoralism.

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[1] The constitutive process started on October 5, 2002 when President Karzai appointed a Drafting commission to produce a preliminary draft constitution. This process ended in 2004 when the Constitution finally saw the light. In Chapter One, the country is defined as the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan": an independent state where official religion was Islam. Nevertheless, it also stated that non-Muslim Afghans were allowed to practice their religions. (Norchi, 2004)

The remaining ethic groups represent only three per cent of the country's population. They are the Nuristanis, the Pashai, the Qizilbash, the Baluch, the Arabs, the Pamiris, the Jugis, the Jats, the Kirghiz and the non-Muslims. They are still important to mention because Afghan rulers frequently followed an old political strategy of appointing members of small ethnic minorities to high positions in the government and military. It was believed that they would be more loyal because they had no political base of their own within the larger population and were therefore less likely to betray their masters (Barfield, 2010).

3.2.   Recent Afghan history

Because of its position in the heart of Asia, Afghanistan has always been a crossroads for different populations and a "gateway for invaders spilling out of Iran and central Asia and into India" (Barfield, 2010: 1): Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, for example. There have been many wars fought in Afghanistan; just as many were the external powers that were fighting them, often in a wider context of regional and international strategic polarization (Centlivres-Demont & Roy, 2015). However, despite the civil war that broke out in 1929, Afghanistan managed to remain mostly peaceful and neutral, even between the two world wars.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Afghanistan was transformed into the stage of the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States. During the 1960s, Afghanistan was very unstable and the regime that was loyal to the Soviets was on the verge of collapsing under the attacks of the resistance. This is why the Soviets decided to begin their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Within two days, they had secured Kabul (Blood et al, 2001). At the same time, the United States under the Carter presidency were trying to improve relations with Pakistan by offering aid in exchange of their help in the struggle against communism. Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq refused Carter's aid at first, but then accepted a larger offer from the Reagan administration. As the civil war in Afghanistan went on between the communist controlled regimes and the *mujahidin*, forcing people to flee their country and finding refuge in Pakistan and Iran, the Pakistani government proposed "proximity talks" in June 1982, in an attempt to find a solution to the situation. These talks also included the Soviet Union and the United States and

resulted in an agreement on the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (*ibid*). The soviets left the country in 1989, but the situation was no better than before the invasion.

When the communist regime finally collapsed in 1992, the country was left alone while the mujahedeen resistance factions started to wage war on themselves in a deadly struggle for power. These internal divisions combined with the dependency of all Afghan governments on outside aid (Barfield, 2010) left Afghanistan defenceless.

In this vacuum, regional ethnic powers became stronger and Islamist groups took advantage of the situation. The Taliban movement was already popular in the south of Afghanistan: their success was based on the fact that they promised security of life, law and order in a region where they were distinctly lacking. As Malay describes (1997), the Taliban ideology revolves around three cornerstones: fundamentalism, traditionalism and totalitarianism. They see the sacred text "as the ultimate source of guidance on social and political matters" (Malay, 1997: 102) and they deeply depend on the authoritative figure of their spiritual guide, who at the time was Mullah Mohammad Omar. Taliban should be considered as a traditionalist movement, in fact they reintroduced the recrudescence of "modes of behaviour that have existed for centuries in rural Afghanistan" (Malay, 1997: 102). This explains the support they often received, especially in rural areas. Finally, Maley (2007) describes the Taliban Movement also as a totalitarian one: their intent was to "monopolize the political sphere and to assimilate all of social life into it" (*ibid*: 103).

Since there was no opposition of any central government or any coherent military force, (Barfield, 2010) the Afghan Taliban, with the help of foreign jihadists and Pakistan, grew stronger and took Kabul in 1996. However, as they never managed to build a real government, Afghanistan became a failed state. The country under the control of Taliban also became the refuge of Osama bin Laden, a major commander of al Qaeda. According to Rubin (1998), bin Laden came to Afghanistan early in the jihad, around 1979. He then left for Saudi Arabia and then returned permanently in 1996. Because of their alliance with al Qaeda and the protection they provided to bin Laden, the Afghan Taliban were considered as a direct target by the US Government immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York and Washington DC. The Taliban, in fact, were protecting a large number of jihadists in their territory, and when they refused to expel bin Laden and al

Qaeda, the military operations began: U.S. jets struck the Taliban from the sky while their Northern Alliance allies moved against them on the ground.

According to a United Front commander interviewed by Barfield (2010), U.S. and other foreign troops did not encounter a strong opposition from the population because they came "from a distant land that did not border the country" (*ibid*: 276) and therefore felt as safer allies. Therefore, and despite the usual mistrust against foreigners, every region and every ethnic group (including the Pashtuns) turned against the Taliban, welcoming foreign troops. The Taliban, who were initially lauded for bringing "peace and security to the regions they captured" (*ibid*: 261), became more and more unpopular because of their religious and social policies. Taliban, in fact, banned all forms of entertainment, the veneration of saints, shrines and images of living things. Misogynist decrees were passed against women (Maass, 1998): they could not participate in public events, could not receive an education and were forced to cover their bodies and heads. Lawbreakers, even of minor crimes (*ibid*) were punished through violence and murder.

The Taliban regime fell almost immediately: first the north and the west collapsed and then Kabul fell in November 2001. However, questions regarding the process of re-building the failed state remained. In Afghan history, this process was usually controlled by elites who would seize the power and centralise it, but this time there was no political elite left to do it.

The most prominent personalities of the Afghan opposition met at the UN and signed the Bonn Agreement on the 5th December 2001. This agreement gave presidency of the country to Hamid Karzai, scion of a prominent aristocratic tribal family (Centlivres-Demont & Roy, 2015), for the transitional time between the signing of the agreement and the elections that were to be held in 2004. Moreover, the Security Council of the United Nations authorised (Resolution 1286) the establishment of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to assist Afghan armed forces and train them.

Despite the considerable diplomatic effort, Karzai's government was weak in terms of leadership, functionality and legitimacy (Barfield, 2010). Hamid Karzai was seen as weak and passive. He decentralised power, encouraging corruption, maladministration and "*warlordism*" (Donini, 2004: 178). Moreover, it was also the stigma of foreign imposition that undermined his authority.

Despite the difficult situation and the weakness of the centre, no faction tried to divide the country while three million refugees were returning home from exile in 2003. Therefore, although, on the one hand, international aid and troops had actually ended the civil war, on the other, Afghanistan did not have the means to improve the low standard of living of its population. That said, the first signs of improvement still came through, thanks to the democratic efforts of the government.

The international community backed Afghanistan's efforts to write a new constitution and followed closely the presidential election held in October 2004. The 2004 constitution, although it did not mention the Sharia (religious law), clearly stated that "Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic" (Article 1) and that no law may be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam (Article 3). However, as Centlivres-Demont (2004) points out, Islam is indicated as state religion but non-Muslims were and are still free to practice their faiths in the limits of the law. In the preamble, the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are cited, showing the will to start a new path free of oppression, atrocities, violence and discrimination. The constitution gave women the possibility to sit both in the National Assembly and in the senate and Article 22 gives men and women equal rights. This constitution was seen by the US and the UN as a victory (*ibid*).

After the constitution, it was time for the elections: for the international community a fair election was the clear sign of a rightful government in a functioning state, but for the Afghans, Karzai still had to prove himself after winning the elections. Before the parliamentary election of 2005, Karzai tried to weaken the legitimacy of this institution and claimed that parties were associated with Communists; he forced the candidates to run without a party, just as individuals. Despite his attempt, the parliament became a strong opponent to his administration, forcing him to accept several reforms: for example, judicial reform, with the appointment of a Western-trained technocrat instead of a conservative Islamic cleric who had no higher education.

Despite some advancements, Afghanistan was still in need of international aid. Firstly, there was the need of military assistance in order to improve security and diminish local warlords' power in all the major country's regions. Secondly, considerable investments in the agricultural sector were needed, since the Afghan economy is essentially based on

subsistence agriculture (Marsden, 1999). Thirdly, substantial investments to rebuild the country's infrastructures were required, in order to improve urban life on the one hand and to create job opportunities on the other. Finally, Afghanistan needed international aid to support its fight against the production and smuggling of opium, heroin and hashish produced in Afghanistan. Transnational narcotics have always been a particular concern to the international community, yet little progress has been made in tackling this problem (Qassem, 2009).

Unfortunately, the aid was focused on Kabul and did not meet expectations: efforts were mostly short-sighted (Barfield, 2010) and did not create strong foundations to rebuild a whole country.

The enthusiasm shown during the fight against the Taliban in 2001 and during the elections of 2004 and 2005 started to fade. People complained about governmental malfeasance, insecurity and corruption. Basic needs were not met in many cities, even Kabul: there was a lack of electricity, drinking water and problems with transportation. Suicide attacks appeared, especially on the borders with Pakistan, lowering the feeling of security in the population. Taliban forces started to re-invigorate by 2006. Afghanistan was not a closed deal like the westerners had thought.

