

Dialogue

Interpreting the Human Rights Field: A Conversation

Laura Kunreuther, Shiva Acharya, Ann Hunkins, Sachchi Ghimire Karki, Hikmat Khadka, Loknath Sangroula, Mark Turin, Laurie Vasily*

Abstract

This article takes the form of a conversation between an anthropologist and seven interpreters who worked for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during its mission in Nepal (2005–2011). As any human rights or humanitarian worker knows quite well, an interpreter is essential to any field mission; they are typically the means by which ‘internationals’ are able to speak to any local person. Interpreters make it possible for local events to be transformed into a globally legible register of human rights abuses or cases. Field interpreters are therefore crucial to realizing the global ambitions of any bureaucracy like the UN. Yet rarely do human rights officers or academics (outside of translation studies) hear from interpreters themselves about their experience in the field. This conversation is an attempt to bridge this lacuna directly, in the hope that human rights practitioners and academics might benefit from thinking more deeply about the people upon whom our knowledge often depends.

Keywords: field interpreters; Nepal; Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; UN human rights missions

* Laura Kunreuther is an Associate Professor and Director of Anthropology/Core Faculty Human Rights Program, Bard College, USA; Shiva Acharya is a disability and inclusive advocacy advisor, Handicap International Federation; Ann Hunkins is an independent writer and translator; Sachchi Ghimire Karki is a community engagement expert, UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), Nepal; Hikmat Khadka is a freelance translator and interpreter; Loknath Sangroula is a freelance translator and interpreter; Mark Turin is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Canada; Laurie Vasily is Head of Knowledge Management and Communication, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development.

The Interpreter

*Tell them this tell them that. Now stop. Quiet. You are no one.
 A glass window is invisible is forged at extremely high temperatures.
 I was the voice of a Maoist demanding the release of his comrades,
 the half-drowned torture victims the informer the dead man.
 I was the entire family of the dead boy trying to speak at once.
 I was the blood in the square the policemen trapped in the cellar.
 I was the sun at midnight the flat tire the drying laundry
 the rain the valley the dark. My body was an unexploded bomb.
 One night I accidentally spoke my mind, told R in Nepali how late
 we'd arrived to meet the Maoists, how we forgot their names.
 Suddenly C said angrily, "Translate that, please!"
 The whole table looked at me. I got up and walked away.
 A single dusty white rose outside the hotel door
 bloomed obscure in the dark of the driveway.
 I touched the petals, counted the spirals in a forest
 of tongues that had no need to speak of what they'd seen.*

Preface (by Laura Kunreuther)

This poem was written by one of our co-authors and literary translator, Ann Hunkins, after working as a field interpreter for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) mission in Nepal (Hunkins 2018). In it, she conveys some of the pathos and complexities of working as a human rights interpreter. As the poem suggests, the interpreter's voice and body become media that enable the stories and experiences of many to be heard. These translated testimonies transform into the 'information' used for the writing of human rights reports. Interpreters, from Hunkins' perspective, briefly become the people they are speaking for and are witness to many more things that they do not and cannot say.

We have chosen to write this piece more as an open-ended dialogue, rather than as a typical academic article. It is meant to engage with interpreters in their experience working in the human rights field, rather than to draw any substantive conclusions about their work in the form of an argument. In the dialogue that follows, the reader is offered a vivid sense of what it was like for Hunkins and other interpreters in the same office to work under the often chaotic and fast-paced human rights missions in the field. As any human rights or humanitarian worker knows quite well, a field interpreter is essential to any mission; they are the means by which 'internationals' are able to speak to any local person. Interpreters make it possible for local events to be transformed into a globally legible register of human rights abuses or cases. Field interpreters are therefore crucial to realizing the global ambitions of any bureaucracy like the UN. Indeed, the whole field of international relations, broadly speaking, is based on interpreters whose work frequently remains under-recognized (Roland 1999). Interpreters are expected to maintain fidelity to any words spoken, becoming, as one interpreter put it, 'non-autonomous' speakers, who are sometimes perceived as 'human machines'. As neutral conduits, their work may contribute to the goals of impartiality and neutrality that human rights organizations strive to achieve (Kunreuther 2020). At the same time, as everyone in the field knows, becoming a neutral conduit is clearly

impossible, and despite professional protocol, it is not always the best route to accuracy.¹ In some cases, as we see below, the work of translating other people's words in the human rights context takes quite a toll on interpreters themselves.

The interpreters in this conversation were all employed for some time by OHCHR, the UN's primary office that focuses on human rights. OHCHR was established in 1993, following the World Conference on Human Rights and a vast expansion of the human rights movement worldwide. Its headquarters are in Geneva where it employs approximately 1,300 staff. The Office also has field presences in their regional offices as well as representatives and human rights advisers serving in many UN peace or political missions around the world. In the field, OHCHR's mandate is generally to monitor and generate reports on human rights abuses, to provide protection, as well as to promote and advise national human rights actors within the UN's member states through 'capacity building trainings'. When a country suffers significant human rights abuses, OHCHR may be asked by a member state to establish a stand-alone office within the country.² Such was the case in Nepal, where a stand-alone office was established in May 2005, during a brutal civil war between the Maoists and the Nepali state. Directed by Ian Martin, a seasoned UN officer and 'human rights star' (as one OHCHR staff member referred to Martin during a conversation we had in Geneva), OHCHR-Nepal was and still is thought of by many in the Geneva office as a 'flagship mission',³ due to the broad scope of the mandate and its timing in the midst of the war.

According to official statistics, the decade-long war between the Maoists and the Nepali state (1996–2006) took somewhere between 13,000 and 17,000 lives in addition to other sufferings of war that included gross human rights abuses, displacements, and disappearances.⁴ When OHCHR initially set up in 2005 to investigate human rights abuses connected to the war, the office initially hired several interpreters on short-term contracts, both 'internationals' and Nepali nationals. The office relied primarily on international interpreters on the early, difficult missions because of the potentially dangerous nature of this work during the war. After the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Seven Party Alliance, the Maoists, and the Nepali government in 2006, the UN established a separate political mission to assist in the peace process, the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), filling the Kathmandu Valley with UN staff from around the world, many of whom required interpreters or translators to effectively do their work. Both UNMIN and OHCHR began hiring both national and international interpreters on longer term contracts, who worked in the headquarters in Kathmandu as well as in the six field offices

-
- 1 See [Stahuljak \(2000\)](#) for a discussion of the problem with neutrality for interpreters employed by the UN and other global agencies during the Serbian–Croatian war.
 - 2 In 2005, when OHCHR-Nepal opened, there were very few stand-alone offices and few were as big as the Nepal office. In 2018, there were 15 stand-alone OHCHR offices around the world ([UN OHCHR 2020](#)).
 - 3 This is largely due to its size, the breadth of its mandate agreed upon by the Nepali government, and the context of being present towards the end of a decade-long civil war, a successful national movement to overthrow the monarchy, and during the peace process.
 - 4 The statistics on actual deaths during the war differ widely, but this should not diminish the extraordinary suffering that much of the population continues to endure as a result of this war. See [Lawoti and Pahari \(2015\)](#), [Karki and Seddon \(2003\)](#), and [P. Jha \(2014\)](#) for incisive analyses of the war and its aftermath.

of OHCHR and UNMIN. Many interpreters, including some co-authors of this article, worked for both organizations at various times.

