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CRISIS TRANSLATION IN YEMEN

Needs and challenges of volunteer translators and interpreters

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1 Introduction

Experienced, qualified, professional translators and interpreters (T&Is) have supported humanitarian organizations operating in Yemen for decades. Already stretched by the civil war raging since 2015, relief operations have further suffered since the Saudi-led coalition blocked flights in and out of Sana'a International Airport in 2016. According to UNHCR (2017), the displacement of Yemeni people has reached unprecedented levels; hence, many professional T&Is, among other professionals, are thought to have fled the country. Already in 2017, Stephen O'Brien, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, described the situation as a humanitarian disaster (2017). The UN, the Red Cross, and Médecins Sans Frontières humanitarian flights are still allowed to fly in and out of Yemen, but their communication with the local population is mediated by non-professional T&Is. This study was conducted by interviewing T&Is who aid humanitarian workers operating in Yemen with international organizations and who use English as the medium of communication with local agencies. Representatives of local agencies are not native speakers of English, which adds to the burden of T&Is trying to understand hard accents. More discussion on this point will be provided later.

The Yemeni situation is a crisis translation situation (O'Brien, 2016) that involves both an ongoing conflict and an epidemic, in which the Yemeni population relies on the support of multilingual NGO operators, most of whom have limited proficiency in Arabic and near-zero professional T&I experience. Emergency responses to crises mostly see the use of ad-hoc measures to accommodate the language needs of local populations, which remain 'reactive' forms of response rather than planned solutions (Federici, 2016). O'Brien (2016) shows how the zero-translation option is avoided by means of crowdsourcing (e.g., Munro, 2010; O'Hagan, 2015; Sutherlin,

2013) and machine translation solutions (e.g., Lewis, 2010; Lewis, Munro, & Vogel, 2011). Similarly, interpreting in crises tends to be based on ad-hoc solutions (e.g. Moser-Mercer and Bali, 2007; Moser-Mercer *et al.*, 2014). This chapter looks at how the T&Is who provide such ad-hoc solutions to communication perceive their training needs and their roles.

This chapter analyses data collected via remote, semi-structured interviews with non-professional, little-trained, and mainly volunteer T&Is, who might have English-language qualifications and competence but lack training in translation or interpreting. Most of these T&Is fulfilled administrative roles in Yemen but did not perform any active translation and/or interpretation. Once professional T&Is fled the country, however, these people became the few able to facilitate multilingual communication. This study aims to identify the challenges they face in this T&I role and to discuss how they perceive their role in the relief operations.

2 State of the art review

Though limited literature is available on the training of crisis T&Is, there are some attempts to investigate training initiatives for them. O'Brien (2016), for example, conducts a survey on the translator training programme conducted by Translators without Borders in Kenya during early September 2014, aiming to find out how effective this training was in preparing volunteer T&Is for working in crises. Federici and Al Sharou (2018) present the results of testing the speed of acquisition of the skills needed to operate the statistical machine translation tool Moses and the possibility of using Moses in critical crisis situations. With emphasis on interpreters in crises, Todorova (2017), discussing the issue of discrepancy between neutrality and real-life experiences of mediating for the vulnerable, introduces the new 'shuttle interpreting' mode of working for interpreters in conflict, promoting independent interpreting between communicating parties. Mäkelä (2013), in an empirical study carried out on non-governmental organizations' development co-operation projects funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, maps out the needs and practices related to translation and foreign language communication in development co-operation projects. In addition, with emphasis on interpreting training, quite significant resources are available concerning projects carried out within the InZone Centre at the University of Geneva (see Moser-Mercer, 2016; Moser-Mercer and Bali, 2007; Moser-Mercer *et al.*, 2014). The current study attempts to provide an overview of the challenges that volunteer T&Is face in their work during the current crisis in Yemen. It sheds light on how volunteer T&Is perceive their role when providing language support for international organizations in Yemen. Identifying these two elements will enable trainers and educationalists to figure out which skills and topics to include in programmes to train T&Is to face such challenges.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews carried out with twelve volunteer T&Is (six female and six male) working for international humanitarian organizations and intergovernmental agencies in Yemen. They were previously

asked to say whether they would like to participate in an interview when they responded to a survey designed by the EU H2020 – funded International Network on Crisis Translation (INTERACT), which is currently being used on a secure online platform to gather data from respondents from all over the world. Thirty-four T&Is participated in the online survey from Yemen. The survey aimed to elicit preliminary information about the T&Is (e.g., age, gender, qualification, experience, place of work, etc.) in order to identify what needs to be included in training crisis T&Is. The survey was designed as a non-language and non-crisis specific instrument to gather data regarding the activities and roles of T&Is working in crises all over the world.

Due to the ongoing crisis in Yemen and the difficulty of travelling to and from Yemen, I had to arrange for the interviews to be carried out via Skype and phone calls. Audacity was used to record the interviews. The interviewees gave permission to use their interviews for the purpose of this research at the beginning of each interview. Taking the first interview as a pilot interview, I found that their level of English proficiency, especially in speaking, might be a barrier to expressing their experiences fully. All the interviewees had confirmed having graduated with bachelor's degrees in the English language, with speciality either in literature or in English language teaching (more on their qualifications will be discussed later under 'What training did they receive?'). I therefore decided to undertake the interviews in Arabic, so I translated the open-ended survey questions into Arabic. I had them revised and verified by a colleague from INTERACT, who is also qualified as an English/Arabic translator. The English guiding questions were also adopted and ethically approved by INTERACT (see Appendix 1 for the English questions and Appendix 2 for the Arabic questions).[1] I gave the interviewees the option to select which language they preferred to use for the interview, and the majority chose Arabic.