According to Barfield (2010), suicide bombings increased by more than 400 percent between 2005 and 2006 and armed attacks nearly tripled. Therefore, despite previous intentions of withdrawing from Afghanistan, the United States and allied governments decided to stay and fight. What had started as a lengthy state-building process had now become again a full-scale war of counter-insurgency (Centlivres-Demont & Roy, 2015). Thanks to the international help, the Taliban were defeated once again in 2006 and had to find refuge in those areas where the coalition forces were weaker and resort to their old tactics of roadside bombing and ambushing.

With Obama's arrival to the U.S. presidency, a renewed effort to counter the resurging Taliban threat was announced. President Obama's strategy was to destroy al Qaeda's safe havens in Pakistan to prevent al Qaeda's fighters from returning to Pakistan or Afghanistan. Moreover, Obama decided to change course and to send thirty thousand more troops to Afghanistan. As Taliban insurgency kept growing, more troops arrived to

Afghanistan in order to protect civilians, restoring government services and help local police forces, reaching 100000 troops by December 2009.

2009 was a "daunting" year for Afghanistan, as Mullen (2010) refers to it. On the one hand, there were promising signs of improvement: not only in health and education, but also regarding the basic constructions of infrastructures, including roads and electricity. On the other hand, insecurity started to rise and Afghan institutions showed all their fragility when it came to the presidential election of 2009. The international community was made aware of evidence of likely fraud, as probably one third of the ballots had been allegedly corrupted. Despite the call for action against corruption from international powers, Karzai refused to discuss the results that elected him as president once again, alienating international support for his government.

In 2010, NATO forces agreed, at a summit in Lisbon, to hand over the responsibility for security in Afghanistan to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. On the 2nd May 2011, bin Laden was finally found in a compound in Pakistan and killed by the U.S. army. After the elimination of the enemy that had triggered the intervention of the U.S in Afghanistan and with the polls showing growing numbers of Americans not supporting the war anymore, Obama decided to start withdrawing U.S. forces by 2014.

In 2014, the mission of U.S. troops shifted to only military training and special operations of counterterrorism, while NATO forces handed over the control of Afghan's districts back to Afghan forces. In the same year, a new president was elected in Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun, and former World Bank specialist. Ghani decided to sign a power-sharing agreement with his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, who had challenged the results (confirmed however by the Afghan Independent Election Commission a few months later).

Despite an appearance of political stability and after years of fighting, Taliban insurgents appeared again in many regions of the country. However, this time they were not the only one, as a new force emerged in 2014: the Islamic State (IS). IS created propaganda to promote their way of interpreting jihad and also to discredit the Taliban. Authorities found leaflets in Dari and Pashto declaring the creation of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq. By September 2014, a former Taliban commander named Abdul Rahim Muslimdost, started recruiting fighters to send alongside IS forces in Syria (Osman, 2014). In 2015, a video

was released by some Afghan commanders proclaiming the creation of an IS province in Afghanistan, encouraging all militants to unite under IS. The Islamic State "quickly [gained] support among disenfranchised Taliban fighters" (McNally & Amiral, 2016) with the promise of a victory in a renewed jihad.

Afghanistan was therefore at the mercy of three ravaging forces: al Qaeda, Taliban and IS. In fact, IS did not seek an alliance with neither the Taliban nor Al Qaeda; instead, it challenged them both. If, on the one hand, some of the Taliban fighters, who were strongly tied to the territory and ethnic bonds, did not embrace IS's international aim to establish a global caliphate of Muslims, others were won over by IS's offer of wealth (McNally & Amiral, 2016). By mid-2015 the fight between the Taliban and IS reached its peak and when the Taliban confirmed the death of their guide, Mullah Omar (which had occurred in 2013): more and more Taliban fighters were absorbed by IS, disillusioned by their leadership's deceit.

In UNAMA's (United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan) 2015 Annual report on the Protection of civilians in armed conflict, it is documented that there have been 4,137 civilian casualties from ground engagements (62 per cent caused by anti-government elements such as Taliban and IS): an increase of 15 percent compared to 2014. The same report asserted that IS, in 2015, was present in at least 24 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

However, when the Taliban started peace talks with the government in 2016, many militants who had previously pledged their alliance to IS deserted to join the reconciliation process (McNally & Amiral, 2016). Even though the Islamic State appeared to be in decline, the situation for civilians was still dreary. According to 2016 Human Rights Watch's report on Afghanistan, both the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Taliban were responsible for civilian casualties. Moreover, schools, medical clinics and hospitals were most often the target of attacks. In 2016, 1.3 million people were to be considered internally displaced persons (IDPs), living in informal settlements lacking access to safe water, sanitation, education and health care. Although President Ghani approved a national action plan to stop torture in 2015, there were still many cases of torture and violence observed by Human Rights Watch, especially against the LGBT community.

In 2017, according to the UNAMA report, war-related civilian deaths declined but US forces expanded their use of airstrikes, including those with drones, in military operations. On the 13th April 2017, under direct orders of the new US president Donald Trump, the most powerful non-nuclear bomb (the so-called *mother of all bombs*) was dropped on suspected Islamic state militants, in a cave complex situated in eastern Nangarhar Province.

While President Trump commits to a renewed involvement in Afghanistan in order not to leave a vacuum for the terrorists to make use of, 2018 has begun with deadly Taliban attacks in Kabul that killed more than 115 people. After 17 years of war, the future still appears to be grim for Afghanistan and its citizens. In this context of war and violence, life still goes on and civilians risk their lives on a daily basis. Some of these civilians, as we previously said, are interpreters. In the next section, the specific case of Afghan interpreters will be analysed.

3.3. Interpreters in Afghanistan

After having described Afghanistan's population and recent history, it is interesting for this research to look into some profiles of Afghan interpreters. The information gathered will then be useful when comparing it to the information revealed by the users of interpreting services, whose interviews will be analysed in Chapter 4.

In order to outline the interpreters' situation in Afghanistan, two pieces of research will be analysed. The first one (Gómez Amich, 2017) is an academic work that has looked into Afghan interpreters who worked for the Spanish Army; whereas the second one (Anderson, 2014) is a documentary by a writer who interviews Afghan interpreters who worked for the U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Gómez Amich (2017) analyses the figure of interpreters in conflict zones starting from the hypothesis that the peculiar context and characteristics involved in this particular profession alter, inevitably, the interpreter's invisibility and neutrality. From this theory, Gómez Amich interviewed five Afghan interpreters who served in the Spanish army and who are now living now in Spain, regarding their role and their perception of it.

Anderson (2014), instead, with his 14-year-long career as a filmmaker and writer covering foreign conflicts, produced a documentary in Afghanistan, collecting the

testimonies of interpreters who worked alongside American and NATO forces. These interpreters are still in Afghanistan and are having issues or have had their requests for a VISA to leave Afghanistan denied. His work is mainly aimed at telling the stories of those who have been left behind by the troops that they have served.

I believe that these two papers can give the reader two different perspectives: on the one hand, an academic work who focuses on just five interpreters, "prioritising quality over quantity" (Gómez Amich, 2017: 210) and going deep into the lives of these interpreters. Gómez Amich manages, in fact, to look into their past, their origins and their family habits in order to outline a thorough profile: through her work, these interpreters for once are not just tools in the hands of an army in a war; they are people telling their life story. Contrastingly, Anderson (2014) shows us another side of the story: the one told by interpreters who feel abandoned in Afghanistan where they are victims of threats and violence from Taliban.

3.3.1. Afghan interpreters working for the Spanish Army

Gómez Amich (2017) interviewed five interpreters who worked for the Spanish Army until 2014. The objective of her study was to analyse their profile in-depth and establish the similarities and the differences of the five interpreter's personal lives and backgrounds. Moreover, her research seeks to establish the reasons that drove the interpreters to accept this risky job and to see how they perceived their own role in the war.

The five interpreters she interviewed were all from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and, at the time of the interview, fell within the age range of 19 to 29 (they were born between 1985 and 1995). They come from different provinces (Faryab, Parwan, Kandahar, Baghdis and Takhar) and belong to four different ethnic groups: Tajiks, Hazaras, Tajik-Pashtuns and Pashtuns. Their economic history is as various as their origins: one interpreter was born into a wealthy family that allowed him even to attend university, two interpreters belonged to the middle class (even though they said that the loss of their father actually had further deteriorated their economic status) and two others came from low-income families.

All five interpreters said that religion represented a very important part of their lives: four of them were Sunni Muslim and just one a Shia Muslim. Religion shaped the lives and the education (*ibid*: 267) of the five of them, even though there is some sort of variety in the way they interpreted the Islamic rules. While one declared that his family was on the path to radicalisation, another one said that he practiced a more flexible version of Islam, for example in his family they would often dance and drink alcohol.