Translation in conflict zones, as recent scholars show quite powerfully, can be literally a matter of life and death (e.g. Baker 2018; Moser-Mercer et al. 2014; Moser-Mercer 2015; Stahuljak 2000). Several of these scholars have written about interpreting in the midst of a war or a humanitarian crisis. Yet, as one of our co-authors Mark Turin (2019) discusses in his article about the Translation and Interpretation Unit at UNMIN, even Mona Baker's prodigious book about interpretation in conflict zones does not draw upon examples from the many UN field missions across the globe. Furthermore, as Turin writes, '[r]arely if ever, do we hear from translators and interpreters themselves, in their own voices, reflecting on the challenges of the work' (Turin 2019: 35). Along with Turin's 2019 contribution, the present article is one attempt to directly contribute to bridging this lacuna.

There is an emerging body of research that examines interpreters in UN missions discussing their work in the field, but much of this tends to focus on trained and fully professionalized interpreters, most of whom spend the majority of their time within glass boxes in the halls of the UN assemblies (e.g. Ahmed Haider 2021; UN 2018).⁵ Carmen Delgado Luchner and Leila Kherbiche's research does delve into the complex position of humanitarian interpreters within field missions with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Such interpreters, they write, should best be considered 'humanitarian actors who happen to interpret' (Luchner and Kherbiche 2018: 424), who take on the work neither as trained aid workers nor as trained interpreters. They most closely resemble the interpreter/authors in this article. Only two of our authors, for example, practise translation and interpretation professionally, and the vast majority of field interpreters initially hired by OHCHR had very little (if any) experience interpreting prior to their work on this UN mission.⁶ For many human rights field interpreters (including our authors here), working as an interpreter in UN human rights missions may be their first experience interpreting and their first experience working in a conflict zone. The lack of sufficient training makes this already trying experience that much more intense.

As an anthropologist and lead author of this article, my current research project focuses on the labour of interpreters who are hired to work in the field for UN missions. My research has taken me to Nepal (where I have long-standing research connections) and to Geneva, where I spoke on multiple occasions and often several times with interpreters and human rights officers who had all worked for OHCHR's mission in Nepal. After listening to lengthy narratives by each of the co-authors here (as well as many others) about their own experience in the field, it became clear to me that they had never sat in a room together with other interpreters to discuss the stress, fascination, and complexity of their mutual work. I therefore initiated this conversation during one of my visits to Nepal, with the idea that we might collectively publish an edited version of our conversation. Though they may not have talked about their work collectively in this fashion, all of them knew each other from their shared work for the UN.

5 Whereas at the UN headquarters, interpreters (oral) and translators (written documents) are distinguished professionals, with different skill sets, in the field, interpretation and translation are frequently conflated, with the same person required to engage in both forms of language mediation.

6 See Kunreuther (2020) for more details on the hiring and labour of field interpreters for OHCHR.

My initial motivation for this conversation, then, was both ethnographic and practical. I wished, firstly, to participate in and learn through our conversation as an ethnographer researching the subject. I also wished to facilitate making their important reflections about interpreting work into a public record and resource for other field interpreters and human rights officers to draw upon. While we focus here on the experience in Nepal, my many conversations with human rights activists who work regularly with interpreters across the globe suggests that interpreters are often employed in a manner similar to those in Nepal, even though each mission has its specific context that shapes the contours of interpreting work. The piece therefore contributes to a growing and rich scholarship on interpreting conflict produced largely by translation studies scholars.

The article is structured in the form of a conversation in order to give space to and represent each interpreter's understanding of their experience as distinct. We also wish to playfully invert the interpreter's typical role as a person speaking for another, standing between the human rights officer and the local person being interviewed. We wanted to maintain some of the informal, yet directed, conversational feel that echoes interpreters' work in the field (albeit that is with much higher stakes and intensity). Just as translation is never a transparent process, the conversation below is not a direct and unaltered transcript of our conversation. First, the conversation took place in Nepali and one of our co-authors, Hikmat Khadka, took on much of the work of translating into English the portions we were going to use. Each of us then checked our portions afterwards. As some of the core interpreters from UNMIN and OHCHR were not able to make this gathering, they contributed their thoughts in writing after seeing an initial edit of the transcript of the conversation. I then identified several key themes that recurred over the course of our conversation that I represent in my questions.

Several key points are reiterated by the different authors in this conversation. We imagine that these issues will resonate with other field interpreters for large missions across the globe and potentially offer lessons that human rights officers may draw upon in their work with interpreters.

First, while interpreters are expected to remain neutral, their social position—whether as co-nationals or as foreigners—impacts and determines how they are seen and heard by others in the field. As Loknath Sangroula describes quite vividly, he was quickly assumed to hold a contentious political position on a heated issue that could have ruined the meeting in ways that would never be assumed had he been a foreign interpreter. At the same time, as Ann Hunkins notes, there are often implicit turns of phrase and certain colloquial expressions that radically changed the meaning, which she missed as a foreigner.

Second, the human rights field is obviously constituted by physical dangers, but many of the authors spoke poignantly about the emotionally challenging labour they performed by translating so many stories of hardship, most of which they were bound by the ethic of confidentiality not to share. This emotional labour is rarely acknowledged and, importantly, not something many of these interpreters felt prepared for prior to taking on the job.

Third, there were real and practical linguistic challenges of interpreting in the field that they negotiated daily. These ranged from the need to translate for multiple people who often spoke over each other to encountering multiple languages in the field that required them to hire someone else on the spot.

Fourth, all of the authors agreed that the recipe for good interpretation is a trusting relationship between the human rights officer and the interpreter—and most felt that this was something they achieved with their colleagues at OHCHR. However, these same

interpreters simultaneously described moments when they were not recognized as living, human bodies, who needed rest or food. Too often, Sachchi Ghimire Karki remembered, '[t]he food on their [the interpreter's] plate is cold and they are starving, yet the talking does not end'; 'interpreters', Hikmat Khadka summarizes, 'don't always receive human treatment'.

Finally, and related to this last point, we discussed the common but (in their view) misguided assumption that interpreters work like machines or that machines would eventually replace their labour. On this latter point, the authors all noted that while machine translation might be possibly useful in meetings, in the context of the field it would be near impossible. Loknath Sangroula notes the complexity of interpreting culturally specific adages or proverbs on the spot that would be impossible for a machine. Furthermore, particularly important in the field, as Shiva Acharya remarked, 'the mechanization of the interpretation and translation would not be able to deliver clarity, meaning and nuance of language and other expressions'. All the authors here agree that common misunderstandings of field interpretation as something mechanical actually contributes to its challenges.

We begin our conversation with a brief introduction on how each interpreter came to this work.

1. Who becomes a field interpreter?

Laura Kunreuther: So OHCHR established an office in Nepal just before the war was over in 2005, and then UNMIN followed shortly after in early 2007. Many of you began working in the field almost immediately. What are some of the reasons you pursued this work?