The interviews were given to a translator, who had already signed a non-disclosure agreement, to transcribe, and translate their answers into English. I revised and verified the transcriptions and translations to make sure that nothing was missing or inaccurately translated. All the anonymized interviews, transcripts, and translations are saved in a secure cloud server provided by INTERACT. The data were coded and categorized manually based on the themes covered by the questions. The transcripts were closely and thoroughly read to elicit any significant issues expressed by the interviewed T&Is.

3   Analysis and discussion

3.1   *Yemen at the beginning of the 21st century*

Before analysing and discussing the work of T&Is in Yemen, it is important to provide an essential timeline of the events leading to the current situation in Yemen. The so-called 'Arab Spring' revolutions that swept most of the Arabic-speaking World in the last few years represent a turning point for many Arab countries.

Right after the 2011 revolution, political parties in Yemen entered a dialogue. It was about to successfully end with the signing of the draft constitution when the Houthi opposition movement took over the Yemeni capital and seized control of the government in September 2014 (Heinze, 2015), which led some Arab countries to establish the Saudi-led coalition (Al Arabiya News, 2015) to restore Yemen's legitimate government. With this military intervention, Yemen entered an unprecedented phase of starvation due to the blockade imposed by the coalition (Gatten, 2015). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on 26 February 2019, '[s]ince 2015, escalating armed conflict has dramatically worsened Yemen's chronic poverty and fragility, creating a crisis of unprecedented magnitude in what was already the poorest country in the Arab region,' with nearly 80% of Yemenis in need of assistance and protection, 9.6 million on the edge of famine, and about 3.3 million having fled their homes because of the conflict. The current crisis, and the Saudi-led military intervention, further exacerbated already impoverished and hard living conditions, though it was less dramatic. According to the World Economic Forum (Schwab and Sala-i-Martín, 2016, p. 391), among 148 world economies, Yemen ranked 137th for the quality of its roads, 146th for the quality of its electricity supply, and 146th for Internet access in schools, to mention a few indicators. In addition, quality of education in Yemen had been deteriorating in the period leading up to the 2014 crisis. According to UNICEF (2013), the total adult literacy rate in the period 2008–2012 was 65.3%.

3.2   Yemeni T&Is' perceptions of their role in the crisis

Operating in such conditions, it was no surprise that the interviewees clearly highlighted the importance of being volunteer T&Is in Yemen. They perceived and described their activities as 'important' or 'crucial'. Their role in the current crisis revolves around three main aspects: Conveying Yemenis' suffering, communicating with donors to obtain funds, and helping Yemenis communicate with aid providers.

The T&Is believe that their role is to help people in need and convey their suffering to the people outside Yemen. Interestingly, they see themselves as advocates, going beyond the traditional descriptions of translation and interpreting. Advocacy in translation and interpreting is normally considered a breach of the code of ethics. However, advocacy, in some settings such as medical appointments, is likely to be praised and encouraged, since working in such critical settings requires the demonstration of passion and compassion rather than liability. Crisis translation shares some principles with community translation (Federico and Al Sharou, 2018, p. 487); hence, it is expected to find T&Is working in crises demonstrating advocacy for their country and their people. This is likely to raise the question of the ethicality of such practice. However, Angelelli (2004, p. 97) argued that 'the ethical principles laid down in codes of ethics or standards of practice should be empirically grounded and tested, rather than prescribed or assumed' (for more on advocacy and the ethical implications in community translation, see Angelelli, 2004; 2015; Taibi and Ozolins, 2016).

Yemenis currently lack the basic requirements of life, such as clean water, medicine, and food. According to the T&Is, Yemen is neglected by influential media outlets in comparison with some other places like Syria. T11 argued that volunteer T&Is in Yemen 'convey to the world the needs of the Yemeni people. There is no one who can convey such suffering other than the T&Is. So, the most important employee in the organization is the translator'. According to Hind Abbas, the communications assistant for Care International Yemen, 22.2 million of the people in Yemen rely on humanitarian aid to survive. This need for support is escalated by the rapid spread of diseases and the lack of the right courses of treatment (Abbas, 2018). The people in Yemen have not received their salaries for the last two to three years. Volunteer T&Is believe that their role, according to T3, is

> to communicate the current crises in Yemen to the world, especially the humanitarian one. We are trying to explain what happens to civilians – which violent acts happen, which crimes are committed. We are trying to reach the international organizations, just to inform the world of what is happening in Yemen.

None of the interviewees mentioned 'translation' as their role in the Yemeni crisis, though they are volunteer T&Is. They all expressed their concern that the media do not treat the Yemeni situation fairly, and they think that their role is to fill the gap and help Yemenis make their voices heard. They answered the question on their role with concern, emotion, and passion. Interviewee T8 thinks that they have also to 'explain to them [donors] the current situation and the value and influence of their intervention.' In other words, volunteer T&Is thought that their job is to negotiate with donors and persuade them to come and help Yemenis.

