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Communication, Interpreting and Language in Wartime

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Edited by Amanda Laugesen · Richard Gehrmann

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Palgrave Studies in Languages at War

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Languages play a crucial role in war, conflict and peacemaking: in intelligence gathering and evaluation, pre-deployment preparations, operations on the ground, regime-change, and supporting refugees and displaced persons. In the politics of war, languages have a dual impact: a public policy dimension, setting frameworks and expectations; and the lived experience of those 'on the ground', working with and meeting speakers of other languages.

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Contents

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List of Tables

The Challenge of Strategic Communication in Multinational Military Operations: Approaches by the United States and Germany in the ISAF

Section I

Introduction

Introduction: Understanding Communication, Interpreting, and Language in Wartime

Amanda Laugesen and Richard Gehrmann

Wars inevitably bring together speakers of different languages, and successful communication can be vital to the effective prosecution of war. Yet the linguistic and communicative dimensions of war remain understudied, especially with respect to particular wars and particular national narratives of war. Scholars such as Hilary Footitt and Julian Walker have asserted that wars are multi-lingual environments, and must be understood as such.[1] As Footitt elsewhere argues, languages 'are surely an intrinsic part of th[e] materiality and embodiment of war.'[2]

Inspired by such work, in late 2017, a symposium was held at the Australian National University on the theme of 'Language in times of war

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and conflict.' It brought together a number of scholars to address the topic through a range of different disciplinary and methodological perspectives. This collection and its companion volume *Expressions of War in Australia and the Pacific: Language, Trauma, Memory and Official Discourse* are primarily based on work from the symposium, and they continue the valuable scholarship developed through the "Palgrave Studies in Languages at War" series.[3]

In particular, this volume aims to expand our knowledge of aspects of translation and communication in conflicts past and present around the globe. It seeks to illuminate the story of interpreting in wartime, adding to our expanding knowledge about the work and experiences of translators, as well as the policy and issues surrounding translation, in both conflict zones and war-crimes trials. In recent years, there has been increased scholarly interest in the role of language intermediaries, interpreters, and translators in war. Footitt and Tobia note the importance of addressing issues such as how processes of language mediation contribute to the construction of discourses that permit and support war; the role of translators themselves; and the question of the invisibility of translators.[4] They also call attention to the need for consideration of issues such as the class and gender of translators, and a consideration of how attitudes might have shaped acts of language mediation.[5] Mona Baker further adds that translation and interpreting must be considered a fundamental part of the institution of war.[6] These practices are essential in both the articulating and the resisting of the narratives that underpin violent conflict.[7]

We also seek to illuminate the complex nature of cross-cultural communication in war zones. Wars can be understood as relational spaces. They are cosmopolitan zones of contact between people. Werner and Zimmermann suggest the value of an approach they call *histoire croisée*.[8] At the heart of this is the notion of intersection.[9] They argue the importance of analysing the 'manner in which individuals actually connect themselves to the world, the specific construction of the world, and the elements of context produced by this particular activity in each particular case.'[10] Ideas of intersection and contact are useful for scholars of language and war, as language and communication provide a useful prism for considering the nature of cross-cultural communication and encounter in the context of conflict.

War and Its Language Demands

Wars require language resources. Over the course of the twentieth century, military forces became increasingly aware of the need for preparations for war to include the support of linguists, and for language and cultural training to be undertaken. Trained military interpreters are essential, but once war breaks out, demands can change. Professionals often have to be supplemented by locally hired linguistic mediators, and once on the ground, immediate challenges can lead to a range of language and communication strategies needing to be put in place. A history of translation and interpreting in wartime needs both to grapple with the broader logistical requirements for language skills and to examine individual case studies that foreground the actual experiences of interpreters and interpreting on the ground. Individual stories in particular can help to highlight the many different experiences and issues that are raised in this history.

A brief account of the careers of five interpreters helps to demonstrate the intersection of the three themes of this book: communication, interpreting, and language in wartime. Their stories provide a tangible sense of those who have used language skills in war to a variety of purposes and ends. Their varied backgrounds, motivations, experiences, and understandings of their place in the military system shaped what was often a very diverse capacity to use their language skills to advance the cause of military authorities and the state, as well as sometimes their own interests. Military linguists might be an integral part of the machine of war, but they are also individuals with their own human concerns, and their actions can be shaped in diverse ways as they experience the impact of war. They serve to illustrate the human face of language in war across time.