However, in Afghanistan, under the Taliban regime, religion was not only a family matter, a private faith to practice behind closed doors. Gómez Amich, through her interviews, manages to show us how Taliban's rise to power changed the education system in the whole country (*ibid*: 257): the lucky ones kept going to school and were only obliged to wear turbans; whereas others saw their schools first shut down and, later on, even burnt to the ground. Nevertheless, the five interpreters all had access to a basic education and three out of five received university education. These three attended language courses (even though they did not, except one, received any interpreting training); whereas the other two met members of the Spanish and US troops that were deployed in their provinces and took advantage of these frequent meetings with them to learn their language. These two interpreters also declared that listening to music, to the radio and watching movies in English/Spanish had helped them learn the language (*ibid*: 372).

For these interpreters, seeing the military deployed in their territory was almost natural because they had always lived in conflict: from the Soviet occupation, the civil war, the Taliban regime, the 2001 war to the subsequent occupation of foreign armies. What Gómez Amich has observed is that if there is one feature that never disappears from the stories of these interpreters is fear (*ibid*: 308). This feeling is always present when they talk about their job and their experiences as interpreters in conflict zones. This fear would normally set back people from accepting a risky job, whereas these interpreters decided to expose themselves anyway.

Gómez Amich looked into the reasons why these locals decided to become interpreters, discovering that the results matched what was also observed by other researches in other conflict zones (Baigorri-Jalón 2011; Baker M. 2010; Inghilleri 2010; Ruiz Rosendo & Muñoz 2017). The main one is financial: in a situation where the labour market is basically non-existent, any job opportunity is a chance to improve their personal and family

economic situation (Gómez Amich, 2017). Another reason they gave for accepting this job was the possibility to get refugee status: the job offer included the possibility to be relocated to Spain or other country. Whilst this was the case for the five interpreters interviewed by Gómez Amich, in the next section it can be seen that the situation with the US government, as presented by Anderson (2014), was different.

The additional motivations for Gómez Amich's five interpreters were different: whilst four of them stated that the salary was not their only reason to accept the job, (they also wanted and felt that they were helping their country), another one stated that helping the population was not one of the reasons why he accepted this job. In fact, he felt that since he started working as an interpreter, the situation in his country had not improved.

The interpreters revealed that the job interview was aimed at testing their linguistic skills but that was not the only thing being examined: those in charge of the selection process were also interested in their personal background and in understanding the reasons why they wanted this particular job. After being selected, they all had to sign the contract. Thanks to a real contract given to Gómez Amich by the interviewees, the details of this contract are available: the interpreters earned from 520 euros to 720 euros per month. They had to work for seven hours a day and had one day off per week, usually Fridays – the Muslim holiday. For the duration of the job, they were given the same accommodation as the troops and military uniforms were provided to them. Moreover, they were given five euros for every hour they had to work from 8pm to 4am, five euros for every day they had to work in special and difficult condition (although it is not specified which conditions exactly) and finally five euros more in case of an increased availability or higher level of Spanish.

Once being hired, the five interpreters said that they were immediately sent to their destination without being given neither any training regarding interpreting techniques or any military instructions. Because of this lack of training, the interviewees declared that their first steps into the job were quite hard because they "did not know the words used by military forces" (*ibid*: 280). All these interpreters said that they had to learn how to do their job at best step by step, through experience. However, some help came also from their colleagues and from the members of the army who helped them from time to time with specific or technical terminology.

It is very interesting to see how the interpreters perceive themselves and their role: Gómez Amich, in fact, manages to condense in a list the characteristics of what they believe an interpreter in conflict zone should have:

- Knows the languages (all the languages needed in the specific area where the military operations take place);
- Knows the habits, the history and the geography of the region;
- Is respectful, quick, efficient, proactive, valiant, honest, truthful;
- Keeps contacts;
- Listens carefully;
- Interprets the meaning and adapts it so it can be understood by all parties involved;
- Adapts the style of each interpretation to the specific meeting for which is needed;
- Is mindful of his / her surroundings and detects any possible danger for his / her security and the security of the troops s/he is escorting;
- Translates the whole communication in a faithful way to the meaning of the original, taking notes if necessary;
- Is able to build trust between the parties;
- Is able to avoid the insurgency of any conflict between the parties.

As we can see from this list, the interpreters consider that knowing the culture, the habits, the history and the geography of the region where they work is an important feature of the job. They feel that adapting the message is important to make it understandable by both parties. In order to do this, the knowledge they have of the Afghan culture and society is considered to be fundamental in this job. They think it is necessary to explain and make the troops accustomed to the traditional rules of communication in order to avoid any problem or conflict that may arise when communicating. Some of them used to brief their user beforehand whereas some others were used to do it in the midst of the meeting itself, either explicitly or in a subtle way as part of the interaction.

Some of them considered their background as an advantage, because it helped smooth the communication between the two parties that did not share a common culture. However, as Gómez Amich points out, it could also become a disadvantage when the interpreter has to work in a situation that might upset him: for example, in case of violence against their

population or if one of the parties is a victim of abuses or injustices. It will be interesting to see, in Chapter 4, how the users interviewed saw the interpreters' background: as a useful tool or as a liability.

As it appears from Gómez Amich's interviews, the interpreters consider themselves to be some sort of cultural mediators, not just interpreters. Their responsibility, according to them, is to open a clear channel of communication between the two parties, ensuring that this communication is clear, effective, and respectful. In order to do this, they have to make use of some strategies that do not always abide to the ideal deontological rules of the profession. The interpreters describe these strategies with some examples amongst which we can find:

- Adapting the register;
- Changing the tone according to the context;
- Omitting part of the original message that could endanger the interests and the predisposition of the parties to continue to communicate;
- Changing the message when parts of it are considered to be irrelevant or redundant;
- Adding extra bits to the message in order to educate or inform the parties or to clarify some aspects before, after or during the meeting.

Of course, these strategies are not usually taught at interpreting schools and are not usually considered to be appropriate for conference interpreters. However, in a conflict zone, the situation is different, and the interpreters interviewed by Gómez Amich stated that these strategies, which they learnt with the experience, made the communication clear and efficient but also coherent to the parties involved and their respective cultural norms.

Another aspect that clearly differs from the reality of the profession outside war zones is that these interpreters do not only interpret: their professional role does not make a clear distinction between interpreter and translator. The interpreters were in fact asked to translate reports, press, orders, essays, maps, emails, contracts, laws and so on.

3.3.2. Afghan interpreters working for the U.S. Army

This section will analyse the profile of the Afghan interpreters outlined by Ben Anderson (2014), multi award-winning writer and filmmaker who produced and presented a documentary based on numerous interviews to local interpreters. In the manuscript published with the documentary, he explains that he combined the testimony of different interpreters, and changed locations and names to protect them.

Anderson does not say much regarding their education nor their background as he mainly focuses on the job itself and on what happened after the troops left Afghanistan. Even though this does not allow us to analyse this important part of the interpreters' profile, it is still a very good source, since it provides information regarding the aftermath of the war.

The interpreters interviewed by Anderson all at least spoke Dari, the language of the groups living in the northern part of Afghanistan, and Pashto, the language spoken by Taliban and southern Pashtuns. The majority of them were born in major cities across the country.

Their role was not only to interpret when escorting American troops on patrols, but also to educate the members of the military on the local culture that they "so badly needed to understand" (*ibid*: 4). The interpreters declared that they felt as Afghanistan's citizens that it was their responsibility to make them understand the traditions, the customs and what was currently happening in their country.

Another interesting point raised by Anderson's interviews is how interpreters were frequently used as sources of intelligence: they relayed important information that they could gather thanks to their contacts with the Afghan population. This intelligence was not only regarding the Taliban, but also regarding the Afghan police and army who, apparently, sometimes were seen to be as big a threat as the rebels they were fighting. As reported by Anderson, in fact, members of the Afghan security forces had even threatened to kill interpreters, simply because they worked "for the foreigners" (*ibid*: 6).

There were many risks for these interpreters and the threats came mostly from the Taliban. An interpreter narrated how once the Taliban came to his house looking for him. Luckily for him, he was working at that moment and when Taliban did not find him, they

told his family to tell him that one day eventually they would "get him and cut off his head" (*ibid*: 10). However, these threats were not just mere words and many are the stories reported by interpreters who actually were attacked by the Taliban. It is interesting to learn that the majority of these attacks were carried out when the interpreters were going home or when they had just left for work (for those who were not living on the same base as the troops). One interpreter recounts that one morning, while he was on his way to work, he was attacked by insurgents. His brother, who was in the car with him, was killed in the attack, whereas he and his co-worker were just very badly injured. After this attack, the interpreter decided to quit the job and move somewhere else because he judged the risk to be too high.