Mark Turin: I met Ian Martin shortly after his arrival in Nepal in 2005, and was introduced to him as someone who was living and conducting research in a part of Nepal (Dolakha) that had a significant Maoist presence. He asked what passport I carried, and I was then on a Dutch passport, which pleased him as he said that they might need foreign interpreters for OHCHR. A week later, on 6 June 2005, 38 people were killed and a further 72 injured when a crowded bus was torn apart by a suspected Maoist bomb in Madi, Chitwan, and Ian Martin called to ask if I could accompany the investigation team on a short-term contract. That was the beginning of my engagement as an occasional interpreter/translator for OHCHR, including two weeks in 2006 during the Democracy Movement. After that I returned to my academic research until I was asked to consider applying for the Head of Unit position at UNMIN which was just being formed. The opportunity to use my language knowledge and cultural insights in this manner was appealing, and rather unique. I served in UNMIN for a little over a year.

Hikmat Khadka: I had the good fortune to work for both UNMIN and OHCHR. UNMIN was my first UN job. Mark Turin, the Chief of UNMIN's Translation and Interpretation Unit, informed me of a job opening and encouraged me to apply. It was a big career leap for me. At the time, the decade-long conflict had just ended in Nepal and the peace process had begun. So it was an important time for Nepal's political transition. I was also attracted to the exposure and access that the United Nations would give me. They paid well, too!

Ann Hunkins: I had been working for two decades as a literary translator and was in Kathmandu for a book launch when I signed on at OHCHR. The reason I joined was I felt strongly how we were living in the middle of a war, sheltered in Kathmandu, and doing nothing about it. I wanted to make a difference. While I was working for the UN, I felt like

this is the most important thing I've ever done in my life. I felt like we were hearing stories that needed to be told, and that for people to get to tell their story to the United Nations was emotionally important, even if all we were doing was gathering data for reports.

Laurie Vasily: I was motivated to join because I felt that I wanted to contribute to the peace process in a positive way. At the time when OHCHR-Nepal sent out its recruitment notices for international translators/interpreters, I was just finishing my PhD work and I thought that joining in the effort would be a good way for me to 'give back'. I felt that I had myself gained so much from so many who had helped me and cared for me along my life journey in Nepal and I wanted to contribute positively after such a painful period in the nation's history.

Shiva Acharya: Before I joined UNMIN, I had already worked for many institutions and experts as an interpreter. The incredible irony about my experience with UN agencies is that at first, I was denied the opportunity to work for them on the grounds of my visual impairment and blindness. The UN said it would not be able to provide me with the necessary security to ensure my safety. Later, my blindness was seen as a strength. People would say to me, 'You don't get nervous like other seeing interpreters'. I would not be moved by people's emotional reactions, looks, and facial expressions. Also, I was in the habit of focusing on hearing to get around in my daily life so this helped enormously with interpretation.

Loknath Sangroula: I was already working as a translator within the field of journalism, so when the opportunity arose to join OHCHR, this was a natural transition. While I primarily worked in the office on translating documents or interpreting for official meetings, there were several times when I was asked to accompany human rights officers to the field.

Sachchi Ghimire Karki: I remember when I applied for the job at OHCHR. I was working as a lecturer at Tribhuvan University, teaching English literature, and I felt I wanted to do something to help my fellow citizens in the midst of this war. I remember seeing the advertisement in the newspaper for the post of translator/interpreter for OHCHR, and thinking that this was a way that I could help, since I had studied and taught English literature.

2. The human(e) challenges of field interpretation

Laura: Can you talk about the kind of interpretation you needed to do in the field? What were some of the challenges or excitement of going to the field, particularly in the context of human rights work?

Sachchi: The interviews were usually one-on-one. Given the sensitivity of the nature of our work, as far as possible we did not meet in public places. We maintained a low profile. One-on-one interviews allowed us to be more focused. When you are hearing stories or incidents that happened to a particular person, it's easier to internalize. In public forums, it's meetings, all of that jargon, official terms, and what not. If someone is reading a written speech, it's easier. But if it's a conversation, you are not in a position to anticipate what the other person is saying, and it's not a story that you can immediately understand and translate. It's something that has to sink in and then you can translate it. So I think that's one thing that's different [from conferences]. The other thing is that when you are in public, you are perpetually in the eyes of others, and there are people who are looking at you and waiting when you will slip once, and then they'll pounce on you.

Shiva: I faced a plethora of various problems while carrying out my duty as a translator and interpreter in the field. Many female interlocutors would find it hard to guide me to various places because I need to hold their arm to walk. Sometimes I was even rejected because

I needed a person to support me in the field. On a lighter note, I would struggle to ask for help when I wanted to go to the toilet during interpretation sessions. Closeness while whispering in the ear of a female interlocutor was another problem that I had to adapt myself to; sometimes I would be too close and learned later that the person I was interpreting for felt uncomfortable. I developed a habit of asking for the appropriate distance that suited my interlocutor, but sometimes they wouldn't tell me. In the field, when victims wrote letters or applications, I needed to rely on other people to read them aloud since there was no availability of software, like OCR [optical character recognition] that could recognize the Nepali language and script. I used to record other interpreters reading the Nepali text aloud on a digital voice recorder, and then translate them into English by listening to those recordings.

Ann: Most of my interpreting was in the field or else one-on-one with torture victims or others in the office. But there were plenty of times it wasn't one-on-one. Sometimes there were five or more people speaking at once, like once with three human rights officers talking to five local journalists and me as sole translator, or a whole bereaved family or crowd of people. Even one-on-one, interpreting is intense work, especially when the content is heartbreaking. It felt like it used up one hundred per cent of my brain and emotional capacity.

Then add to that situations where the human rights officer was in a shouting match with someone, a police officer or army guard, or charging past them and I had to follow, or I had to translate for someone who was speaking with a really thick accent or they were obviously drunk or speaking incoherently or even just had a speech impediment. Or sometimes there was a child shrieking in the person's lap or a cement mixer running right there or the person's voice was distorted by a loudspeaker or by shouting. Or they spoke some other language than Nepali and we had to find a second interpreter right there in the field. And there were many times I was waiting a long time to eat or drink something right in front of me because I never got a break. One day I almost lost my voice by the end of the day, around ten o'clock at night. And we started again at seven in the morning.

That's the result of being invisible as an interpreter. I often felt like I was treated like a kind of expensive machine. There was one human rights officer who would ask: 'Did you sleep all right? Did you have enough to eat?' which most of them wouldn't even think to do. But it was like: is the machine well-oiled? Because you are not really noticed as a person. No one asks what you think. You are speaking all day but never saying anything of your own.

Sachchi: Yes, there are lunch and dinner meetings [in the field] when interpreters must work. The food on their plate is cold and they are starving, yet the talking does not end. Nobody is bothered to look at your plate and say, 'Oh, you haven't touched your food'. No one is even thoughtful enough to ask the interpreter to eat.

Hikmat: This even happens in conference settings, when everything is supposed to be less chaotic and more regulated. I once had to fight for a bottle of water while sitting inside an interpreter's booth. Especially during simultaneous interpretation, our throats are parched by the intense talking. On the discussion floor, you see that everyone has candy, hot or cold water (as they prefer), tea, and coffee on the table, while the interpreter's booth has none of that. I drew the attention of a staff member who was serving and asked for a bottle of water. But he made a big deal out of it, saying he couldn't serve me, as he had received no instruction to do so. A bottle of water was all I had asked for—something that cost 15–20

rupees in those days! In the end, he had to go and ask his superior for approval before I could have a bottle of water!