In addition, the interviewed T&Is think that they play an important role in helping Yemenis communicate with international service providers. Considering the low rate of literacy in villages, where humanitarian aid is most needed, aid providers need T&Is to help them communicate with beneficiaries. Most of the T&Is interviewed expressed their intention to help facilitate this sort of communication between international providers and residents. T2 stated that

> those who receive humanitarian supplies are simple people. They are the poorest people in the society. They don't know English, and they can't communicate with the donors. Therefore, the role of the translator at this time is essential and very important.

How volunteer T&Is in Yemen perceive their role in their society is important. Their role clearly extends beyond the traditional business of T&Is to include their intention of serving their society. They take the case of Yemen in the core of their business and work hard with full passion to spread it to the world. It is worth noting that they are hired and paid by organizations to carry out various administrative jobs other than translation, which they volunteer to do when needed. They

look at translation as a medium through which they can expose the problems Yemenis are going through to external powers, so as to convince a broader international community to come to aid the Yemeni population. Also, the information on how volunteer T&Is perceive their role might underpin the work of educators when designing courses on *Crisis Translation* that could meet the learning needs, expectations, and requirements of those who are willing to serve the civil society through their volunteer work. In relation to training, the data from the interview strongly indicate that it would be recommendable to incorporate discussion on topics such as T&I code of ethics, conflicts of interests, and advocacy and its cascading effects in relation to formal translation and interpreting assignments in crisis situations.

3.3   Yemeni T&Is' preparation and training

As the purpose of this study is partially to highlight the training needs of volunteer T&Is in Yemen, it is necessary to look into the current status of their education. All twelve interviewed T&Is had degrees in English. Some had obtained their degrees in their training to be teachers of English as a foreign language, while others had specialized in English and literature. None of them had a degree in translation or interpreting. Five of the interviewed T&Is (41.7%) had had one introductory course in translation studies in the whole course of their degrees.

    All twelve interviewees confirmed that they had not received any proper training on how to solve ongoing problems faced while translating. Only one of them said that she refers to qualified and expert T&Is when she is stuck with a term or any other translation-related problem. All of them (100%) showed awareness of the existence of online resources and their value, but also voiced how they are not formally trained in finding and utilizing them for their purpose. It is worth noting that they all stated that they often rely on their own limited abilities to learn how to solve problems using online tools. However, they expressed their willingness to go beyond the use of basic tools such as dictionaries and search engines to learn how to use sophisticated tools and applications such as translation memories. They all confirmed that none of the few translation programmes in Yemen teach translation technologies.

    Another significant issue highlighted by interviewees in relation to training is translation in crises. All interviewees were apparently unaware of anything called 'crisis translation'. None of them had received any training related to translation in a crisis, or even to crisis management and the phases and collaborations it entails. They all stated that this subject is never taught in any of the translation programmes offered in Yemen at present. By surveying the translation programmes offered by both the University of Science and Technology in Yemen and Sana'a University and personally approaching lecturers in both programmes, I confirmed this information. Faculty at those universities also confirmed that none of the translation programmes currently offered in Yemen teaches anything related to crisis translation.

3.4   Yemeni T&Is' challenges

In this section, we will analyse and discuss the challenges that volunteer T&Is in Yemen face in their work during the current crisis. Challenges reported by interviewed T&Is come in various forms and can be categorized under the following headings: Language and translation incompetency; workload, utilities, and emotional stress; safety issues; cultural and intercultural communication; and gender-related issues.

3.4.1   Language and translation incompetency

It is expected that someone who has not received any formal training in translation will be unable to solve even little problems that usually face T&Is when dealing with real projects. The volunteer T&Is, as it appears from the data collected for this study, had never received any training in translation. Unlike those who have graduated from translation programmes, volunteer T&Is in Yemen apparently cannot distinguish between literal translation and other orientations of translation like foreignization and domestication. T4, for example, mentioned that she 'used to translate reports for Vision Hope that were specially written for women. They were translated literally, and the organization refused many [of their translations] and showed us how we should translate them.' Trained T&Is should be able to distinguish between various types of texts and adopt a certain strategy for every different text, which seems not to be the case here.

   Another related issue is that the volunteer T&Is showed an inability to deal with politically critical situations. As part of the current crisis in Yemen, there is remarkable tension between the local ruling authority, belonging to Houthis, and the authorities backed by the legitimate government and the Saudi-led coalition, each ruling some parts of Yemen (see 2.1. above). Volunteer T&Is, from the interviews, expressed concern about the kind of language some authorities used when they became outraged about the topic in question. Some people in authority were found to use bad language (swear words) against representatives of international organizations, especially when the former is not happy with the response of the latter. T&Is find themselves in a difficult situation that they are unable to solve, since they have not been trained on how to deal with such situations using techniques such paraphrasing, rephrasing, or applying some pragmatic principles in order to avoid such a difficult situation, as explained by T1:

> I feel embarrassed and try to translate it in a different way to keep the relationship between the two parties good. That is why I really find myself in bad situations because of the lack of training; we didn't study to be translators and deal with different situations.