Like with Gómez Amich's interpreters, through their words one can see the reasons that drove them to accept this risky job. According to Anderson's interviews, most of them did not do it for a financial reason. Apparently, the only ones who were well paid were US citizens that were sent to Afghanistan only for the duration of their contract as interpreters and who would then leave and go back to the United States. The rest of them earned one thousand dollars per month, an amount that was not considered to be enough by the interpreters interviewed. An interpreter observed that in three years he only managed to earn around fourteen thousand dollars; he did not believe this to be enough considering the danger he had put himself in. The reason why this interpreter accepted the job was another one: obtaining the VISA. According to their story, in fact, the deal was that they would have had to work for three years and in return, they would have obtained a US visa.

However, this is not what happened, at least, in most cases. Anderson found out that approximately 70% of the interpreters "are being either denied transit to the US or left in limbo for years" (*ibid*: 5). "Limbo" is probably the right word: according to them, once the troops left they were stuck in a country where they were no longer accepted and where the risk is just too high. One interpreter said that he could not even trust his neighbours anymore, because everyone thought that he was a spy for the Americans or that he had become an infidel, because of the job he had. These interpreters knew how risky the situation had become in Afghanistan and they knew that they could not stay anymore. One even added that he would have rather taken the risk to go on ships in order to illegally

reach Europe because at least in this case he would have had "only" 50% chance of dying, not like Afghanistan where he had 100% chance of getting killed.

Many interpreters deeply regretted accepting this job and they would not have volunteered for it had they known that they would have been abandoned by the US troops. Another one agreed with this feeling of regret but because he did not have the impression that anything changed for the better: the Taliban came back after ten years, security declined, the economy was failing and corruption permeated every aspect of the Afghans' daily life. This idea, however, is not unanimous: another interpreter interviewed by Anderson said that he feels proud of the job he accomplished with the American troops as they came to Afghanistan to rebuild the country and he was happy to have been part of this act of good.

The interpreters interviewed by Anderson felt they were exposed to considerable risk, that their pay was not worth the risk and that the promise of a way out of Afghanistan to the United States was not fulfilled. Some of them did not even believe that their effort or even their sacrifice was even meaningful because they could not see any improvement in Afghanistan's situation.

3.3.3. Conclusions

As seen after analysing these two papers, the local interpreters have a clear idea of what their role is: not just an interpreter, but also a cultural mediator. They understand themselves to be a link between two different worlds and they adapt their message in order to ease the communication. It will be interesting to see if the users also had this impression and if the strategies put in place by interpreters were effective.

Another interesting point raised by Gómez Amich and Anderson is the motivational factors behind the decision to accept this job (mostly financial and linked to the possibility of obtaining a VISA) and their judgment on whether it was worth the risk. The users interviewed for this research project will also be asked about their opinion on this matter, in order to discover how this decision is seen from their point of view.

Finally, in the next section, the matter regarding threats to interpreters will be raised. As seen in Anderson's work, a sense of danger was not only perceived as coming from the Taliban, but also from the Afghan Army. Interpreters did not feel safe and because of this

declared that the benefits of the job were not worth the risk. Users of interpreting services will have the chance to express their ideas on this matter too.

4. Research project

As analysed in the previous chapter, local interpreters in Afghanistan perceive themselves as cultural mediators. It was established that the main reason as to why they accepted the job was because of the financial benefits, although ultimately believed that their salary was not worth the risks that they had to face. Taking this into account, the aim is to find out what the users of interpreting services think of this: more specifically, to raise these points with members of the military who used interpreters during their turn in Afghanistan to discover the answers to the following questions:

- Do they believe their interpreters were more useful because of their cultural background?
- Do they believe their interpreters were ever at risk and, if so, why?
- Were the economic advantages they received because of their job were worth these risks?

4.1. Methodology
4.1.1. Qualitative case study

The study presented here is an inductive qualitative case study. Because of the limited sample, this method allowed deep understanding of the lives and experiences of the participants of this research and to better understand their thoughts and impressions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

4.1.2. Semi-structured interview

The chosen method for the collection of data is the semi-structured interview. This particular type of interview has many advantages when exploring the reality of the interviewees. On the one hand, it maintains a structured interview and ensures that all the main points are covered during the interview. On the other hand, as Lewis-Beck & Bryman & Liao (2004) highlight, the structure can also be flexible and adapt to the interviewees' answers: in this way it is still possible to explore and probe deeply into the experiences of the people interviewed (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Moreover, the semi-structured interview allows the participants to contribute to the research if they feel that anything had been left out or if they believe that there are any

additional points to consider which could be relevant to the discussion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this way, the interviewer's framework of understanding is not imposed on the interviewee who can actively participate in the interview (Lewiss-Beck & Bryman & Liao, 2004). This also allows aspects that may have not been anticipated by the researcher to still be included in the findings of the research (*ibid*).

Finally, according to Savin-Baden & Major (2013), there are three more strengths of this method: first of all, it is very useful when it comes to following up on initial responses. A structured interview would not allow the interviewer to enquire further, whereas in this case if the researcher believes that some matters may need to be analysed more thoroughly or if clarifications are needed, there is the chance to expand on some sections of the interviews. Secondly, semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate when the information given is confidential or sensitive: since there is a tendency to move from general topics to specific ones, it is particularly useful for introducing delicate issues or questions. Thirdly, it is efficient, because the researcher can decide how to use the limited amount of time and can keep the interaction focused throughout the interview.

4.1.3. Reflexivity

As pointed out by Berger (2015), it is important to clarify the researcher's positioning, including personal characteristics, personal experiences, linguistic traditions and ideological stances. This is essential in order to take responsibility for any possible influence that the researcher may have on the setting and people studied, on the questions that are asked, on the collection of data and on its interpretation. Presenting the researcher's reflexivity on the study and taking account for it allows the researcher not only to hinder the possibility of constructing meaning in the data obtained, but it also allows the process of research to remain ethical.

As the author of this research project, I am an outsider to the subject I am researching. I am a Postgraduate Conference interpreting Student at the University of Geneva and I have no professional experience in conference interpreting. However, when researching this topic, I had to consider how my reflexivity could influence the process and the results of this study. On the one hand, being an outsider could be considered an advantage, due to the fact that I had no previous opinion on this matter that could influence the study. Moreover, the results of this study will not benefit me in any way, as I do not have any

conflict of interest in this matter and will not have any possible influence on the population that I am studying. On the other hand, not having any previous experience on interpreting in conflict zones may mean that I cannot fully comprehend the situation or the context to which the participants of this study refer.

When contacting and then interviewing the participants, I decided to clearly state the fact that I was not familiar with interpreting in conflict zones and that my aim was to find out their impressions on the matter. Even though they responded quite well to my request, I perceived the first obstacle: not having language sensitivity on the matter. Because of my lack of experience with this topic, I did not share their jargon and had to be extremely careful when referring to interpreters and to their mission in order not to use terms that could be perceived as biased. I achieved this by studying previous literature on this subject when preparing for the interviews, and by keeping the questions as concise and clear as possible in order not to lead the participants.

Because the interviews were carried out via Skype, another challenge I had to face was not giving physical clues such as my body language and expression of my emotional response to any surprising answers given by the interviewees. As my knowledge on the subject was based on the literature I had studied when preparing for the interviews, I had expectations of what their answers could have been on specific themes (even though I am still to be considered as an outsider). When their answer did not match what I was expecting, I tried to avoid any physical reaction in order to hide any response. I put myself in the position of the listener, responding to what the interviewees felt like sharing, avoiding any reaction that might have influenced their answers.

When analysing data, I listened repeatedly to the interviews several days after they had been recorded, in order to review and check if my questions or reactions had had any influence on the participants. This helped with the analysis of the interviews, as one not only has to consider the answers of the participants but also whether the interviewer's presence or actions might have lead the participants to answer in a particular way (*ibid*).

4.1.4. Participants

The participants of this study are two members of the Dutch army who used interpreting services when they were deployed in Afghanistan. I got in contact with these two officers

through the help of a mediator who was born in Afghanistan and who currently lives in Holland. This person knew the officials personally and asked them if they were willing to participate in my research.

The participants agreed to being interviewed and signed a consent form, with the purpose of protecting their privacy. They agreed to share their first name, but not their family name nor specific details on the missions they carried out in Afghanistan. However, in order to protect their privacy, their personal details will not be disclosed. In this paper they will be referred to their military rankings; the Captain (first user interviewed) and the Colonel (second user interviewed),

They have been assured that the information that they have shared will not be divulged for any purpose different to the one for which they give permission. Moreover, because of the sensitivity of the matter, personal details of Afghan interpreters or Afghan officials will not appear in this paper.

4.1.5. Procedure

Participants were contacted by email and then interviewed via Skype. The duration of the interviews was approximately 35-40 minutes. The interviews followed a script that covered the main themes. However, the participants had the chance to expand on any topic and were given the possibility to add any relevant information they felt it was important at the end of the interview.