Collecting Qualifications and Competencies on a Paid Holiday: The Professional Interpreter

In the case of British General Sir John Marshall-Cornwall (1887–1985), the decision to qualify as an interpreter was based partly on his natural

competence but also on the benefits he could accrue by studying languages and acquiring interpreter qualifications. Marshall-Cornwall learned French and German at school and received the prize for gaining first place in German at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, a clear demonstration of his interest in languages. His parents had retired from colonial India to Edinburgh, where he was subsequently stationed with the British army, but the military culture of his era mandated that it was inappropriate for an officer to spend his two months' annual leave at his garrison location. He began the practice of living abroad for two months every year from 1908 to 1914, studying a language of the country he was visiting and formally qualifying as an interpreter in that language, all the while having his annual holiday subsidised by a succession of War Office language grants.

Marshall-Cornwall's facility for languages saw him progress rapidly down the pathway of becoming a professional collector of military interpreter qualifications, initially qualifying in German and French in 1908 and 1909. In an army where a subaltern's pay rate had not increased since the Napoleonic wars one hundred years earlier, the language grant of £50 for German and £25 for French was most welcome. A chance meeting with a Norwegian officer while skiing in Germany resulted in an invitation to visit Norway and his annual acquisition of language interpreter qualifications continued from Norwegian to Swedish and then Dutch. Unlike his less studious and wealthier contemporaries he continued to spend his holidays studying in-country and soon qualified in Italian and Spanish.[11] This linguistic polyglot was only obliged to pause his language acquisition because of the disruption of the First World War, where his language ability resulted in a professionally fruitful wartime military-intelligence career that included questioning of prisoners of war, translation of documents, and analysis of the disposition of German forces on the Western Front.[12]

Following the war, Marshall-Cornwall began studying Turkish and Modern Greek when he was posted to Turkey. The decision to study Turkish gave him the added luxury of six months on official language leave in Istanbul, plus the £125 language allowance, giving him a pleasant working holiday for a language that by this stage he was fluent in.[13] A subsequent posting to China led to the acquisition of basic

Chinese-language qualifications and an ever-helpful £50 language grant, with his linguistic interpreter qualifications culminating with colloquial Arabic, acquired during a period of duty in Egypt.[14] Throughout the Second World War he held positions as a negotiator with the Turkish government and as a military commander, completing his military career with MI6 and the Special Operations Executive.[15] His eleven interpreter qualifications and obvious ability to use his holidays constructively provide examples of how official structures conducive to language learning have been used to the linguist's advantage, both for enjoyable vacations and professional advancement.

Non-native Native Speaker Shaping Events

In contrast to the hard-working Marshall-Cornwall, Major General Sir Edward Spears (1886–1974) had a natural advantage in becoming a British military interpreter. Born in Paris to a British family of long-term residents, his early childhood in France left him with a natural fluency and a slight French accent when he spoke English. Spears joined the British army, and his unorthodox upbringing shaped his career as an unorthodox army officer. He became an accredited French-language interpreter and, by the age of twenty, further demonstrated his military language capabilities by translating a French military account of the recent Russo-Japanese war into English.[16] At a time when Britain and France were undertaking secret planning in the event of a possible war with Germany, he joined a team of British officers working with the French military in Paris.

This close association with the French military and his facility in what was essentially his native language led him to become a liaison officer at the start of the First World War. In this position he managed to achieve far more significance than expected of an officer of his particular rank, and as a low-ranking officer, he undertook negotiations between Sir John French, the British commander, and his French army counterparts. This experience was to be the basis of his post-war book *Liaison 1914* and also demonstrates the significance and authority that an interpreter can have. In this instance, a comparatively junior officer was in a position to

interpret for his superiors and at times guide them. Spears was a lifelong Francophile, to the point where some of his English contemporaries were suspicious of his loyalty. Elected to Parliament during the interwar period, his Francophile views led to him being referred to as 'the member for Paris.'

Spears rejoined the army during the Second World War and again used his language skills to mediate between the British and the French, this time as a senior-ranking Major General with significant political links to the ruling Conservative party, speaking not as a subordinate but as an equal. His fluency in French and his senior position meant Spears could play an active leadership role in trying to prevent the French government from surrendering in 1940, an attempt that was ultimately unsuccessful. As a known French linguist and senior army officer, he worked with Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement in its efforts to shift the allegiance of French colonial governors away from the pro-German Vichy government. Ultimately appointed as British Commissioner for Lebanon and Syria, he was an influential figure in these formerly French territories from 1942 to 1945.[17] In Spears's story, we see an example of a military linguist, with a deep-seated admiration for a country other than his own, playing an important role in shaping policy at a high level both as a junior officer in his youth and as a senior officer in middle age.