In addition, the interviewed T&Is highlighted terminology as one of the biggest challenges they face in translating in Yemen. They particularly mentioned cholera

and other health topics for which they struggle to find appropriate equivalents. These are new phenomena in Yemen that emerged as a result of the current crisis and the siege imposed on Yemenis. According to T2, volunteer T&Is face 'medical words, medical abbreviations, and names of new medicines that are completely different from the Standard English that [they] have learnt'.

In fact, this issue is not limited to technical and specialized terms but extends to everyday language use. For example, T4 described how she found herself in an embarrassing situation of being unable to translate the word بخور, literally 'incense', into English in a meeting with an international delegate about the spread of cholera in Yemen. She tried many times to explain the term but had to bring the incense itself to them on the following day. This incident shows that volunteer T&Is may not have received proper training in the English language in the first place. One other translator expressed difficulty understanding English spoken with different accents. He thinks that 'sometimes the people that you are translating for – their English is not good, their accent is so different and difficult, it is not clear English.' He gave an example of a Kenyan delegate who pronounced the word 'other' as /oda/. He had to ask her to repeat it, and still he could not recognize it until she spelt it. Another concern expressed by T&Is is particularly related to direction of translation. T7, for example, stated that 'translation from Arabic into English is more difficult because some vocabulary in Arabic is strong in meaning, so it is difficult to find the appropriate equivalence in English.'

Writing and translating reports is one of the major issues raised by the interviewed T&Is. T2 explained,

> As we are fighting cholera, we … face a big challenge in convincing the organization to fund the project. I was unable to write a report properly and [produce a] technical description of the disease. So, I had to do a lot of research, and then I prepared the proposal and asked doctors from America to revise it. But because they [treat me] as a volunteer, they had no time for me.

The description above reflects the perception volunteer T&Is in Yemen have of their work and how some international workers view them. It pinpoints a number of critical issues about the work of volunteer T&Is in the crisis of Yemen: They believe their job is to serve their country by negotiating with international sponsors for better deals; they lack proper training in writing good reports to serve that purpose; they have to learn how to solve their problems by themselves; they seek help from experts but believe that those experts have a negative perception of them as volunteer T&Is. In fact, this last observation was echoed by other T&Is interviewed for this study. They think that volunteer workers do not receive the necessary attention and respect they would get if they were paid workers.

Back to the writing and translating of reports, in the cholera context, the interviewed T&Is emphasized how their lack of proper training affects the quality of the reports they produce, which in turn negatively affect the progress of funding applications. T4, for example, reflected that because they send low-quality reports,

potential donors delay their responses 'because they spend their time revising our translation … and forget the main topic.' The challenge Yemeni volunteer T&Is face in writing and translating reports is also expressed in other parts of the world. In a three-year project (2015–2018) on the role that languages and cultural understanding play in international development, officials from NGOs working in Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, and Peru expressed how challenging it is to write applications for donors in English, per the donors' request (Footitt *et al.*, 2018). In fact, some organizations find themselves forced to use Google Translate to translate their applications into English to meet the donors' conditions. According to the director of a local NGO (Footitt *et al.*, 2018, p. 20),

> And of course, they [donors] don't pay for translation. If we can afford it, then we hire a translator, but if we cannot afford it, then we just do it the stupid way, which is Google translation. And it's not just my organization. Many organizations – they just do Google translation.

3.4.2   Workload, utilities, and emotional stress

Translating in crises is very likely to affect translators and the quality of their work. The interviewed T&Is all complained of the severe circumstances they go through when offering their volunteer services in Yemen. Translating reports on people dying of hunger, disease, and airstrikes, to name a few, causes them a lot of emotional stress. In addition, T&Is travel with international delegates and witness indescribable stories of families and individuals who lose their relatives, for example, at a wedding that is hit by an airstrike. These painful stories affect the psychological and emotional status of the translators, who themselves live in a similar situation. As mentioned, the interviewed T&Is argued that they feel responsible for spreading the word on what happens in Yemen to the world. At the same time, they think that, due to their lack of sufficient resources, they are unable to achieve that mission, which adds to their pain. T3, for example, stated,

> When you feel that you have something to offer to those people, to help them, to make their voice heard by the world, you just want to be part of them and work with them. I wanted to do that, but it was really difficult. But I really feel that it is our responsibility.

In describing their experience, some of the T&Is interviewed were in tears, narrating how they feel when seeing people suffering around them. According to T7, speaking on behalf of volunteer T&Is, 'we feel that we are deprived of everything, and the only thing we still live with is that we are able to breathe … we have a strong determination to help these people.' All interviewees insisted on their determination to spread Yemenis' suffering to the world, feeling that there is unfair coverage of the crisis in Yemen. They believe that the world knows very little about their situation, and that their role is to make up for that lack of coverage, since they

can speak English. T11 confirmed that 'if you read the reports that I write about the situation in Yemen, about the diseases and about the airstrikes, you will be affected. I want to convey the message in a way that will make the foreigners feel about Yemen'.