That got me thinking. Most of the time, people forget to say thank you to the interpreter. They forget to tell the interpreter, ‘Please eat’ or ‘Please drink’. Interpreters don’t always receive human treatment.

Loknath: Sometimes your interpretation ends up doing better than you thought it would. At other times, it does not do so well even when you thought you had done well. There are many factors: what is the nature of the audience; how many participants there are; what is the subject matter; where it is; how familiar you are with the issues; are there any noises; what your biological needs are—these matter greatly. I had one bad experience when I was with OHCHR. I was in Gaur, Rautahat with four or five foreign human rights officers. The officers were sitting in four different corners. It was so hard for me. It was a Madheshi issue.⁷ There had been an incident not long ago. People in the room mentioned dates. For example, they would say, ‘On *saat gaté* (seventh day of a Nepali month), they took us in such and such manner and distributed video clips in such and such manner’. What year was it? It was impossible to convert every date there and then. So many events and circumstances were referenced that I could not cope.

There was a human rights officer who spoke from this corner; and there was the Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who spoke from that corner; there was another officer who spoke from another corner. I felt very nervous there. The more nervous you are, the poorer you will perform. But I still went all the way to the end. At one point in the conversation, someone in the room said, ‘There were many Madheshi leaders there, including Upendra Yadav’. When interpreting, my tongue slipped and I said ‘Madhise’ (derogatory) instead of ‘Madheshi’ (respectful), and people stared hard at me, which made me even more nervous. [Two in our group took a big breath in after hearing those words.] I almost came under attack because of the word ‘Madhise’. There were tensions between Pahadi and Madheshi communities in those days. It was a burning issue at the time.⁸ The people in the room saw it more like a Pahadi deliberately calling Madheshi, Madhise. So, when that happened, I became more nervous, and my interpretation suffered even more.

Fortunately, a friend of mine was also in the room. He and I had worked together at the *Kathmandu Post*. He was able to intervene. Speaking in my defence, he said, ‘I know Loknath very well. I have known him for 15 years. We have worked together, and I know he has been fighting for the cause of the Madheshi people. He did not mean to insult the Madheshi people in any way.’ He came to my rescue!

7 Madheshi refers to people from the Southern plains of Nepal, on the border of India, who have been systematically excluded from the dominant power structure. In 2007–2008, they staged a political movement to demand inclusion in rebuilding the state after the war. On the specifics of the Madheshi movement and its relation to human rights, see D. Jha (2018).

8 Pahadi refers to Hindus from the hills (*pahar* referring to ‘hills’), and Madheshi refers to plains people, as noted above, who face much discrimination. As Prashant Jha describes, Madheshis are ‘people who live largely, but not exclusively, in Nepal’s southern plains . . . and maintain close linguistic, cultural, ethnic ties with people across the border in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. [They] felt a deep sense of resentment against the Nepali state, and the hill-centric political elite’s discriminatory practices’ (P. Jha 2014: 166).

It's very difficult. And then there is an issue with nuances. Later, I told the human rights officer, 'I performed poorly today.' He said, 'It was all right.' Even though he said it was all right, I knew how I had really performed. 'It was the situation that was difficult', he told me. 'I understand'.

3. The emotional labour of field interpretation

Laura: Interpreting in the field sounds like it required you to perform an intense kind of emotional labour as well. Can you talk about how the inevitably intense, and no doubt downright horrific, nature of the stories you were translating for human rights officers affected you—or not?

Sachchi: Some cases kept me awake. In other cases, there were stories, and you would see that aspect of your country which you didn't imagine existed. Some of the political rhetoric was interesting to hear. It was amusing! Especially while interpreting during monitoring missions, you go and meet the Maoists, you go and meet the UML [United Marxist–Leninist Party], and you go and meet Nepali Congress, RPP [Rastriya Prajatantra Party]⁹—all the political parties—the patchwork of their rhetoric was amusing. But the cases were most difficult. In my experience, witness protection cases were most difficult. One person or another would ask us where we had been and what we had been up to, and you had to be perpetually conscious that you were not letting it out—wherever you went, or whoever you met, or whatever you did. You completely had to lock yourself out and consciously, too, as you couldn't talk about it with anyone.

The burden of confidentiality was too heavy in some cases. In cases where one or two human rights defenders had to be sent secretly, international interpreters were used mostly. But I was used for two cases. That part was quite hard for me. You go to villages to monitor certain incidents and you see other things as well, but that's not part of your mandate, and you do not deal with it. I remember that we were staying at a house in Rasuwa. There was a girl there both of whose parents were mute. It was a day's walk to her house, which was close to a school. She was a very scared child. She did not look normal. She did not look like she was getting education or getting a space to stay free from other kind of pressures. But that was not my responsibility. I was not supposed to intervene there. My role was only to see, or document it.

Shiva: I also came across various distressing details about human rights violations and torture. I felt a deep sense of anger, anguish and agony; however, I would treat all such details like I was reading a disturbing novel. I would not immerse myself in those issues. Because I thought that it was important to save myself from being disturbed and to remain professional. Horrific, graphic matters were definitely difficult to interpret.

Ann: Once in the maximum security prison there was this Maoist guy who yelled at us saying, 'How come you think you have the right to come in here and ask us questions?!' The human rights officer I was with didn't really know what to do, just spouted UN policy. Because in a way the guy was right, we weren't going to do anything for his case. That was true of everyone we talked to. We always had to start by saying we couldn't do anything

9 This is a Hindu right-wing party that supports the monarchy. *Rastriya Prajatantra* translates as 'National Democratic'. It was formed after the first major People's Movement in 1990 that abolished the single party system (that is, the monarchy) and established a multi-party democracy.

about their individual case. And that was really hard when they so obviously needed serious help.

Sachchi: Actually, for the person who came to make a complaint to a UN office with very high hopes, all we could lend them were our ears. What else could we do? We could not give them anything concrete or tangible. And generally, because you are the Nepali speaker, they connect with you and they try to ask you. It also depended on the human rights officer. But then there were certain human rights officers who were very suspicious of our dealings with the people. All they were doing were making connections and building trust, but the human rights officers would be very alert. ‘What did you just say?’ ‘What was that?’ ‘What was going on there?’ We had to face questions like these. On the one hand, the victims were suffering. On the other, interpreters would be suspected.

Ann: Right, I started to feel like we were not really helping people by being there, because people were desperate but we were just there to extract information for a report and leave. Also sometimes people posed as victims who were actually perpetrators, while the horrors of what we heard were beyond words. Sometimes people had fingered a personal enemy as a Maoist in order to take their land. Even what we were there to do . . . even though we’re documenting the incidents, but what was going to happen with those individual cases?—nothing.

Loknath: Well, I was never traumatized in the same way that Ann was when interpreting in the field.

Sachchi: But we live here, *dai* (older brother). This is our country. These are our people.