Amateur as Kind Interrogator

Widely regarded as one of the most successful Second World War interrogators, Lance Corporal Hanns Scharff (1907–1992) falls into the category of an amateur who was in the right place at the right time and succeeded because of his skills and powers of observation. Born in Germany, Scharff spent a decade working in South Africa, where he married a native English speaker and developed a thorough understanding of English language and culture. It was only by accident that the outbreak of war found him visiting his family in Germany, and he was conscripted into the army. Despite his English-language skills, he was trained as an infantry soldier and was in the process of being sent to serve on the Russian Front when his wife managed to convince a general that her

husband had skills that could be employed in a more constructive fashion. He was transferred to an interrogation centre in an administrative capacity, where he made use of his time observing the work of other interrogators to try and determine what was successful or not successful. He was eventually sent on a Luftwaffe interpreter-training course and employed as an interrogator.

It became apparent early on that Allied airmen who were captured expected harsh treatment, so Scharff disarmed them by treating them with kindness. After a series of formal interviews, his confidence-building measures included days of seemingly pointless pleasant conversations, on occasion involving walks through the woods or apparently social chats in other innocuous locations. In his memoir he gives an example of his interrogation technique, explaining how he had to determine from his captives why Allied fighter pilots were shooting with white tracer bullets, what specific orders they had to attack ground targets, and under what circumstances they released their long-range spare fuel tanks. Relaxed conversations, use of American idiom, subtle flattery, jocular comparisons between Germany and the USA, and disarming expressions would lead to a casual introduction of the key question, and collection of the answer, which had to be remembered and included in a subsequent report of the interrogation that the hapless pilot did not even realise was still taking place.[18]

Scharff was an untrained interrogator who looked at the successes and mistakes of other interrogators and by trial and error came up with his own approach.[19] This technique was based on taking the perspective of the source themselves, and is still used and studied today.[20] The experiences of Second World War interrogator interpreters such as Scharff were to have profound consequences in military intelligence practices. At the conclusion of the war he was employed by the American Counter Intelligence Corps, subsequently immigrating to the USA where he gave presentations to the military on his interrogation techniques.[21] During the Cold War and beyond, American interrogation training drew on Scharff's experience of 'kind' interrogation of hundreds of aircrew.

Cultural Knowledge That Saves Lives

Australian Warrant Officer Arthur Page (1922–2011) was born in Japan to the Greek-Russian Pappadopoulos family and learnt Japanese as a child, courtesy of his Japanese nanny. He learned what he was later to refer to as perfect grammar school English at the English Mission School in Kobe. Many of his classmates were of mixed Japanese and European ancestry, and with the coming of the Second World War, his former school mates joined a variety of armies with two brothers actually serving in the British and Japanese army, respectively, one of whom was to later arrive at Page's interrogation centre as a prisoner.[22] Increasing anti-foreign sentiment caused his family to leave Japan in one of the last neutral ships to sail before the war, arriving in Australia in July 1941.

Arthur Page and his father thought their language skills would be of use to the Australian military and tried to enlist, but were refused because of their foreign background. It was only after Japan entered the war that both were conscripted for military service, with Arthur being sent to the infantry, specifically to a unit for foreigners 'that can't speak the Kings English.'[23] His 'foreign' identity kept him from using his skills until the Japanese bombing attack on his station on the West Australian coast when he correctly identified the aircraft type by the sound of its engine.[24] His explanation of why he had a familiarity with Japanese aircraft led to the realisation that he had critically valuable Japanese language skills and he soon found himself transferred to the Intelligence Corps.

Page and his father were both assigned where they could use their linguistic skills, in Page's case initially translating Japanese broadcasts before he was sent to the interrogation centre at Indooroopilly in suburban Brisbane, where he was classified as a Grade A interrogator.[25] His linguist career initially involved translation and then interrogation, a task he found easier than the translation of documents. Having learnt Japanese from his nanny and exposure to everyday life in Japan, his knowledge of written Japanese was limited. Page explains that the interrogation of Japanese prisoners involves both knowledge of language and knowledge of culture. Japanese military culture indoctrinated troops with the concept that Japanese soldiers could never surrender. Those who were

captured had never expected it, and so found themselves nervous and distressed in what was for them an unimaginable situation. Furthermore, having a perception of Japan as a unique culture, they were usually dumbfounded when questioned by a Japanese-language speaker, at which stage they would nearly always relapse into open dialogue.[26] His subsequent military career saw Page attached to the US military during their liberation of the Philippines and interpreting at war-crimes trials, but it was his work with Australians at the conclusion of the war that led to his most demanding wartime experiences.