Answering a question on the type of relationships volunteer T&Is have with other parties, they all insisted that they have to maintain good relationships with everybody they are in contact with in their work. They deal with representatives from international organizations, military officers, government officials, doctors in hospitals and clinics, and residents. Any of these parties can be a source of stress or discomfort to the T&Is. For example, a translator has to obtain a license from the government to travel to a village; this license is unlikely to be granted unless the translator has a good relationship with the officer in charge. A female translator mentioned that without the use of her personal relationships, she could not get access to the needy families to fill out project surveys, considering that there are still people who look down on women in Yemen. T1 stated that 'as long as you build a good relationship with everyone, you will work with less stress and less pressure from everyone.'

In addition to the miserable stories they witness in their work, the heavy work-load adds to the mental stress of volunteer T&Is in Yemen. As has been shown above, they are not trained to be T&Is, nor are they trained to deal with crises. Due to the shortage of T&Is who can travel to villages and translate reports and interpret for patients and people in need, volunteer T&Is, especially in conflict areas, find them-selves in a critical situation where they have to write and translate lengthy reports with short deadlines. According to T4,

> we spend a lot of time at our work translating and preparing the reports. We work from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. This has a physical influence. Our translation skills become weak at the end of the day. In the field, when we go and see the current situation, we get busier with such cases than with the translation. Thus, we try to describe it in brief.

As seen from T4's statement above, there are negative impacts on the physical abil-ities of the translators, which will add to the mental stress they go through. In the same statement, it is argued how engaging with the suffering of locals psycho-logically and emotionally affects the translator, distracting them from focusing on the production of high-quality translation. Valero-Garcés (2015) and Cambridge (2012) discussed the influence of emotional and psychological problems on public service interpreters; there is clearly the need for extensive research on the mental health of crisis T&Is. T8 confirmed that 'the general situation in Yemen has its psy-chological impact on [the T&Is], and the result is less creativity and less motivation.' However, she continued, 'we work hard in order to survive.'

The economic situation in Yemen was deteriorating even before the current crisis emerged in 2014/2015 (see 2.1. above). It was normal to see the power cut off for hours and for an email to take minutes to send in the capital, not to mention

in villages that already received less attention from the government. The situation is worse with the current crisis. Volunteer T&Is, especially those working in the countryside, work in an environment that lacks essential services and utilities, such as electricity, water, and cooking gas. This all adds to their mental stress. T11, for example, explained what a miserable environment they work in: 'We face a psychological problem because of the power cuts. Sometimes we write something, but the electricity goes out suddenly before we can save our work. The absence of the internet sometimes is also a problem that we face'.

In fact, the absence of such important services, apart from adding to the stress on T&Is, affects the quality of their translation. Having the electricity cut off suddenly before the text is saved will necessitate retranslation, which in turn makes them miss the deadline for their project. Although residents in Yemen recently started to rely on solar energy, T&Is still face a problem with the power being cut off while they are in the middle of their work. According to T9, although they use solar energy, 'if the weather is not sunny, we suffer a lack of electricity.' She continued, 'I face stress as a female because I can't go out and do my work in any [printing] centre.' She wondered, 'if I can't go in a time of peace, how can I go during the war?' There are more challenges that female T&Is, in particular, face in Yemen, which will be discussed in the relevant section below.

It is well known that T&Is use the internet to carry out various tasks in their translation projects. They search for terminology, dig for information related to their texts, communicate with other T&Is and subject experts, build up corpora and search existing ones, and learn tips and techniques that can help them work faster and better, to name a few. In Yemen, under the current crisis, with the internet hardly available, T&Is, especially volunteer T&Is who are not paid for their services, find it hard to find solutions to the problems they face during translation. The interviewed T&Is expressed how hard it is for them to search for information about a certain term, to send an email to a translator to verify a term, or to access an online forum to discuss a concept or a term with other T&Is. In fact, even with the limited availability of the internet, they cannot get into some websites and online services if they are blocked by the government. T9 emphasized that 'the blocking or the hiding of the email [service] or some websites is one of the problems that [they] face.'

3.4.3   Personal safety and security

Volunteer T&Is in Yemen work in unsafe conditions; they face all sorts of threats. They are exposed to military actions, as well as to rejections by their own relatives and civil society, if they act in a way that seems to violate traditions. This dangerous environment, in fact, is one of the main reasons why professional T&Is had to flee the country in the first place, thus causing the critical shortage in qualified T&Is, which is being filled by the untrained T&Is. RedT, a non-profit organization specializing in protecting translators and interpreters, documents how translators and interpreters working in areas of crises (e.g. Afghanistan, China, Iran, Iraq) face a catastrophic fate because of their work (see *Incidents Archive – Red T*, 2019). T6

explained that the main reason he fled Yemen was the lack of safety. He continued, 'I have children, and I take care of their future and their safety. So, I left Yemen for my children.' In addition to the safety of their families, T&Is are concerned about their own safety, having to work in conflict zones, mediate between fighting parties, and travel to remote areas, crossing checkpoints that are sometimes considered to be life-threatening. T1 described the situation: 'We are working in a place that is full of risks from every side. We are dealing with military people, sometimes with people with weapons, with the police. If they are not happy, they will arrest you.'