The interview was structured as follows: firstly, basic information was gathered, e.g. the user's mother tongue, work experience and military rank. Initial questions also focussed on the users' missions in Afghanistan, specifically: how long it lasted, where it took place and what kind of mission it was. After this first part, the users were asked to provide some details on the interpreters they had in Afghanistan, their recruitment process, working conditions and tasks assigned. The interview then moved to a more sensitive section, trying to find out the users' impressions regarding the interpreter's neutrality and trustworthiness. Subsequently, the issue of safety was introduced: the users discussed safety measures on the field, threats received by interpreters and a general impression on the interpreter's safety. After this, questions turned to what happened after the users had left Afghanistan: if they kept in touch with the interpreters and if they had any information

about what happened to them after they had left. Finally, the users shared their thoughts on what could have been improved and what was their general impression about the interpreters' job, safety and salary. At the end of the interview, users also had the possibility of adding anything they thought was relevant or important to the research.

4.2.   Results

The first user of interpreting services to be interviewed was a captain who had been in the military forces for almost twelve years. He served for two tours for the Dutch Army in Afghanistan: the first one took place in 2009 in the Uruzgan province (in central Afghanistan), whereas the second one was in 2015 in Mazar-i-Sharif, north Afghanistan. In both tours, he was a commander of a NATO protection platoon, whose mission was to provide security for international advisors and trainers who trained Afghan national forces, police and army. The 2015 mission was where he had most contacts with interpreters: information regarding them is mostly referring to that specific mission.

His mother tongue is Dutch. While on the mission, the language spoken between members of the Dutch army was Dutch, of course, but given that, for the majority of the time, they had a German or Finnish medical team, all the radio communications were in English. Since national advisors were not Dutch (there were Croatian, Swedish, Turkish, German and Americans mostly), the language usually spoken was English.

They needed interpreters when they had to communicate with Afghan locals and members of the Afghan forces who did not speak English. International trainers and advisors had to mentor local officials of the Afghan Army and Police. They had their own interpreters, who were usually locals. From time to time, when he had to meet with Afghan police commanders he also had his own personal interpreter, also a local.

Interpreters were always Afghans. What changed between 2009 and 2015 was their province of origin. In 2009, interpreters were not from Uruzgan, where his troops were deployed. This policy was in place because of safety reasons so that it would have not been easy to link them with their families. In 2015, on the other hand, all the interpreters came from Mazar-i-Sharif, in the Balkh province (located in the north of the country).

English was used as a *lingua franca* and interpreters worked mainly from and into English and Dari (one of the two official languages in Afghanistan). Some of them also spoke Urdu

(official language in Pakistan) and some others also spoke Pashto (the second official language in Afghanistan). When communicating with the Afghan locals or with the Afghan forces, the languages spoken were usually English and Dari.

Some of the interpreters had learnt English at school whereas some others learnt the language independently, although the interviewee did not know if this was through interaction with foreigners or by self-teaching. All the interpreters he worked with had been working on the base for almost four or five years, so they were experienced interpreters, even though he did not know if they had received professional interpreting training before they started or while working for them. While he was deployed in Afghanistan, however, they did not receive any additional training of any kind (safety, linguistics, interpreting training).

In 2009, when interpreters were not from the Uruzgan province, they lived on the base. Whereas in 2015, since they all came from Mazar-i-Sharif, interpreters lived in the city and only some of them, the ones working for the higher ranks, had clearance to go into the NATO base. When the captain's troops needed interpreters, they would go to the Afghan camp by helicopter or using roads and meet the interpreters there. Meetings were usually held in the Afghan camp. Once the meeting was over, the Captain's troop left the camp with the NATO convoy whereas interpreters were on their own: they were usually picked up by a taxi that drove them back to their houses.

During his 2015 mission, interpreters were paid by the German army because Germany was a lead nation in northern Afghanistan. Interpreters earned approximately one thousand dollars a month. The Captain believed that their salary was exceptionally higher than Afghan standards, incontestably enough to outweigh the risk. Moreover, he added that an Afghan colonel usually earned four hundred dollars a month; therefore, interpreters were earning twice as much as an Afghan Chief Army general.

Interpreters worked six days per week, with their day off usually being Friday- the Muslim day of rest. They used to work mostly in the mornings, from 7am o'clock until 12am or 1pm. They did not wear uniforms nor could they carry weapons as it was strictly forbidden. They could not even have a bulletproof vest because they could not carry it with them when they went back home outside working hours, according to the Captain.

The only ones who had weapons and wore uniforms were American or German soldiers who were also interpreters, the so-called military linguists (see Chapter 2). These soldiers were American or German nationals who were able to speak the languages required (for the most various reasons), and who were given extra salary as part-time interpreters.

According to the Captain, there were two types of interpreters: some of them "*only translated the paperwork*"; the others interpreted in meetings or came with them on the field to guide the conversations they had with Afghan nationals. Of course, the first type have to be considered as translators, so they will not be considered for the purposes of this research. These two professional figures had distinctive roles on the base, as interpreters never had to translate.

Interpreters, however, were also a source of information. Since they lived in the city and went to the mosque, they spoke to people and provided useful information about the local population. As stated by the first user interviewed, after some time working with them, his fellow soldiers and he used to ask them questions regarding what was happening in the city or to know if their family were doing fine. When information was provided, it always had to be reported to the base.

When asked if they expected a word-for-word translation from the interpreters, the Captain immediately said that this was not what was required. The interpreter's added value, according to him, was their knowledge of the Afghan culture and of the way Afghan people communicated. He needed the interpreter to "*feel the ambiance, feel the atmosphere of the conversation and go with the flow*". The interpreter had to understand the intent of the mission, the goal of their chief and act accordingly.

Moreover, he believed that it was very important that the interpreter was able to adapt the message to their traditional way of speaking: westerner's people are usually very direct and want to come straight to business, whereas Afghans are used to "*chitchat*" and make general conversation for a while before dealing with more important subjects. The interpreter knew that and it was his role to guide the conversation. In order to do this, the interpreter had to be a local, according to him. This is when the interpreter's background really came in handy.

As previously stated, the interpreters were under the army's protection only during working hours. After their assignment was over, they were on their own. When they were on the field escorting international advisors they did not have any additional protection: international advisors, in fact, wore a bulletproof vest whereas interpreters did not. International advisors were often members of the military themselves so in this case they also had weapons, whereas to interpreters a weapon was strictly forbidden. He confirmed that, although this might sound harsh, international advisors were the first priority, whereas interpreters were only the second priority in the case of a firefight.

However, according to him, because of their knowledge and since they are part of the community, interpreters were capable of reading the situation better than they did: they were capable of spotting enemies more quickly and that was probably the best way to protect themselves, "*their best weapon*".

Mazar-i-Sharif at the time, however, was not as dangerous as other parts of the country: at the time it was the city with the least amount of attacks or bombings in all Afghanistan. Later, he says, that this has changed since and one year on, the same places they used to patrol were the location of the biggest attack on Afghan army ever perpetrated[2].

According to him, interpreting in Afghanistan was a dangerous job and interpreters did receive threats. The problem was that everything happened outside working hours; as such, not only were the members of the Dutch Army unable to be present (to check any threats) but, officially, it was no longer their responsibility. The Dutch army was in charge of the interpreter's protection only whilst they were working for them: when they left the Afghan camp, they were on their own again. If interpreters received threats or had the impression of being followed, they had to report it to the Afghan police who would then start the investigation. The first user interviewed emphasised that these threats never came from the Afghan Army or Police officials.

The Captain mentioned several examples on instances of threats outside the Afghan Camp. One time, an interpreter who usually wore Western looking suits came to work wearing traditional Afghan clothes. Apparently, he was being threatened and decided to change clothes to avoid being recognised and attacked. The interviewee reported this

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[2] He refers to the Camp Shaheen attack that took place on the 21st of April against the 209th Corps of the Afghan National Army that killed about 140 people and injured 160. (CNN, 2017)

information to the base but again, there was nothing he could do about it other than advise him to speak to the local police. According to the Captain, the Afghan police should have provided them with a special status or additional protection in order to keep them safe.

On another occasion, an interpreter was seriously injured; however, the cause and the attackers were not known. This interpreter, in fact, also worked as a journalist at the same time and he could not tell if the attackers had targeted him for his job as an interpreter or as a journalist. He was a very confident man who used to "*bluff around, talking about how much money he had*" etc. One day he came wearing a hat and he was very silent. The Captain called him in his office and asked him what happened: the interpreter took off his hat and showed severe wounds to the head and numerous bruises on his back. Apparently, unidentified subjects attacked him with a chain and a bat before running away. He did not want him to write an official report of it (even though he had to do it anyway) and did not want to go to the Afghan police. The attackers were never found and he never knew if this attack was due to the interpreting or to the journalism: *"maybe he wrote something that people did not like"* (first user interviewed).