Ann: But I felt like that too. You know I had a Nepali husband; so when I met those people I felt like they were my own in-laws. I always thought the human rights officers weren’t as affected *because* they didn’t live here, didn’t have anything invested in the country. It was so difficult to hear these stories of killings and torture. I would have to stuff back tears, and anger too, so that I could keep working. I never felt like I was allowed to cry, or stop and take a break, and I felt like the stories went into me, into my body and stayed with me. I couldn’t forget. I became numb, I just had to stop feeling anything at all because it was so overwhelming. I was the one who spoke their language, so they bonded with me and expected all sorts of things from me, but then I had to tell them I might not be the one to follow up on their case; I might never see them again. They could be killed later and no one would bother to tell me. We weren’t involved in making up the reports or following up with people like the human rights officers were.

Laurie: Perhaps because I joined in a bit later on in the process of OHCHR’s work, I had fewer interviews in detention facilities or with families of the missing or bereaved. I was deployed to the Terai during the *Madheshi aandolan* [Madheshi movement]¹⁰ there and that was quite a difficult period of time because there were no vehicles on the roads—all of the roads had been obstructed by protesters, but they all allowed the OHCHR vehicle to go through and do monitoring. They were all very eager that we hear and understand their grievances, but we never had any difficulties at all with the protesters. At one point, we had some concern about whether the armed forces were complying with international standards of engagement with peaceful protesters and we went to the police station where the human

10 The *Madheshi aandolan* was a political movement that erupted in January 2007 in the Terai, or Southern plains of Nepal, which borders India. When Madheshi activists took to the streets, they were protesting the interim Constitution’s silence on federalism and proportionate representation of Madheshis in all organs of state governance. See footnote 9 for further description.

rights officer went through the standard steps of engagement. We were all surprised when one of the police personnel there said, ‘You don’t have to tell me this; I wrote the Nepal Police training handbook on human rights!’ There was a sense of relief that perhaps that man would lead the police response in positive ways, but later that day when our vehicle turned into the *Birgunj ghanta ghar chowk* [the intersection at the clock tower in Birgunj] we saw the police laid out on the road in formation with weapons directed at a crowd of peaceful protesters, just standing behind a barricade on the other side of the *chowk*. That seemed like a rather aggressive stance, and we were ourselves afraid as we sat in the car and moved through the chowk with all of those weapons pointed right at us.

4. International and national interpreters

Laura: These are complicated situations and it makes me wonder: what do you think were the differences faced between international and national interpreters in this context and perhaps more generally in other human rights field missions?

Laurie: I saw a big difference between how national and international interpreters were treated. Some of that has to do with how the UN itself differentiates between what they term ‘national’ staff ranked with an ‘N’ (National) and the international staff ranked within a separate system labelled ‘P’ (Professional). Even though national staff and international staff may have been doing similar work, there would be very different benefit packages and there was only so high up in the system that national staff could progress before hitting a ceiling beyond which they couldn’t rise in the ranks. Then there were United Nations Volunteers—most of the international interpreters quickly recruited for UN OHCHR work were UNVs.

I saw a normalized culture within OHCHR of status and rank consciousness. Many of the international staff would spend time ‘managing upwards’—as they say—meaning that they would spend a lot of professional and personal energy on managing their own positive image to their ‘rank superiors’ while either not bothering at all with or, in worst case scenarios, mistreating their ‘rank inferiors’. Some of that had to do with the global UN mission employment environment whereby professional international staff had to cultivate relationships that would help them get their next jobs in the next mission.

On an informal level, I saw that the international staff would often come together for socializing which didn’t necessarily include the national staff. While that may seem like a set of personal decisions, in such an environment it creates a sense of a well-informed ‘inner circle’ closer to those in power, which excluded many of the national staff.

This all can be slightly difficult to generalize, since there are definitely exceptional people who behaved outside the norm—either behaving very well or behaving very badly—but I think it’s fair to say these were the prevailing norms.

Sachchi: In some cases, a national interpreter has a better understanding of the mores, the nuances of what is being said in a village setting. Just as we may not be able to capture it in English, no matter how good our English is, an international interpreter may not be able to grasp the nuances, though they obviously had a much better perception of neutrality. There were times when I felt biased when talking to the Maoists in the field. The way they talked angered me—they spoke as if they had committed no wrong and everything was other people’s fault and they hadn’t killed anyone. At times like that, we felt angry. So our biases probably came out as well, but that should not have affected our interpretation. We probably would have understood the latent content behind their words. No matter how perfectly

international interpreters were able to interpret the overt content, I feel that they might have missed the latent content in several cases.

Ann: There were definitely cases where we missed latent content. I remember translating for a Maoist in a wheelchair with a rotten wound in a prison. He said he felt like he had ‘received a new life’ because we had come. Then the Nepali human rights officer added, ‘I think he means he was going to commit suicide’. I definitely missed that.

Then with the Maoists I’m sure I missed a few things. I got really stressed whenever we were going to meet Maoist commanders the next day. They would use jargon, words I didn’t understand, words they had created, often from Sanskrit. I would study and study these words the night before and be totally keyed up with anxiety. I had to stop these commanders pretty often and sometimes ask them to clarify or repeat things, which really annoyed them. One guy even starting to yawn and rolling his eyes. I was terrified of missing something among all that political jargon. And I did miss something in one of the first meetings with them but luckily a Nepali human rights officer was there and filled it in.

Sachchi: We had Laurie, Ann, Jogendra *dai* [older brother], and Mark as international interpreters. If national interpreters had been used for the cases of torture at the Maharajgunj barracks or the Bardiya disappearance cases, our security would have been jeopardized. In several instances, national interpreters would have gotten much deeper into what was being said. There were several cases where, if national interpreters had been used, their security would have been threatened. Also, the interviewees may not have spoken openly. The people who suffered torture at the Bhairab Nath battalion don’t know who I am connected to in Nepal. So why would they open up to me? So there are strong aspects and fairly weak aspects of both kinds of interpreters. They could have used us for the best purposes. None of the national interpreters went for the Maharajgunj and Bardiya cases of torture and disappearances.

Mark: Having worked in both organizations, I think that I saw the need for international interpreters at OHCHR more than I did at UNMIN. When working in the field for OHCHR, in quite a few instances I was in situations, meetings and places where it would have been very awkward, if not unethical and dangerous, to have a Nepali citizen exposed in this way. The enduring ‘white privilege’ of Nepal ensures that some doors just open more easily as a foreigner and certainly as one who speaks Nepali (this is not true in other places, from what I gather from other field interpreters I have met), and one is more protected and insulated from fallout. Having said that, when it came to precision—and in particular with simultaneous interpreting into Nepali—I always felt that I was missing nuance and would often ask to record sections to check later, and having bilingual Nepali staff at the OHCHR office meant that we could verify certain details later. At UNMIN, there were very few instances when I felt that it was essential for an international interpreter to accompany mission leadership to a meeting instead of a Nepali national. As unit head, on a number of occasions I was asked to serve in closed-door sessions or to accompany visiting UN officials from HQ [headquarters], and some members of the Political Affairs office at UNMIN wished only to have high-level political meetings with an international interpreter for reasons that I couldn’t really understand. At UNMIN, since most of our work was desk-based, it ended up being that translations into Nepali (at least 80 per cent of our work) were managed by the Nepali nationals and translations into English by the two international staff. Of course, we all worked together, but in terms of who ‘led’ specific parts of the work, the division outlined above made most sense. At the end of my term, I felt that the Unit Head post should be held by a Nepali national, and I believe that Ian Martin

agreed. At UNMIN I also found myself working as much on messaging and communications (not to mention managing a large team) as actual translation and interpreting. Just as many of us rank and file interpreters and translators feel that we're mostly invisible—and only noticed if there is a problem—so too I saw my job as a unit head as trying to contain the politics and administration so that my team could work effectively.