When asked why they accept working in such risky environments, the volunteer T&Is all answered that they do this to serve their country and people in need and to feed their families. Due to the current crisis in Yemen, no more jobs are offered, and those with paid jobs have not received their salaries for almost two years (MSF, 2018)[2] (at the time of this writing). Therefore, volunteer T&Is have to accept working for international organizations, although they know they will be sent to work in dangerous areas where fighting is going on, like Meedi, Taiz, and Ibb, where they become worried for their lives. According to T5, 'their pay is not that high, what they get is not that much, and the risk is so high.' He continued,

> Those organizations can never get anyone other than Yemenis. I mean, no one can sacrifice his life to come to Yemen – I mean, non-Yemenis. So, they get those Yemenis who can be happy with four or five hundred dollars with all the risks surrounding them, but they have to. The idea is that they work under pressure, pressure of the worries of war, pressure of their families. I mean, they work under exceptional circumstances, and they have to – they are obliged to.

The safety of volunteer T&Is can also be threatened through the type of texts they translate and the people with whom they communicate. They are concerned about engaging in dialogues that contain any opinions that may oppose either party of the conflict. Some stated that they have to change their email addresses from time to time to conceal their identities from cyber monitors in Yemen. T5, in addition, is 'careful about mentioning [his] name, since the guide [he translates] was in connection' with a subject of conflict.

It is noteworthy that the T&Is themselves expressed concern about the quality of their work being carried out in such a critical and dangerous environment. T5, a senior translator and university professor, for example, stated that this feeling of lack of safety 'will be reflected in their translation … because if the translator is not comfortable, is not satisfied, when he is not in a very peaceful environment, he will never be able to do very well. That will be reflected in the translation itself, its accuracy and adequacy.' He continued that the translation produced will not be as good as expected because 'the translators are working under exceptional circumstances or conditions.'

The interviewed T&Is had different (sometimes contradictory) opinions on whether female and male T&Is face similar issues of safety. Some thought that

female T&Is have less exposure to risks, as they mostly work in offices and do not have to travel to conflict zones. T5 (a male translator), a university professor, described the situation of those female T&Is working in the capital city of Sana'a, saying,

> I used to work with an organization in Sana'a in the relief programmes, most of [whose translators] are female, because they are working in offices, a very peaceful atmosphere, and they even get good salaries while they are working in offices and nice places.

However, it appears that this perception might be either dated or the context misconstrued, as some female T&Is live in the conflict zones and have to travel to remote villages where their safety is under threat almost all the time. The risk of those who live and work in offices in non-conflict areas may be restricted to the disclosure of their identity if the texts or reports they write and translate oppose either party of the conflict. More discussion on gender-related issues will be given below.

3.4.4   Gender-related issues

Female T&Is have a central position in providing crisis translation services in Yemen. Their position is reflected in the fact that 56% of the answers to the online survey came from female T&Is. However, partially due to the relatively high rate of illiteracy, the society, especially in the countryside, is likely to look down upon women and treat them inferiorly. Therefore, one of the questions this study aims to answer is to what extent the gender of the translator can be a challenge. The interviewed female T&Is were asked if they faced any challenges just because they are female T&Is. The answers and stories obtained from them interestingly constructed two different and opposing views: One confirming that people look down upon them, and the other suggests the opposite.

Starting with the negative view, some T&Is explained how hard it was for them to collect information from people in need, or even to visit families to convey their needs to donors. T1 (a male translator in the margin of his answers), for example, mentioned that they had a female translator who used to accompany international delegates to hospitals. He added that some of the male patients refused to cooperate with the translator, and they used to shout at her. According to him, they did not accept her, and they accused her of being unable to translate well. He understood that the reason for this kind of denial was her being female. People are in more need in villages than in cities; hence, more T&Is are needed to work in villages, and this is where international donors target the most. In order to gain acceptance from their society and to have people cooperate with them, female T&Is, according to T4, move in teams with male T&Is. The presence of male T&Is on the team will make it easier for them all to distribute and achieve the planned tasks. Although, according to T8, women in Yemen 'are oppressed, and their work is always under criticism,

either in translation or in any other work, the situation nowadays is better; society accepts women as managers, translators, and drivers.'

On the other hand, some female T&Is denied the existence of any issues related to their gender. T7, for example, stated that she can move freely. In fact, she confirmed, echoing other female T&Is, that she can visit many areas that the male T&Is cannot visit because of the strict security measures implemented at checkpoints. She clarified that people respect women and cooperate with them. Women can pass through police checkpoints quickly because Yemenis, traditionally, do not allow people to inspect women. Interestingly, international organizations, according to T9, tend to prefer female T&Is to male T&Is, believing that the former have easier access to targeted families and through security checkpoints. She added that all-male groups have less chance to move in society; hence, international organizations add at least one female translator in a group, so she can approach targeted families. T9 continued that 'women are allowed to enter the houses and meet the women.'

It is not clear why female T&Is had two distinct views on how they are treated by their society and to what extent either perspective can cause them challenges in performing their translation work. Such distinction may depend on their place of work and be linked with the fact that there are great differences among Yemenis in terms of conservative values. It is found that those who expressed their concern about the way society treats them work in the countryside, where villagers are known for their conservative positions regarding the role and position of women in the Yemeni society. On the other hand, those who stated that female T&Is have easier access to targeted families work in cities, where people are educated and more open-minded.