Following the surrender of the Japanese government, a key requirement was to ensure that subordinate Japanese commanders throughout Southeast Asia also surrendered, and this was a task that demanded high-level interpreter skills. Page found himself occupying a key role in not one but two surrenders on the island of Borneo. Firstly, he was flown to Balikpapan to assist commander of the Seventh Division Major-General Milford to accept the surrender of his Japanese counterparts. Milford was determined to avoid further loss of life and wanted 'someone with the knowledge of the Japanese temperament—and language, of course—someone able to cope with summing up the Japanese psyche as the conversation goes on.'[27] Page found himself in a series of meetings with the Japanese throughout which he was instrumental in explaining to his superiors that they could initially convince the Japanese to consider a temporary suspension of hostilities in order to move them down the path towards surrender.[28]

An even more challenging experience for Page was the surrender ceremony that took place in Banjarmasin, also in Borneo. This was an event where his knowledge of Japanese culture was far more significant than his linguistic skills. Prior to the surrender ceremony, he tried to explain concepts of syntax and vocabulary that would be significant to the Australian commander, Colonel Robson, as well as key aspects of shame and Japanese culture. Robson refused to pay attention to his interpreter, and during the surrender ceremony demanded the Japanese Commander General Uno place his sword on the ground. Uno refused, the Colonel aggressively repeated his demand, tension increased, and as seconds passed, the stalemate intensified with an increasingly stressed and shamed Japanese general almost pushed to breaking point. In Japanese

militarist culture, surrender itself was highly shameful but to place the sword on the ground rather than in the hands of an enemy was a symbol of absolute dishonour. Page could see that General Uno's sense of military virtue and samurai honour could well lead him to draw his sword and commit suicide—after first beheading the Australian Colonel and Page, his interpreter. In the ensuing long, drawn-out seconds, Page quickly managed to think of an appropriate Japanese concept that would clear the general from any sense of disgrace regarding his own personal honour, using phrases to convince him that laying down his sword related to the symbolic defeat of the nation and surrender of the Emperor, rather than of Uno. By placing the emphasis on the Emperor rather than on Uno, Page managed to resolve what could have been a disaster. While his understanding of the cross-cultural issue of shame and his knowledge of the exact language to use to mitigate the possible crisis were critical, as a low-ranked Warrant Officer interpreter, Page found himself ignored following the ceremony and not even thanked.[29] This particular story illustrates two other aspects of the role of communicating and interpreting in wartime, that of the need to understand culture, and that interpreters' superiors need to work with them, rather than viewing a linguist as nothing more than a language machine.

Understanding Culture and Interpreting the Unfamiliar

A final story of the military linguist in war takes us to the contemporary, in considering the experience of Sergeant Kayla Williams (1976–). Her pathway to the US Army came through a series of experiences that included unemployment, attending college before dropping out, drugs and alternative culture, low-level jobs, and finally graduation with a degree in English literature. Williams enlisted in 2000 to challenge herself and to challenge the perception others had of her. Her previous exposure to language came through an Arab Muslim boyfriend. This relationship taught her both words and phrases, and more importantly, also gave her a rich understanding of the cultural constructs implicit in Arab society and of Arab attitudes towards Western society.[30] Her very high score in the US Army language tests had her classified as a Category Four language

student, capable of learning the more difficult language of Arabic at the Defense Language Institute, which she described as 'a college campus for soldiers.'[31] Williams undertook crypto-linguist training and qualified as a signals intelligence specialist and was deployed to the Middle East for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

While her specialty was primarily as a signals intelligence analyst, her wartime language experiences in Iraq included working as a document translator, as an interpreter, and on one occasion as an assistant to military interrogators. Williams initially thought she was being asked to assist with the interrogation of female suspects but then found that she was to be used for her status as an Arabic-speaking blonde American female, as part of an interrogation ploy involving humiliation of male Iraqi prisoners. This is an aspect of language and war which incorporates elements of cultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication, in this case, used against prisoners. She was disturbed when the interrogation session went beyond the Geneva Conventions, seeing it as both illegal and counterproductive, and refused to take part in further interrogation sessions.[32]