5. Training and preparations for field interpreters

Laura: What kind of preparations did you get before going into the field—and was there any kind of debriefing afterwards?

Ann: I didn't have any training in interpreting; I was a literary translator. I thought we would get training from the UN. Instead we got three days of the history of Nepal and Nepali politics. Why would interpreters need that? I'd been involved with Nepal for over 20 years. What we needed was to know what to expect in the field, what should we be emotionally prepared for, what sort of vocabulary we ought to brush up on, or even just the fact that our notes might be needed for written confirmation of details after a mission, so we should take some! It's not just a matter of speaking two languages. I kept trying to get people to tell me how to prepare myself, but no one would. They seemed to think interpretation was simple. Just translate. But it's not the same as plenty of time with words on a page. It can be a situation where people are traumatized, angry, maybe volatile. There can be really particular vocabulary we might not normally know, like the Maoist jargon-words, or military vocabulary.

And afterwards, no, I didn't get any debriefing. Not even once. Once I asked to take a bathroom break in the middle of an interview with one of the torture victims from Maharajgunj, and the human rights officer asked me to wait. So I stayed. Those interviews were really, really hard. I remember that the guy had brought a friend with him, who hadn't heard the details of the torture, and he was just shocked and didn't know what to say.

Mark: No training, either, although I ended up doing training for the Nepali field interpreters and translators working with the arms monitors and electoral officers. The long car journeys provided a very useful way to debrief with human rights officers and UNMIN staff.

Sachchi: My old boss used to suggest taking a break if the interview went in such terrain. After the interview was over, I was debriefed. He always provided a debriefing, especially after long, harrowing interviews. For the interviews that I was with him, he provided a debriefing because I could cry easily. He would say to me, 'Do you need a break? You can take a break.'

Ann: I guess I should have cried. [Laughter]

Laura: Are there particular conditions that help or hinder your interpretation process in the field?

Loknath: There are many variables that determine the fate of interpretation in terms of making it good or bad. It depends on various conditions. How much has your speaker informed you? In some cases, the speaker will have informed the interpreter in advance about the questions he or she will ask. Even if an interpreter gets five minutes for preparation, he can work to perfection. Some speakers give no information at all. I once accompanied the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to Panchthar. He spoke so well I wondered how good his writing must be. But he spoke so much that I was left in a difficult

situation. I was standing next to him for interpretation, but he did not even notice that I was there!

Laurie: Again, I would have to say that the situation would vary a lot from individual to individual. There were some really great human rights officers who I saw handle situations in incredibly professional ways. I believe some of those people had an importantly positive impact on the situation, and on individual relationships. And they very often led the most intense missions with a lot of concern for everyone on the team—including translators/interpreters and drivers. On the other hand, there were some individual human rights officers who seemed to be leading by their own idiosyncrasies. For example, one with whom I worked I suspected of having an eating disorder. She was extraordinarily thin and she was very particular about what kind of bathroom she would encounter, avoiding ones in the field that didn't meet her standard. She would refuse to allow the team to stop for food, so a couple of the drivers would carry some bread in the car with them and in the worst situation, we sat together in the car surreptitiously eating bread while she did something. Sometimes we couldn't figure out the surreptitious moment, and would have to go hungry until we dropped her off at home. With all of the energy it took to concentrate on the work, getting a reasonable refuelling with food was important, so working with her under those circumstances was very difficult.

6. Interpreters and human rights officers: a relation(ship) of trust

Laura: The relationship between interpreters and human rights officers for whom they are interpreting is clearly built on trust that no doubt develops over time. Can you talk a little about this relationship?

Ann: The relationship is key—if the human rights officer lets you know what he or she is trying to do, you can work as a team, but if they just treat you like a machine, then you can end up unprepared and not do your best. Sometimes you're just thrown in with someone brand new and you have to work it out.

There was a human rights officer whose English was difficult to understand; it wasn't his first language. He would go rambling on in these long, vague, unfinished sentences. When he finally stopped I would say, 'Can you clarify that?' And he would say, 'No, just translate it like that'. He seemed to want the translation to be just as unfocused as his words, to draw the person out, but I could barely follow the English.

Laurie: Yes, I worked with the same human rights officer and he was one of the most difficult human rights officers with whom I ever worked. His accent and pronunciation were not what was difficult, it was rather his manner of expression which made comprehending his meaning very difficult. As Ann mentioned, he spoke in very long vague sentences which I think often served him well in general chatty conversation because his interlocutors would often then be forced to make their own sense of what he was saying. But in tense interview situations where the interlocutors may have been reluctant to openly share information in a chatty back and forth, interpreting could be excruciating.

With regard to trust, there was one head of office who explicitly said that she preferred an Indian-American colleague for her official interpretation work. Indeed, his language skills were excellent and I actually preferred not to interpret for high-level meetings since the formality often got in the way of clarifying meaning and making good eye contact with the speakers. But on one occasion, I was quite disturbed by the comment made by this woman when she turned to me after something I translated and said, 'How do I know what

you're saying is accurate?' This woman was the head of office at the time and I was very much taken aback—here I was, giving so much of myself professionally and personally to ensure that I am interpreting as accurately as possible and her one comment very much demoralized me for some time afterwards. What answer could I have given her?

Mark: Lots to say here. I think that each had to learn a lot about the other. I often found my commitment to the place—Nepal—to be a source of fascination and slight confusion for human rights officers. Why would someone want to live in one place so long? What brought me here? What keeps me here? Some were interested in culture, history and society . . . others less so. I found the security officers the most respectful and easy to work with. Quite a few of the OHCHR human rights officers had just landed when I met them and had not really settled into life in Nepal yet, and also found it hard to imagine that not everyone swam in the waters of international human rights jargon as they did. I had to learn a lot of concepts in English, even before thinking of translating them into Nepali.

7. When interpretation falters

Laura: Accuracy in language is obviously central to the interpreter's job. From our previous conversations, it seems that there are many challenges in the field that can impact the ability to be precise, and I wonder how you handled that, particularly when you were working on difficult human rights cases

Sachchi: Speaking of challenges, I mentioned an interview that went on and on and on for three hours. When it was time for critical information to come, the interpreter spaced out. I spaced out. No matter how much we talk, it is registered as a challenge. What can we do to change that? That's the tough bit. Because there were three human rights officers talking to a police officer who had just been recruited. Immediately after recruitment, he was deployed to stop protesters. He was given a cohort of recruits who had just been recruited. So we were talking to him. It took him three full hours to cough up that information. And we were going on and on. And there were three human rights officers, and I was the interpreter interpreting for four people. The questions went back and forth. At last, when he mentioned something that was critical, I zoned out. There was a Pakistani human rights officer, who understood a bit of Nepali. He asked, 'Sachchi, what he said just now, did you get it?' I had captured everything before that final sentence. The human rights officer said, 'But he said this. Can you ask him again?' So when I asked him again, it turned out that I had missed the most critical sentence from that three-hour long conversation.

