



Reliving the nightmares of others

Interpreters often experience vicarious trauma when giving voice to the victims and perpetrators of atrocities.

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Published: October 24, 2018 Last updated: October 24, 2018

The number of international courts mandated to probe the worst atrocities of conflicts around the world has grown significantly since the end of the Second World War, when the first of these courts heard and adjudicated cases against the leading perpetrators of Nazi war crimes in Nuremberg.

Today, these courts hear cases of the most brutal and inhuman violence and abuse that took place during conflicts such as the Balkans war of the mid-90s, the genocide that swept through Rwanda in 1994 and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to name but a few.

Interpreters allow communication between witnesses and the court

One of the features of these international transitional justice mechanisms, as they are known, is that the hearings take place in several languages: in many cases, the languages of court record are English and French, however testimony is often given in any number of languages spoken by the affected populations. Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian in the case of the Balkans war, Kinyarwanda in the case of the Rwandan genocide and Kiswahili and Lingala in the case of the DRC.

This means that, in order for the panel of judges and lawyers to be able to communicate with witnesses, what they, the witnesses say, and what the judges and lawyers say, is translated by simultaneous interpreters.

Right from the start, at the Nuremberg Trials, it was felt that the courtroom dynamic would be undermined if statements made by individuals had to be translated *after* they had been made in what is known as consecutive interpretation. As a result, it was decided that the court proceedings would need to be translated simultaneously, something, which, incidentally, had never been tried before.

"Some form of witchcraft"

Some of the witnesses at the Nuremberg Trials were amazed at the efficiency of the technique but also at what appeared to be some form of witchcraft, one which enables the interpreters to listen in one language and, at the same time, say something in another. Reichsmarschall Goering is reported to have quipped to the interpreters, "You are shortening my life by several years".

Fast forward to the 21st century and simultaneous interpretation has become a commonplace. However, while interpretation booths and the faces behind the soundproofed glass have literally

become part of the furniture in places such as the UN and the EU, one thing which has not been given the consideration it deserves, is what it is like to ‘be the voice’ of someone who has either suffered horribly at the hands of a perpetrator of hideous abuse and violence, or indeed what it is like to ‘be the voice’ of that same perpetrator.

For many people, the interpreter is simply some form of conduit, a translating machine, a bilingual transmitter, however what is little understood, is that an interpreter who is doing their job properly, is in fact re-enacting the narrative they are hearing in one language and re-telling it in another. If you were speaking through an interpreter, would you not expect that?

Saying something awful can overwhelm you

However, it is a recognised fact that the act of saying something awful, even if it is not *you* that has experienced it, can overwhelm you with the affect associated with that narrative. Imagine yourself saying, “I climbed into a tree to escape from the Interahamwe, but my daughter was not quick enough: I had to watch.....” or if you found yourself arrogantly denying any involvement in the organised execution of thousands of boys and men even as you are pictured swaggering in front of the barbed wire pens in which they are hoarded prior to being slaughtered.

Would that not affect you? Would it not hurt? And what do you do with those words, the words *you spoke*, once you have left the booth?

Many interpreters developed nightmares

Peter Uiberall was one of the interpreters at the Nuremberg Trials and he said, “Nuremberg was a horrible experience as far as the content was concerned. Many interpreters developed nightmares. You know that as an interpreter, you do nothing mechanically, but you don’t really carry it with you afterwards: in Nuremberg, we did”.

An interpreter at an International Criminal Tribunal told me she experienced “secondary traumatic stress symptoms such as nightmares, incapacity to deal with violence on screen or in books, a distorted and sometimes too negative vision of life and people, and the proximity of the idea of death that can fall upon us at any moment”.

Another interpreter who used to work for another Tribunal wrote, “The day you are able to walk out of court and crack a joke and laugh out loud, it means that you are already changing. It means that you have become less sensitive to human suffering. I think that my nature is no longer the same. I am a different person”.

So clearly, the fact of re-telling these stories both hurts *and* numbs, and those affected are left without the resources to properly manage the impact. Perhaps we should be listening to them more.

Related material

- Read Martyn Swain's Masters Dissertation: [The Professional Interpreter in Transitional Justice: An Empirical Study](#)
- Listen to an [audio version of this article](#).

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Recommended citation format:

Martyn SWAIN. "Reliving the nightmares of others". *aiic.net*. October 24, 2018. Accessed May 2, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/8671>>.