There were more positive aspects to her work as a military linguist, and some very successful interactions with local people where Williams was able to contribute with her Arabic-language skills, but cross-cultural considerations were always present. A unit she was attached to in Baghdad found a soccer field full of unexploded artillery shells, and she spoke with the local people who wanted the Americans to clean up the site to make it safer for the children who persisted in playing in the area. Several days later an accidental explosion in this area led to her translating for wounded and dying Iraqis, one of whom even while bleeding through his shattered legs was embarrassed and concerned that a female could see his exposed genitals. The complex situation included her American superiors being hypervigilant about the possibility of a secondary explosion and other soldiers trying to treat the injured, while relatives of a dead man were expecting the Americans to do something for his family. Having involved themselves in the crisis, under Islamic law they had now become implicated. This is a telling illustration of the complex situations wartime linguists can experience on the ground. Williams found the situation distressing, feeling she was helping some people but not as much as she

could have.[33] Those who have language ability in war can find themselves feeling torn between commitment to their own side and those whose language they are translating.

On occasion, relationships with her fellow Americans were problematic for Williams. Cross-cultural communication can be difficult for highly stressed or culturally confused soldiers deployed to an environment where the language of the country is unfamiliar, the people of the country are unfamiliar, and their customs are unfamiliar. In such situations it is possible to blank out sights and sounds that should be understood. One of the more bizarre experiences of her deployment was when Williams was attached to a military team searching an Iraqi Catholic monastery. Arriving at the monastery, the infantry team with her was confronted by a smiling Iraqi monk who explained in English they had nothing to hide. The officer in charge of the mission paused, looked at Williams, and asked her to interpret what had been said, at which point she explained the monk was speaking in English. In a bizarre cross-cultural exchange, the officer (who Williams now presumed could not understand the monk because he *looked* foreign) spent a period of time questioning the monk through the interpreter, despite the fact that the Iraqi monk and Williams were speaking English to each other. This confused the monk and amused the lieutenants' subordinates, but the more Williams insisted that English was being spoken and she didn't need to interpret, the more the officer demanded she continue with this bizarre non-translation exercise. Despite efforts to convince him otherwise, the officer remained convinced that Arabic was being spoken. As the monk began to simplify and slow down his English as if talking to a child, the exchange continued until the search was concluded.[34] This again reminds us of the challenge for highly skilled linguists who because of their low rank are unable to rectify situations of avoidable linguistic confusion.

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Interpreting and Communication in War

The stories outlined above reveal the complex and fascinating stories that can be told when placing the interpreter and their work at the centre of study. By uncovering these stories, and the broader context and policy

environment that shapes such stories, we can come to a better understanding of the role of interpreters and the challenges of translation and communication in relation to war.

Our chapters offer perspectives that include those drawn from personal experience, as well as those drawn from oral history interviews and the traces left in archives, diaries, and letters. This collection aims to make an original contribution through its inclusion of accounts informed by personal experiences of language in the context of war. Several of the chapters are written by authors who have combined their past experiences as practitioners with an academic approach to address issues of language in war and disaster zones, as well as in war-crimes trials. Such accounts placed within and alongside academic reflections help to enrich and deepen our understanding of language and communication in war.

Several chapters investigate and uncover the stories and experiences of language mediators in the context of conflict. Amanda Laugesen in her chapter identifies several interpreters in the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the First World War. We know very little about those who worked (formally or informally) as language mediators in the First World War, but their stories are slowly being identified. Oleg Beyda's chapter looks at the complicated situation that emigré Russians who worked as interpreters for the Germans in the Second World War found themselves in. He examines, through the accounts they left of their experiences, their motivations for doing such work and considers the way they performed those roles in very difficult circumstances. His chapter brings an important new perspective to the complicated history of the Eastern Front.

The experiences of language mediators in more recent conflicts are examined by Matt Grant and Ali Albakaa, both of whom have personal experiences in war and disaster zones. Grant undertook deployments with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to both East Timor and Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami. His personal reflections offer insight into the evolution of ADF experiences with language professionals, as well as providing insight into the challenges of communication when on the ground in a conflict or disaster zone. Albakaa, who worked as a local interpreter with the ADF in the Second Iraq War before going on to investigate the experiences and policies around language mediation in the ADF, contributes a powerful chapter that draws on his own experiences