Whatever the cause of this attack was, he believed that the fact that this particular interpreter was also a journalist raised some serious doubts regarding his integrity: he received classified information as an interpreter and then he wrote articles for a local journal. The conflict between these two jobs was reason enough to question the interpreter's professional ethics and made the Captain believe that the interpreter/journalist could not be fully trusted.

The last example that the Captain spoke about regarded the granting of a VISA. One day, an interpreter came to him to tell him about one of his colleagues who was receiving threats: this man was apparently on a hit list of the Taliban headquarters in Quetta (Pakistan). As this man was mentioned in this hit list, people were looking for him and trying to harm him. The Captain asked this interpreter to provide him with this kill list or some proof of the reality of this threat. Proof was not provided. After a period of time, he found out that the interpreter who was allegedly on this hit list was actually the only one who did not have the right papers to obtain a VISA. According to him, the whole story about the threats was just a lie to speed up the process for obtaining the VISA.

Even though he believed that at least some of the threats were true, he admitted that it was out of their sphere of responsibility and nothing could be done to help these interpreters face these threats. The fact that some of the threats may have been fabricated in order to receive something in return (for example, accelerating the process for granting the VISA), surely disrupted the trust that he had towards these interpreters.

Regarding the relationship with these interpreters and specifically the trust that he had in them, he said that because of his experiences he had learnt "*not to trust them 100%*". This is what he also told his soldiers in order to keep the working relationship professional and not to take any risk. One time for example, one of his soldiers, who happened to be a tattoo artist, took one of the interpreters (who actually had clearance) inside the NATO base in order to tattoo the interpreter. He was informed about what happened after it had happened. He decided to speak to the soldier to tell him that even though they might get to know the interpreters better after working with them, they had to keep some information classified so it was better to maintain some distance.

This sense of mistrust however, was only at a personal level: when they were working, he never felt as though he could not trust the interpreter's work. This was apart from one exception: during his 2009 mission he met with some local Afghans and wanted some information from them. The interpreter started speaking to a local asking him if he had seen something of significance. The two spoke for about fifteen minutes, even in animated tones, and at the end of this conversation the interpreter turned to the Captain and told him that the man had not seen anything happen. He immediately believed it was strange that the interpreter had nothing to report after speaking to the man for fifteen minutes - as if "*he did not want to take any risk*" by not telling him everything.

Of course, the Captain wanted to specify that these were isolated events, and that in general he was satisfied with the job they did. He just believed it was necessary to be extremely careful with the information shared with these interpreters, as he believed it was more cautious not to fully trust them, especially when they held two conflicting jobs like the case of the interpreter and journalist.

After his tour in Afghanistan, he did not keep in contact with these interpreters. He did not believe, however, that because of them leaving the interpreters were more at risk than

when they were deployed there. This is because after their six-month tour, their colleagues returned to the area, and "*nothing shocking happened*".

Most of the interpreters, he said, start working as interpreters for these foreign armies. with the perspective of obtaining a VISA. He was not aware of the American regulations, but he knew that after working for four or five years for the German army these interpreters would obtain a VISA to live in Germany. The Captain had experienced both sides of the coin: on the one hand, he had seen one interpreter attempt to accelerate the VISA process by saying that he was on a hit list (although this could not be proved to be neither true nor false). On the other hand he also saw an interpreter leaving for Germany with his family after legally obtaining a VISA through the proper channels.

All in all, he believed that these interpreters were living in a risky environment and that this also involved receiving threats. However, according to him, the advantages of this job made it worth the risk:

> Like I said, interpreting in Afghanistan is a dangerous job. I do believe that it is a dangerous job and that they are receiving threats, although we could not check it. But the salary and the perspective of receiving a VISA in the future… yeah… if I were an Afghan I would take that risk for my family. (First user interviewed)

The second user of interpreting services is a full colonel who has been in the Dutch army for 38 years now. His mission in Afghanistan lasted from November 2009 until June 2010. It was an ISAF (International Security Assistance Force, see Chapter 3) mission and took place in the Uruzgan province in central Afghanistan. He was a commanding officer of the OMLT (Operating Mentoring Liaison Team) and senior mentor of an Afghan brigade commander.

The Afghan brigade commander he mentored spoke English rather well, as he had spent some time working for an American NGO. However, it was a standing order that the Colonel had his own personal interpreter who had to stay with him at all times. His personal interpreter helped him when he wanted to express himself more clearly when speaking to the Afghan brigade commander and when speaking to Afghan locals and Afghan members of the army or police. The interpreter was employed and paid by the Dutch army.

Since this interpreter worked exclusively for the Colonel, a very different type of relationship was built between the two of them, with several implications on numerous aspects. During the mission, other interpreters were working on the camp. The Colonel usually refers to them as: *"some other 20 interpreters that were on my team as well"*. However, these interpreters had different obligations and were identified by him as belonging to the lower ranks of interpreting services; they had easier jobs and were required just "*to translate easy things*".

All interpreters on the mission, including the Colonel's, were Afghans, but none of them came from the Uruzgan province. This was decided as a safety policy, so that they would not be familiar to the local population: since they were not known, they could not be recognised and this protected them from retaliations. For example, his personal interpreter was from a city east of Kabul, near the Pakistani border.

His personal interpreter was a former sergeant of the ANA (Afghan National Army), who had released himself from that position and decided to become an interpreter for the ISAF. According to him, his interpreter came from a well-positioned family, and this is how he was able to go to school and learn English. Pashto was his mother tongue, but he could also fully understand and speak Dari rather well. He had served several of the Colonel's predecessors, and thus had experience as an interpreter.

Since they were not from that province, interpreters lived on the same compound as the soldiers. The Afghan camp and the ISAF camp were located adjacent to one another and interpreters had their own tent where they also had a kitchen and all other facilities. If they had to go the city to buy food or visit the bazaar, they all went in groups because they were aware of the possible dangers they might face when leaving the camp.

This came in particularly handy, he said, because sometimes they would meet at his accommodation with the interpreter before a meeting to discuss the topics they were going to talk about in their daily meetings.

As seen in the previous interview, interpreters earned more than regular Afghan soldiers. According to the Colonel, interpreters who were positioned in the lowest ranks of the hierarchy were paid around six hundred dollars, whereas interpreters with more experience or a higher linguistic profile received a higher salary. This is also why his

personal interpreter resigned from the sergeant position in ANA and became an interpreter for the ISAF.

Their salary was not as high as the one the ISAF soldiers received, however it was still a lot considering Afghan standards. Interpreters had enough money to go to the local shops and bazaar to buy their own food that they would eat in their accommodation.

It is important to mention that, according to the Colonel, all the armies deployed in Afghanistan paid interpreters more or less the same. In this way, nations would not compete lowering salaries nor standards. Therefore, interpreters would receive the same amount, regardless of the province they were working in or the army they were working for.

The Colonel's personal interpreter had to accompany him wherever he went, "*day and night*". However, there was still a daily routine, that the Colonel called "*battle rhythm*": they had certain appointments at certain times of the day. For example, his interpreter had time to pray five times a day. Daily meetings usually lasted for about an hour.

The Colonel explained that since the interpreters lived on the base, they had to wear the same uniforms as the soldiers did, even though of course they did not have any military markings on it. There was no name on it solely an ISAF badge. When they were outside the camp on a mission, they wore a bulletproof vest and a helmet and they could not carry or have any weapons.

The main task assigned to the interpreter was to interpret in meetings and on the field. The Colonel and his interpreter, they usually met before a meeting to prepare the topic they were going to discuss together as they were in the same camp. This provided the interpreter with the necessary terminology and simultaneously it gave them the opportunity to plan a strategy for the meeting.

The interpreter was also a source of information: when he heard something at the mosque or if someone told him anything that he thought it was relevant, he immediately told the Colonel. Or, for example, the interpreter also made him aware of possible dangers when they had to go somewhere. Sometimes they even decided to return to the base when they were on the field on a mission, because the interpreter had the impression that it was not

a good day to be outside the camp. According to the Colonel, he was able to see the environment, detect possible dangers: "*He had a nose for that*".

Interpreting was not, however, the only thing required from the interpreter. According to the Colonel, the greatest asset of his interpreter was his knowledge of the Afghan culture. Since in Afghanistan, according to him, nothing is without influence from their culture or religion, having someone that can guide you through this maze is crucial.

The colonel, usually asked his interpreter for advice regarding the Afghan culture. Teaching the Afghan way of speaking, of interacting was a crucial part of the interpreter's job, according to him:

> My interpreter was not there only to interpret but he was also assisting me on how to react, teaching me cultural awareness, for example. Once he told me: "*You are going to meet this guy, he is a Tajik, he is from the north and he has short views so please be careful, and do not look him right in the eyes, just to his left or right, look at this ears and you will be successful.*" That was a precious advice and I took it right away
> (Second user interviewed).