Another striking issue raised by female T&Is is being asked to take off their face veil (in Arabic, *niqab* or *burqa*). T7, in particular, stated that 'in some organizations, they don't accept the women who wear the *burqa*. They ask the women to take off their headscarves at the gate of the organization.' This claim was backed by other female T&Is among the interviewees.

3.4.5 Intercultural communication

The data obtained from the interviews show clear evidence that international donors are likely to lack full understanding of the Yemeni culture and its traditions. Requesting or preferring that female employees take off their face veils, as shown under 'gender-related issues' above, is an obvious example of intercultural misunderstanding. In addition, some interviewed T&Is mentioned that international organizations lack awareness of the geographical and political factors when they deploy T&Is to different parts of Yemen. In the last few years, due to the ongoing politically triggered conflict, Yemenis have begun to identify themselves according to the region of Yemen they come from. For example, someone who comes from a region ruled by Houthis is considered by someone from a non-Houthi region to be a Houthi-supporter. The dialect of such a person will easily identify him or her as being from this or that region, even if he or she tries to conceal his or

her identity. People do not find it easy to work in a region they do not belong to. International organizations, according to T5, 'don't consider this factor when hiring those translators.'

Another translator (T6) gave another example of intercultural misunderstanding on behalf of the international organizations: Once, he was required to interpret for a training workshop run by an international organization targeting teenagers. One exercise in the workshop was to ask boys and girls to draw private parts of the body together. In a relatively conservative society like this, having teenage boys and girls together is not appropriate, not to mention the task of asking them to draw private parts. In the same workshop, the instructor talked about homosexuality positively, saying it is normal and it has been practiced for centuries. The translator had to interrupt the instructor several times, explaining to him that this was not appropriate to discuss in this society, not to mention with children at this age. The translator found himself in an embarrassing situation, he reported. This and other examples given by the interviewed T&Is clearly demonstrate international organizations' lack of awareness about the cultural norms of the society they come to help, which could in turn affect the success of their projects.

4   Preliminary findings

The discussion above sheds light on what needs volunteer T&Is working in the current crisis in Yemen have regarding training, deployment, and post-event support. First, they all expressed their nationalistic passion for their country and their people. With no exception, they believe that their role as volunteer T&Is is to let the world know what is happening in Yemen, believing that the mainstream media do not give Yemen the coverage it deserves. Such a patriotic feeling in volunteer T&Is sheds light on an important dimension that translation studies scholarship has largely underestimated until recently: The humanitarian side of the translator as activist. In fact, the issues T&Is highlighted in relation to their volunteer work in Yemen were all touched by passion and sadness: Their patriotic feelings towards their country and their sadness that they could not help it enough. It is worth drawing attention in this context to other scholars who have discussed forms of and issues related to the socio-political engagement of T&Is and their activism in translation projects that serve a particular cause or interest (see Baker, 2006; 2016; Tymoczko, 2000).

T&Is perceive their role to go beyond translation to include writing reports and funding proposals and negotiating with potential donors. Technical writing, according to many scholars (see Byrne, 2012; Hallman, 1990; Olohan, 2016), is one of the important skills that translators should possess, and the 'technical translator, in fact, has to be a technical writer but operating across two languages instead of just one' (Kingscott, 2002, p. 248). T&Is expressed their weakness in writing reports and demonstrated how international organizations neglect their need for specific training on writing reports, especially at this critical time in Yemen, when T&Is have little or no access to self-learning materials outside Yemen. The situation in Yemen is

internationally known as consistently deteriorating, with T&Is, like everybody else, lacking access to water, food, and electricity, not to mention work-related resources such as a good internet connection. INGOs hardly pay any attention to training their volunteer T&Is to translate and to perform any other tasks such as report writing and negotiating with donors (particularly in crises). They require training in the use of translation electronic tools and translation memories. They recommended that INGOs have a plan to train T&Is to work in emergencies. In fact, INGOs also need to train their staff on how to work with T&Is, who belong to different cultures with different traditions and habits. Training volunteer T&Is in relation to crises has become an urgent need, considering that there are only a very few universities in Yemen that offer translation programmes, and none of them offers any training related to crisis translation.

There are significant challenges that face volunteer T&Is working during the current crisis in Yemen. We, as trainers and educationalists, should examine such challenges and adopt approach to teaching and learning that can help trainees cope with those challenges. As Allen (2012, n.p.) argues, field interpreters working in conflicts and crises 'have a lot to teach the rest of us.' We should listen to their stories and learn how to design programmes that can truly prepare them for working in such circumstances. Volunteer T&Is are exposed to a variety of challenges in their work during the current crisis in Yemen. They find it difficult to understand strong accents, to find equivalents of specialized and technical terms, and to deal with inappropriate language used by arrogant authorities against foreigners. Furthermore, they are exposed to high levels of stress for various reasons, including direct contact with victims, possible detention at checkpoints, a lack of proper training in (crisis) translation, and urgent deadlines with limited or no access to the Web and other useful sources. In addition, the society's negative attitude towards women still represents a big challenge to female T&Is, especially in villages. This situation also affects the accuracy and reliability of data collected for the use of donors. It is also not easy to move through checkpoints, although female workers can help teams get through and get access to families in need. They also suffer prolonged blackouts and continuous loss of internet connection and electricity, which has a negative impact on the quality of their work and their ability to meet their deadlines. Such challenges should be considered when designing any training course. For example, training providers could teach T&Is how to use translation memories and machine translation applications in a way that can help them make high-quality translations in less time. Recently, a few studies were carried out to examine the status of crisis translation and the training of T&Is working in crises and emergencies that could help with this aspect (see Federici and Al Sharou 2018; Mäkelä 2013; O'Brien 2016).