This is a challenge. But how do you address it? Maybe having two interpreters would have been useful. But if there had been a group of five people, a newly recruited inspector would have been intimidated. There will always be some Catch-22 situations.

The inspector was totally flustered, red in the face, and sweating. I felt pity for him . . . So I remember that—that is really etched in my memory as one of the instances where it was one sentence, but it was a deal-breaker.

So these things happen. But what you do about it is more important in some cases. Maybe we could have done with two human rights officers and two interpreters or *something*. They should not go more than three hours when performing simultaneous interpretation.

Ann: Yeah, one time I told a jailer at the maximum security prison that we were there to interview prisoners; I accidentally left out the phrase 'Maoist' prisoners. That was a mistake I don't think I would have made had I been briefed on why we were there. Then the guy was

really upset because he complained we never investigated whether non-Maoist prisoners were being illegally detained. The human rights officer was really irritated too. It was extremely awkward and set the jailer against us at the start.

I think interpreters of the hearing impaired have a very good model. There is never just one of them. Of course, they are doing simultaneous translation which is even harder than consecutive. But we were always isolated and working non-stop; in the field I commonly worked from 7 a.m. till 10 p.m., even during meals. I had to remind people that I needed to stop talking to eat. The only breaks I got were while we were travelling or if we happened to run into people who spoke English pretty well. Sign language interpreters have rules that they can't interpret more than so many hours, and there is another interpreter always sitting there to catch what they might have missed or answer a question. Every so often they switch and the other person takes over. There needs to be emotional preparation and support, and there needs to be debriefing, especially because of the confidentiality. In so many sensitive cases we weren't allowed to talk with anyone about what we had heard and translated, so everything just stayed with me when we didn't get debriefed.

Loknath: While providing consecutive interpretation, there is some time to think and speak. But there is no time at all when it comes to simultaneous interpretation, as it has to happen at the same time. Additionally, language structure is another challenge. For example, the speaker may give a long list of *dal*, *bhat*, *tarkari*, *achar*, but to find out whether he will say he ate it or did not eat, we must wait until the end of his sentence, because verbs go at the end of the sentence in Nepali. Also, English words come faster to us when we are interpreting, whereas Nepali words take some time. That's one aspect. The other is that Nepalis have the habit of beating around the bush rather than going straight to the point. They speak in complex sentences. This makes the interpreter's job hard, as the original speaker might go on and on, but the interpreter might blank out, while the interpreter's client may think that the interpreter is not doing his job. This might make things hard or awkward. In any interpretation, some message is bound to be lost, but simultaneous interpretation is particularly challenging.

For some words, there are perfect equivalents . . . But some words have zero equivalents. For example, how do you translate *janai*? An original speaker might talk about someone wearing a *janai*. How is the interpreter supposed to translate that?! It takes you ten minutes to think about it. For example, the speaker might say, 'The Maoists attacked me when I was in the middle of performing my late father's *shraaddha*.' How do you translate *shraaddha*? You get stuck there. This is the challenge in the case of zero equivalents. You need to write a paragraph in the footnote to explain what *janai* and *shraaddha* mean!

Another simple example involves the words 'stop' and 'prevent'. There's a difference between the two words. You can 'stop' what is already happening. But to 'prevent' is not allowing something to happen at all. 'To stop human rights violations' means that human rights are already being violated and that needs to stop. But 'to prevent human rights violations' is about not allowing those violations to occur in the first place. There's a substantive difference from the semantic point of view. But if you look these up in our dictionaries, they make no distinction between the two words and offer *roknu* as the translation. Therefore, if you translate 'to prevent human rights violations' as '*manab adhikar ullanghan ka ghatana haru huna nadine*', an editor who has had a traditional or stereotypical upbringing will edit your translation, replacing '*huna nadine*' (prevent) with '*rokne*' (stop). This danger is really there. So even if you spend a lot of time going deeper into the meaning of a particular word or phrase in order to translate or interpret, if you are stuck with an

editor who has been trained to think in a traditional or stereotypical manner, he or she might still misinterpret your efforts and think that you have used the wrong word in translation.

Ann: One time when we were interviewing civilians accidentally caught up in a battle, a woman said, ‘I was reading the *Svasthanī Vṛathakathā*¹¹ when the rebels shouted to me to turn out the light’. How was I supposed to convey that?! I said she was reading a book. But that didn’t convey why she was refusing to turn out the light, that it was a religious thing.

Hikmat: Part of the task is to re-translate concepts that don’t work in villages. For example, ‘layer cake’ can’t be conceptualized by people who don’t even eat biscuits. So if speakers were to make an effort to understand and adapt to Nepal’s local context, our jobs would become a little easier. If I don’t understand the foreign concepts they are presenting, I am not ashamed to say so and apologize.

Sachchi: I see an interpreter being overwhelmed. Interpreting non-stop at big UN meetings can be intimidating for anyone. It’s all high-profile interpreting. In the field, one does not experience the same kind of intimidation. Maybe it’s a different experience for international interpreters. But I did not feel intimidated by the Maoists. Maybe because somewhere deep down we did not agree with their ideology, we felt a sense of antagonism at times. But you have to be an objective conduit of language transfer. Although it was not expressed, I felt the antagonism and anger.

Laurie: One of the challenges with the interpretation of Nepali language is that the verb comes at the end of the sentence, so you won’t know whether the action ‘was’ or ‘was not’ until the end of the sentence. When translating, you can piece together the puzzle relatively easily enough, but during simultaneous interpretation, the challenge of not knowing the action until the end of the sentence could cause problems in flow.

Also, I found it very challenging to translate court or other official government documents which may be a full page of text, but only a single sentence. Figuring out which were the dependent clauses could be very challenging in those cases, and sometimes all of us in the office would go over it again and again to ensure the accuracy. We were incredibly fortunate that Lok *dai* [Loknath]—who is a human dictionary/encyclopedia—would be there to help sort out the particularly challenging sentences, phrases or words.

8. Interpreters and neutrality

Laura: Being neutral obviously is essential in this kind of work, though I’m sure it was also challenging as Sachchi suggests. Some interpreters have told me that this neutrality is sometimes equivalent to feeling invisible. What are some of your thoughts about the challenges of being neutral in this work?

Hikmat: I find it hard to be neutral because of [inevitable] biases [we all have]. Sometimes, it helps the interpreter not to have too much background information, such as cultural or historical knowledge, about the topic of discussion. If an interpreter is a subject matter expert on the topic, he or she might take the liberty to go into great detail and explain what was never said or mentioned by the speaker. I was once interpreting at a meeting in a rural setting. The nature of interpreting was quite technical, so when someone with the substantive knowledge of the topic of discussion volunteered to interpret for me, I was more than

11 A series of stories narrated by Lord Kumar (Shiva’s son) to a saint about the Goddess Swasthanī, which Hindu Nepalis read during the lunar month of *Poush* (mid-January to mid-February).

happy for him to take over. I personally thought he did a great job. But my client was not happy. The problem was that when a villager spoke for two minutes, the ‘expert’ interpreter spent five minutes explaining what the villager had never said. So my experience tells me that knowing too much does not always make us neutral. While it is very important for an interpreter to be neutral in his or her profession, I really find this challenging.