The interpreter also taught him the way Afghans speak during a meeting: they would start a conversation talking about unimportant things, while drinking tea. It could even happen that the most pressing matters come up in the conversation during the last ten minutes of the meeting "*while you are shaking hands and wishing them a goodnight*". According to the Colonel, this part of their working relationship was crucial because it helped him achieving good results at the end of meetings.

He did not expect a word-for-word translation from his interpreter. He wanted explanations regarding what was happening and for when he could not understand because of the cultural gap. Moreover, he quite willingly accepted the interference of his interpreter, also in a non-verbal way, who tried to help him not to make mistakes or act inappropriately without realising it:

> I always expected more [than a word-for-word translation], that's in my character. I don't accept just a yes or no as an answer, I want to know why. So I asked him to explain me what was behind an answer. And we got used to each other quite quickly and then on a non-verbal way he made clear "*Stop asking, I will tell you later what happened or what will happen*". We were really a good team (Second user interviewed).

As stated before, interpreters wore military uniforms, a bulletproof vest and a helmet. They had the same type of protection that the soldiers had, except the weapons. In case of them being injured after an attack, they would receive the same medical treatment that a soldier would receive. According to the Colonel, interpreters belonged with them and they took great care of them.

The only fact that worried the colonel regarding their security was when interpreters left the camp for their paid leave. When they did, nobody was informed about them leaving (*"They would leave like a thief in the night."*) and they would then return after a couple weeks as if nothing had happened. The secrecy, as the chief interpreter explained to the Colonel, was for safety reasons. However, these interpreters were not escorted home by a military convoy and they were on their own on their journey home. According to the Colonel, this was the only moment when they could not protect them properly.

In this case, the second user interviewed had complete trust in his interpreter. On a professional level, he never doubted his interpreter's translation. Sometimes, after a meeting, he used to ask to his fellow members of the army about the translation provided by their interpreters. Luckily for him, he said, the translation provided by both his own interpreter and the others was usually a match. Sometimes the Colonel and his interpreter would even discuss how the day went, if they could have done better, or trying to understand what went wrong in order to improve their working relationship.

On a personal level, they had a very good relationship that evolved with time. They often talked about personal matters, about their families and how things were going at home. He said that his interpreter was a good person, who was always honest with him and never told him untruths. He trusted him completely.

The Colonel said that because of the excellent opinion he had of his interpreter he decided to help him get into Holland, several years after they worked together.

Before leaving Afghanistan, his personal interpreter told him that he did not want to work for the Australians (who were coming to the Uruzgan province just after the Dutch army) and that he would have worked until the Colonel left and then go back to his family and his region.

After a few years, his interpreter contacted him with an email explaining to him that, because he was being hunted down, he had left Afghanistan with his family and he was living in a refugee camp in Holland. Apparently, they were asking him for references someone of Dutch nationality who knew him and could speak for him. The Colonel was not sure if he should have helped him, but since he always was loyal and honest to him, he helped him get his VISA. His personal interpreter is now living in Holland with his family as a refugee.

Unfortunately, this was not the case for all the interpreters. Most of them were hired by the Australians that came to the Uruzgan province after them, but he was not very sure what happened to them. The Colonel believed that since they hire these men to help them do their job, it is their obligation to take care of them once the troop comes back to its own country. One cannot just leave and say: "*-take care of yourself-. If you realise that their lives are in danger, you have the moral obligation to take them back with you*".

4.3. Analysis

For the analysis of these interviews, data has been structured and categorised. Because of the limited amount of data, coding was not used as a method for analysis. As it was clearly established after conducting the interviews, the two experiences are very different from one another. Therefore, for the analysis, the two interviews have been compared in order to highlight the similarities and the differences for each main topic.

4.3.1. Differences

The first main difference, of course, is in the very same job role of interpreters. While the first user interviewed, the Captain, had a team of interpreters that helped them talk to Afghan locals and commanders, the second user interviewed, the Colonel, had only one personal interpreter who was with him at all times. The different military grades of the two users could possibly explain, if we consider also the hierarchy amongst interpreters, the different type of assignment given to interpreters.

4.3.1.1. Working conditions

While the Captain's interpreters lived in the city (Mazar-i-Sharif) and had to commute by taxi to the Afghan camp, the Colonel's interpreter (and also the other interpreters) lived

in the camp. This makes a great difference when it comes to their own security and safety. The Captain's interpreters, in fact, were on their own when they left the Afghan camp; no safety measures were taken, nor was it possible to ensure their protection outside working hours. On the other hand, the Colonel's interpreters lived on the same camp where the soldiers lived and only left the camp if they wanted to visit the bazar (and when they did they did it in groups) or during their paid leave.

Working hours were completely different: the Captain's interpreters had to work mainly in the mornings whereas the Colonel's personal interpreter had to be with him at all times. Of course, the Colonel still had a daily schedule, the "*battle rhythm*" (Second user interviewed), that allowed the interpreter to leave for the daily prayers but, according to the Colonel, his interpreter still accompanied him day and night.

The Captain's interpreters did not wear any uniform or a bulletproof vest, whereas the Colonel's interpreters had a uniform, an ISAF badge and wore a bulletproof vest. This is probably due to the fact that the Captain's interpreters did not live on the camp and could not bring equipment with them outside working hours or outside the base. While there is still a debate on whether wearing a uniform has a positive or negative impact on interpreters' safety (see Chapter 2.3.6.), there is not much debate in the literature regarding the connection between living in the camp and, therefore, having access to bulletproof vests and helmets as an additional safety measure.

4.3.1.2. Trust

Even though trust is a subjective factor, I believe it is still important to notice how this changes from one user to the other. Because of a few bad experiences with some interpreters, the Captain believed interpreters could not be fully trusted and advised his soldiers to be extremely careful with the information shared and to keep the distance from them. On the other hand, the Colonel had a very good relationship with his interpreter built on trust and honesty. This might be because of the type of person, of course, but also because of the relationship that can be built when the working ratio is one-to-one: the Colonel's interpreter only worked with him and vice versa, they began to know each other and to trust each other. Conversely, the Captain's interpreters changed all the time, and this did not help when building a relationship on trust.

4.3.1.3. *Threats*

When it came to the threats received by interpreters, the two experiences differ as well. The Captain's interpreters received multiple threats, although these could not be confirmed nor checked by the Dutch army because, as he explained, it was not their responsibility, and interpreters had to report any threats to the Afghan police. On the other hand, the Colonel was not aware of any threats received by interpreters while they were working for them. The only time he was informed about his interpreter being hunted down was after his troops had left Afghanistan, when his interpreter asked for help to get into Holland.

What is worth noticing about this is the different security measures used to protect the interpreters' identities and to shelter them from possible retaliations. On the one hand, we have the Colonel's experience: interpreters were not from the region where they were working, they lived on the base and when they left for paid leave it was done with the utmost secrecy. On the other hand, the Captain's experience: interpreters were locals, living in the city going back and forth to the Afghan camp by taxi. It seems the safety policies put in place in the Colonel's case were substantially more effective than in the other case.

4.3.1.4. *Aftermath*

As far as the aftermath of their tour in Afghanistan is concerned, they had different stories to tell and different opinions on the matter.

The Captain did not keep any contact with the interpreters who worked for them and was not very concerned about their current situation because he knew that they had been employed by his successors without incident.. He also knew that there were policies in place to grant VISAs for interpreters with several years of service and believed that it was an incentive for working as an interpreter for the army.

The Colonel, on the other hand, left Afghanistan knowing that his interpreter did not want to work for their successors (the Australians) and that he was planning to go back to his region to his family. However, a few years later he contacted him via email to tell him that he was being hunted down and that he needed help to get into Holland. The Colonel helped him obtain his refugee status and now his interpreter lives in Holland with his family.

According to the Colonel, if one realises that these interpreters are in danger, there is a moral obligation to grant them VISAs to flee their country and reach a safe place.

4.3.2. Similarities

As we have seen from the interviews, there are also some points raised by the two interviewees that match. Specifically, in this section five points that were found in both interviews will be analysed: the interpreter's training, the interpreter as a source of information, the interpreter as a cultural mediator, their salary and the need of additional protection from the Afghan police.

4.3.2.1. Training

In the interviews it was established what was more or less expected, considering what has been reported in previous research (see Chapter 2.3.3.): interpreters did not receive any training. Before starting to work for the army, neither the Captain's interpreters nor the Colonel's interpreter received any guidance regarding the interpreting profession or safety measures to put in place while on the field. However, and this is somehow new, they both thought that the interpreters' years of experience provided them with the right skills to carry out the job.