The stories and experiences narrated by volunteer T&Is should go beyond designing training programmes to inform international organizations and their workers in the field on how they can better understand the problems faced by T&Is working in crises. O'Brien (2016, p. 107) states that 'equally important is training of translation users (e.g., first responders, security personnel), so that needs

and limitations (both human and technological) are understood.' The interviewed T&Is emphasized how international organizations had failed on different occasions to understand the cultural and social situation in Yemen and to respond effectively to any resulting problems. There are cases in which INGOs or their local offices show insufficient awareness of the cultural norms of the local citizens. More than one translator confirmed that some organizations request that female T&Is take off their face coverings in order to be able to work with them, which violates one of the basic norms of life in Yemen. Another organization sent an instructor to deliver a course to teenagers in Yemen in which he praised homosexuality, which is considered taboo in Yemen. INGOs and their representatives in Yemen, according to some interviewed T&Is, lack basic knowledge and awareness about the cultural and social norms of Yemeni people. Accordingly, it is highly recommended that, in order to succeed in their work in target areas, international organizations should educate themselves and their workers about the culture of the targeted society.

5 Concluding remarks

Volunteer T&Is' main goal is to let the world know about the situation in Yemen and how miserable Yemeni people are during the current crisis. They think that their volunteer work in translation and interpreting will help them get in touch with international organizations and donors, which in turn will help them serve such a humanitarian goal. This chapter finds that volunteer T&Is working in the current crisis in Yemen have no previous training in translation, not to mention in crisis translation. This echoes findings by Todorova (2017) that most of the interpreters working in an emergency UNHCR deployment are not professionals. Although training in translation and interpreting is necessary, 'other types of training are also equally (or even to a greater extent) necessary when working in emergency situations' (ibid., 128). Further research is recommended in studying what policies international organizations have about training T&Is in Yemen, what training courses they offer to their T&Is in Yemen and other countries, and how they design such courses.

Volunteer T&Is in Yemen face many challenges caused by the critical situation in Yemen that have an impact on all aspects of life and become obstructive for untrained T&Is who have to complete translation in absence of internet, electricity, and the basics of life. Without having essential facilities, they are even more exposed and completely unable to produce high-quality work, as they cannot consult online sources and experts, nor can they meet deadlines set by their employers. Their working conditions add to the psychological and emotional issues that they suffer in a country at war. In the broader picture, the working conditions of T&Is in Yemen further suggest that the international humanitarian organizations have limited awareness of the Yemeni culture. However, as the data for such conclusions are based on interviews carried out with T&Is alone, it is not possible to generalize, nor to confirm such a conclusion. Further research is therefore recommended to investigate how knowledgeable international organizations and their delegates are about the traditions and norms of the Yemeni society.

Acknowledgements

Appendix 1

Interview Questions (English)

1.   Do you consider your work a profession or a vocation?
2.   How would you define your role as a crisis translator?
3.   Could you please describe to me your training/experience/linguistic cultural background relevant to being a crisis translator?
4.   What are some of the difficulties you've had to face in the course of your translation practice in crisis settings?
5.   How would you describe your relationship with operators (medics, police, voluntary workers, etc.)?
6.   What recommendations, if any, would you make to improve the quality of intercultural communication in crisis situations?
7.   (to women) Are there any gender specific issues that have emerged in your work as a crisis translator, if so, what are they?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions (Arabic)

1 هل تعتقد(ين) أن عملك في الترجمة مهنة أم عمل تقوم (ين) به لأن لديك الرغبة والدافع لذلك؟

2 كيف تحدد(ين) دورك كمترجم (مترجمة) في أوقات الأزمات؟

3 هل يمكنك أن تصف (تصفي) لي التدريب الذي حصلت عليه وخبرتك وخلفيتك اللغوية والثقافية ذات الصلة بعملك كمترجم (مترجمة) في أوقات الأزمات؟

4 ما هي الصعوبات التي واجهتك أثناء ممارستك للترجمة في أوقات الأزمات؟

5 كيف تصف (تصفين) علاقتك مع المشغلين (المسعفون، الشرطة، المتطوعون، إلخ)؟

6 ما هي توصياتك، إن وجدت، لتحسين جودة التواصل بين الثقافات في أوقات الأزمات؟

7 (سؤال خاص بالمترجمات) هل صادفتك مشاكل معينة لكونك امرأة خلال عملك كمترجمة في أوقات الأزمات؟ وما هي، إن وجدت؟

Note

1 UCL Ethics Approval no. 6625/004 INTERACT 2: Needs Analysis in Crisis Scenarios (WP5).

2 For details, see also www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/increased-fighting-causing-massive-displacement-and-suffering

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