Ann: It was very hard to remain neutral when we were constantly working with people in extreme crises. I think invisibility comes from an attitude that an interpreter is not only neutral but nothing more than a machine that speaks both languages. The only advice I was in fact given about interpreting from a human rights officer was that I should never be drawn into having my own conversations with people, that I should always turn it back to a conversation between the human rights officer and the interviewee. If you are not treated as a person with your own agency, there’s a danger that you yourself can begin to feel you actually don’t exist. That and the fact that I could never tell anyone what I had been doing because it was highly confidential gave me a feeling of unreality which I know contributed to the secondary trauma I suffered from afterwards.

Shiva: My work never made me, or actually allowed me to, feel invisible. Because I have always been in the limelight while interpreting. I was interpreting for Ian Martin on several live radio and television programmes. It was impossible to be invisible for this; rather, I was put in a very delicate position. Any wrong use of words, misinterpretation, or deviation would jeopardize the image and neutrality of the organization. Further, during my entire work period as interpreter, I never gave up the other hats I was wearing. I never stopped being a human rights defender, activist and fighter for equality. In my opinion, interpreters are still not respected enough for their contribution to helping foreigners understand cultural reality.

Interpreters are expected to remain as professional as they can be, and also neutral in the expressions of their interlocutors. In this regard, I would say that interpreters are a mirror of the society they live in. If the human rights officer or investigator does not understand some cultural trait and interpreters are forced to be silent on this, then there is a real risk of losing the important reference that might actually help them.

Mark: I didn’t mind the invisibility because it didn’t happen that often, or happen nearly enough as far as I was concerned with OHCHR. I think that was partly because many of the human rights officers with whom I worked were new to Nepal and deferred to me on field missions about whom to speak to and where to go next, and also a strong element of white male privilege. In some contexts, particularly in Madi, Chitwan, I often found our interlocutor wanted to talk to me and not to the international human rights officer, but that may also have been my inexperience.

9. Interpreters as human machines: common misunderstandings

Laura: Whenever I talk to people about the research I’ve been doing on field interpreters in global organizations, like yourselves, inevitably the topic turns to Google Translate. This job, they think, is on the verge of extinction due to the rise in machine translation. Do you think that is the case? What are your thoughts about machine translation in the context of the human rights work you were doing with UN agencies?

Sachchi: If we were non-thinking, automated machines, maybe it would be easier. But we think; we know what can flare up the situation ... Machine aided translation may be

possible during meetings, but when it comes to field-based work, we are talking to the people, reaching out. It's intensive in nature. And then there's body language, the inflection of their language, eye contact, and several other factors that provide information. How could machine aided translation be used for fieldwork when so much information is being given away? Machines could provide a mechanical translation of the language, but how will they ever capture the other essential information that is shared through non-verbal means?

Ann: Machines. Well, machines can't respond sensitively, can't respond to subtleties. Also machine translators are at this time extremely inaccurate even in the best of circumstances, let alone in highly volatile situations, or with the use of dialects, idioms, thick accents, people shouting, insults, jokes, understanding context or culture. Plus, a machine is only as neutral as its programmer and user. Also, in certain areas people might react very negatively to a machine's presence.

Loknath: Right, machine aided translation cannot reflect the tone, intonation, emotions of a speaker in the same way as a physically present interpreter can. Also, how will it capture the nuances? And then there will be extra linguistic gaps. For example, '*Kaalo biraalo-le baato kaatyo ra ma ghar pharken*' could be translated into English as 'A black cat crossed my road and then I turned away to go home'. If someone from Scotland hears this expression, he or she might be surprised, as it's a good thing in their culture if a black cat crossed someone's road. But in our culture, a black cat crossing one's road is considered inauspicious. How to bridge this gap, this void, and this absence? This is really challenging.

Shiva: As the others have said, the mechanization of the interpretation and translation would not be able to deliver clarity, meaning of nuance of language and other expressions. I have examples of when I have stopped interpretation because the other person, in my opinion, pushed beyond the limits of a human rights officer or of an investigator, by, for example, pressuring to take photographs when people were asking them not to. On different occasions, I have led the discussion myself when we were there to talk about human rights situations and peace and order, but people wanted to ask for various development projects in their communities. In those situations, I used to clarify the purpose of our visit myself. A machine would not be able to do that.

Laurie: The human element in translation is its incredible strength, and its challenge. That's what's not recognized and needs to be. Because it's essential to the interaction, it's essential to the work. . . . It's the heart.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge colleagues at OHCHR and UNMIN who worked tirelessly to facilitate social change during a particularly dramatic moment in Nepal's history, and hope this conversation will provide helpful ideas about how to work more effectively with interpreters. Heartfelt thanks also to Mark Flummerfelt for his early technical help with our recorded discussion and his insightful comments about interpretation. We thank Ashmina Ranjit for providing the space at NeXus for us to have this conversation.

Funding

This work was supported by a Post-PhD Research Grant, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (to Laura Kunreuther), and Bard Research Funds (to Laura Kunreuther).

Conflict of interest declaration

There are no conflicts of interests among the co-authors, and all co-authors have participated in the framing of the article and agreed to its content.

References

- Baker, M. 2018. *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Haider Ahmad, C. 2021 (forthcoming). United Nations Interpreters in the Arab Spring. In M. Todorova and L. Ruiz Rosendo (eds), *Interpreting Conflict: Comparative Perspectives*. Palgrave Studies in Languages at War. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hunkins, A. 2018. The Interpreter. In *Morning in a Country at War: Poems Written During the Maoist Conflict in Nepal*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Jha, D. 2018. *Federal Nepal: Trials and Tribulations*. Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Jha, P. 2014. *Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal*. Delhi: Aleph Book Company.
- Karki, A., and D. Seddon (eds). 2003. *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*. Delhi: Adroit Publishers.
- Kunreuther, L. 2020. Earwitnesses and Transparent Conduits of Voice: On the Labor of Field Interpreters for UN Missions. *Humanity* 11(3): 298–316.
- Lawoti, M., and A. Pahari (eds). 2015. *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*. Delhi: Routledge (Special India edition).
- Luchner, C. D., and L. Kherbiche. 2018. Without Fear or Favour? The Positionality of ICRC and UNHCR Interpreters in the Humanitarian Field. *Target* 30(3): 408–29.
- Moser-Mercer, B. 2015. Interpreting in Conflict Zones. In H. Mikkelsen and R. Jourdenais (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Interpreting*. Routledge.
- Moser-Mercer, B., L. Kherbiche, and B. Class. 2014. Interpreting Conflict: Training Challenges in Humanitarian Field Interpreting. *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 6(1): 140–58.
- Roland, R. 1999. *Interpreters as Diplomats: A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics*. University of Ottawa Press.
- Stahuljak, Z. 2000. Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators. *Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 13(1): 37–51.
- Turin, M. 2019. Translation and Interpretation in the United Nations Mission in Nepal. *Nepalese Translation* 3: 34–45.
- UN (United Nations). 2018. UNOG: Human Rights Missions. The Following UNOG Interpreters' Testimonies Highlight Some of the Challenges and Hardships Encountered During Human Rights Missions. Video by Cristóbal Osuna, UN Geneva. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XpD_smmJsg&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop (referenced 12 January 2019).
- UN OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2020. OHCHR in the World: Making Human Rights a Reality on the Ground. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/Pages/WorkInField.aspx> (referenced 17 January 2020).