The Colonel realised that not all the interpreters had the same skill-set: according to their experience on the job and their linguistic proficiency, they were positioned at different levels in the interpreter's hierarchy. While the Captain did not believe that interpreters may have needed additional training, the Colonel thought that it could be useful to train them beforehand: some of them, in fact, "*were not that good, but we had to hire them because there was nobody else*" (Second user interviewed). This is what Gómez Amich (2013) meant when explaining that in conflict interpreting it is the rule of supply and demand that overrules all other protocols: in absence of professionals, anyone left had to be sufficient because of how much they were needed.

4.3.2.2. The interpreter as a source of information

Another very interesting point that came up in both interviews is the importance of the interpreter as a source of information. Even though it happened in different ways (the Captain's interpreters lived in the city and had more contacts with the local population,

whereas the Colonel's interpreter usually went to the mosque and only rarely went into the local town), both users reported that interpreters were a very useful source of intelligence. They reported what was the atmosphere in the city was like, what people were talking or worrying about and even if it was a good day or not to be out in the field.

Moreover, while they were on the field during a mission, they often asked interpreters if they thought it was safe or not as apparently they could detect the danger coming more rapidly than the soldiers themselves could.

4.3.2.3.   Cultural mediation

For both interviewees, the interpreter's real added value was his knowledge of the Afghan culture. As the Dutch and the Afghan cultures are very different from one another, the interpreter's role was to teach the users how to speak, what questions to ask and how to behave during a conversation. This was incredibly useful for them and it could mean the success or the failure of a meeting.

In the Colonel's case, and probably because of the close relationship he developed with his personal interpreter, this type of advice also worked in a non-verbal way during the conversation. While he was talking, his interpreter would look at him in a certain way to tell him to stop asking questions, for example, or that he would have explained later what the interlocutor's words really meant. Sometimes, after the meetings when the interpreter explained why a question the Colonel asked had been inappropriate, the Colonel would reply: "*You should have given me the eye!*" (Second user interviewed). This, of course, happened because of their one-to-one relationship that worked extremely well but, in general, we could say that this element of cultural mediation was a crucial element when it came to assess the interpreter's performance.

4.3.2.4.   Salary

According to the Captain, the interpreters earned one thousand dollars per month whereas the Colonel said that it was of about six hundred dollars per month. If we consider, however, that nations were not competing amongst themselves by lowering salaries and that the Colonel said that interpreters with more experience and better language proficiency earned more, we can safely say that the two amounts are not that far from one another.

Moreover, both interviewees thought that the salary received by interpreters was enough and surely it was worth the risk. This was especially true to them, if they compared this salary to Afghan standards or to what an average captain in the Afghan army earned, which was around four hundred dollars per month. The Colonel's interpreter even decided to resign from the Afghan army to become an interpreter for the ISAF forces because of the salary. It is worth noting that this statement contradicts what Anderson (2004) observed in Afghanistan: that interpreters there told him that the money they earned from this job was absolutely not enough to take that risk.

4.3.2.5. *Additional protection outside working hours*

The last point that will be analysed in this section is how both interviewees thought that interpreters were not sufficiently protected by the Afghan police. According to the Captain, the Dutch army was only responsible of the interpreter's safety while they were on job: outside working hours, if they felt threatened they had to report it to the Afghan police as it was not the Dutch army's responsibility. The Colonel thought that interpreters needed more protection during their paid leave: in fact, interpreters would go back to their home without anyone escorting them for two or three weeks. This is when he thought they more exposed to possible dangers. However, both agreed that while they were on the job, their lives were not at risk.

4.4. *Discussion of the results*

As has been observed, there were some similarities between the interviewees' very different experiences. From both testimonies, in fact, it came up that the interpreters received no training before or whilst working for the Dutch army. Moreover, they were seen not only as mere interpreters, but also as cultural mediators and as a source of information. In both cases, the users felt that more could be done to improve the interpreters' safety.

The significant difference between the two experiences, however, was the working and personal relationship between the user and his interpreter. Due to the fact that the Colonel had his own personal interpreter, he managed to build a stronger relationship with him and this had consequences on both a professional and personal level. His interpreter's working conditions were better as he could live on the base: this allowed

him not only to benefit from the protection of the army base, but he could also have private meetings with the Colonel. This allowed them to discuss previous interpreting meetings, strategies, assess his performance and brainstorm on how to improve their working relationship. Moreover, the fact that they had this type of working relationship created a kinship between the two based on mutual trust. This proved to be crucial not only while working but also in the aftermath of the conflict, on a personal level, when the Colonel helped his interpreter leave Afghanistan.

However, one has also take into consideration that this different type of working relationship is indubitably due to the different rank in the military hierarchy that the two users had. Whilst, on the one hand, a Colonel could rely on his personal interpreter, the same was not possible for a Captain, who worked with several interpreters with less experience and lower language proficiency.

5. Conclusion

This preliminary study has shed light on a perspective that is often forgotten when analysing the current situation of local interpreters in conflict zones: the users' point of view. From the analysis of two experiences some points were raised that conflict with previous literature on the subject and are worth highlighting.

The main finding was the great difference in the working and personal relationship that is built between the interpreter and the user according to the nature of the employment (personal interpreter vs. several interpreters) which is linked to the military rank of the user. This has shown how a personal and close relationship between the user and the interpreter creates advantages on different levels: working conditions, perceived trustworthiness and security.

Additionally, the study has revealed how the interpreter's accommodation has an influence on many aspects: when the interpreters live on the base, they are given a uniform that can provide the interpreters' with additional protection as they cannot be identified as civilians and therefore avoid being targeted. Moreover, if the interpreters live on a base, they do not have to commute from their home to the work place every day: this was one of the most dangerous moments, as both the interpreters and the users have stated.

Another interesting point is how users have described the interpreter's salary. Not only did they believe it was worth the risk, but also they thought that it was a considerable amount of money. This was said after making a comparison between what the interpreters earned and the average salary of an Afghan officer, which was considerably less. This is something that diverges from the opinions that can be found on the literature on this subject and is worth investigating further.

In this study, there were some aspects that were not prevalent in the participants' experiences: the users, in fact, never had the impression that the interpreter was emotionally involved in what he was interpreting, nor had the feeling that there had been some sort of bias influencing the translation. Of course, this is according to them and based on their own personal experiences, but it is still worth mentioning.

The work presented in this thesis presents a clear limitation that ought to be considered. As it appears from the analysis of the findings, the main difficulty is generalising the users' experiences. Since only two members of the military were interviewed, one cannot say that what has been observed could be applied to all members of the military working with local interpreters in conflict zones. However, based on the findings, some interesting points were raised and further research could be conducted on what has been observed in this specific case study.

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Annex I

Questions

Information on the user

- How many years did you spend in the military?

- What is your rank?

- What is your mother tongue?

- When did your mission in Afghanistan take place?

- What kind of mission was it? (Humanitarian, military)

- What was the language usually spoken on the field?

Basic information on the Interpreter

- Did you need an interpreter? Why?

- Was he/she a local?

- What languages did he/she speak?

- Do you know how he/she had learned English?

- Do you know if he/she had had previous experience in interpreting?

Recruitment & Working conditions

- How was the interpreter recruited?

- Did the interpreter have a regular contract?

- Did the army provided him with any type of training? (Safety, Linguistic or Interpreting?)

- How many hours did he/she have to work?

- Do you know how much was his/her salary?

- Was he/she wearing a uniform?

- Could he/she carry weapons?

- Where did he/she live?

Work

- What were the tasks assigned to him/her?

- Did you expect a word-to-word translation?

- Did he/she escort you on missions?

- What was your impression of the service provided by the interpreter?

Neutrality

- What was the relationship between the interpreter and the local population?

- What was the relationship between the interpreter and the members of your troop?

- Have you ever had the impression the interpreter was emotionally involved with what was happening?

- Have you ever had the impression the interpreter was not neutral?

- Do you believe the risky environment had any influence on the job performance of the interpreter?

- Do you believe the interpreters' background (cultural, religious etc.) had any influence on the job performance of the interpreter?

- Have you ever had the impression the interpreter was not completely accurate in translating? Why so?

- Did you trust your interpreter?

Protection and safety

- What were the safety measures on the field?

- Do you believe you interpreter was safe?

- Has he/she ever received threats? From whom?

Aftermath

- Did you keep contact with your interpreter after leaving Afghanistan?

- Did he/she stay in Afghanistan?

- Do you believe he/she might be in danger now that you left?

- Did the interpreter seek protection after working for you? (Visa, Refugee status, Asylum)

Closing up

- What do you believe might have been useful to improve the interpreter's working conditions?

- What could be done to improve their safety?

- Do you believe their salary was worth the risk?

- Do you believe it could be useful to train interpreters beforehand (linguistic, interpreting and safety training)? Do you believe it is feasible?

- Is there anything else you want to add?