

TRANSLATION IN JOURNALISM: THE PRACTICES OF MULTILINGUAL FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS

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ANALYSIS

Introduction

Language translation in journalism demands trust. When readers in the U.S. sit down to read a New York Times story about refugees in Idomeni camp on the border of Macedonia, they are reading words that have been passed through many gatekeepers.

One gatekeeper is often invisible — the translator. They aren't seeing the exact words spoken by a Syrian refugee or a Macedonian border patrol agent or a Greek volunteer. The words have been translated by a journalist or interpreter, and the reader trusts that one or both have translated the words correctly. They trust that they are essentially reading exactly what the quoted source said.

But translation isn't that simple. It's more complicated than knowing the Arabic word for "ocean" or the Greek word for "refugee." Translators and journalists must interpret nuance in language — idioms, expressions, implications, sarcasm and slang, not to mention gestures and emotions.

In his 1992 essay *Traduttore, Traditore*, which roughly means "the translator is a traitor" in Italian because a translator can easily obscure truth in translation without readers knowing, John Tusa, former director of the BBC World Service, wrote, "Translators then are not simply traitors. They are more complex than that — they are jugglers, conjurers, mind readers, psychologists, games players, poets, social scientists. At the end they are cultural porters, offering the use of one language an imaginative

equivalence of the meaning expressed in another. The question is not whether they get it wrong. The wonder is that so much of it is right” (as cited in Baumann et al, 2011a).

Professionalism in journalism requires self-discipline and accountability, so it is appropriate then that journalists hold the responsibility of accurate translation. They also hold the responsibility of being liaisons between cultures. As the “cultural porters” that Tusa describes, they are responsible for explaining events and their circumstances in one culture to people of another culture. This research looks at the ways in which international journalists deal with translation in the field.

Research Questions

While there was a lot of literature about how translation has been used in journalism and particularly in the editing process, I found little research that looked at the practices of multilingual journalists and the decision-making processes of translation while reporting in the field. For that reason, this research, through interviews with international print journalists, sought to compile and compare the practices and decisions of these journalists when translating during the reporting process. I have included questions about how they work with translators as well in order to compare those practices to those of the journalists when translating themselves. Doing so might assist in further research that looks at how these decisions might affect content and how that content might influence readers’ worldviews. I hope to fill a small gap in the research about translation in journalism.

The following research questions framed the interviews and helped to keep the research focused on the reporting process:

RQ1: What are the principal challenges and benefits to reporting in multiple languages?

RQ2: How do reporters maintain journalistic professionalism and ethics when reporting in multiple languages?

RQ3: How do journalists work to include not just linguistic nuance but also cultural nuance when reporting across language barriers?

In this discussion of the findings from the interviews, I will address each of the research questions. I found similarities in the way the journalists overcome challenges of and benefit from reporting in a foreign language.

These commonalities are outlined as best practices for translation in international reporting.

Methodology

This study used semi-structured interviews as the main method for obtaining information about how journalists report across language barriers. Interviews were used because the research largely examines the reporting process as opposed to other parts of the news production, and therefore, anecdotal information about the journalists' experiences was more valuable than textual content. Interviews were conducted with journalists about the decisions they make in the field when interacting with sources in languages other than English. The semi-structured interviews maintained a somewhat consistent set of questions, with only a few questions varying in each interview. This allowed me to more easily compare answers among the journalists, and therefore, find trends or best practices for reporting across language barriers.

Structured questions included:

1. How long have you been a journalist?
2. What countries have you worked in?
3. How many/which languages do you speak?
4. Do you use translators for interviewing sources who don't speak your language(s)?

Open-ended questions included the following, and additional questions were added depending on the answers from each journalist:

1. How do you translate information from sources who speak other languages?
2. How do you make sure information is accurate when you don't speak the language of your source?
3. What process do you use for finding reliable translators?
4. How do you verify information from sources who speak poorly in the language in which you are interviewing them?
5. How transparent should journalists be about what they translate during or after reporting?

The interview subjects were found by word of mouth and through online searches.

The first few journalists I spoke with, Cynthia Gorney and Giovanna Dell'Orto, recommended other journalists who had experience reporting from various countries. Additional journalists, such as Dan Bilefsky, were found by searching for English news from other countries that was written by a journalist in the field and not by a member of a wire service.

I wanted the pool of journalists I interviewed to be varied in experience. I interviewed seven journalists who have reported from six continents and speak eight languages collectively. In addition to reporting in languages other than English, all the journalists have had experience using translators in the field. One interview was conducted in person, with John Hooper, while the rest were done over Skype or by phone.

The following list includes the journalists I interviewed, the publications they work for, areas of the world where they work in and the languages they speak.

Cynthia Gorney — National Geographic; U.S. and South America; English and Spanish
Claudio Salvalaggio — Ansa; U.S. and Russia; English and Russian
Nicole Winfield — The Associated Press; Italy; English, Italian and French
John Hooper — The Guardian/The Economist; Southern Europe; English, French, Italian, Spanish, German, Portuguese
Dan Bilefsky — The New York Times; Central and Eastern Europe; English, French, Hebrew, Portuguese
Dionne Searcey — The New York Times; West and Central Africa; English and French
Elizabeth Dickinson — Deca/Foreign Policy; Gulf States; English, French and Spanish

The interviews are supplemented with personal observations through the professional skills component. For my reporting project, I conducted several interviews in Italian; therefore, the discussion of my findings from the interviews will also include some personal observations from my own reporting.

Findings and Discussion

I identified each journalist's primary steps for reporting and translating for a story. I then compared the steps to find patterns among a majority of journalists interviewed. Finally, I went back to the interviews to further explain the reasoning behind the common steps or practices. One journalist, Claudio Salvalaggio, I left out of the final findings because I decided his experiences were too different from the others. When I interviewed him, he was about to start a job in Washington, D.C., where he reports in English for an Italian wire service called Ansa. However, his past experience, that which he spoke about in the interview, was as an editor for the Ansa Moscow Bureau where he mostly oversaw the translation of news text from Russian to Italian. Therefore, he didn't yet have much personal experience in translation.

Speaking the local language provides a strategic advantage.

This practice is the most essential to international reporting. All of the journalists interviewed know at least one language other than their native language, and almost all mentioned that their ability to speak the language where they were reporting was indispensable to their job. Nicole Winfield, who works for the Associated Press in Rome and covers the Vatican, said, “I couldn’t do my job if I didn’t speak other languages.” She said that speaking Italian helps her to gather more nuanced information.

“I have been in many situations in which a source might have been able to speak English but both the source and I concurred that it would be better for them to speak in a native tongue so they can express themselves better. You get a better sense of what someone is trying to convey if they are speaking in their native tongue,” Winfield added.

John Hooper, who has reported from countries all over Europe, the Middle East and North Africa since 1973, also sees his ability to speak multiple languages as crucial to his job. He believes he developed a reputation among editors as a linguist, or someone who can easily learn languages, which has allowed him to report from many countries.

“Being able to speak another language is a huge benefit. It gives you access to a whole group of people, but it also puts people at ease because it makes them feel like you are making an effort with them,” Dickinson said.

When using translators, it is important that they have a strong command of both the reporter’s and the source’s languages, the ability to control the interview and an understanding of the purpose of journalism.

Speaking the local language is not always possible. All of the journalists who were interviewed have at some point used translators in their reporting. With many of the journalists, these translators were local fixers, or someone who is a guide to an area or country in addition to being a translator.

The journalists have had both positive and negative experiences with translators/fixers. Finding reliable translators/fixers can be challenging, but they all agree that two things are most important. First, is obviously a good command of both the source's language and the translated language, usually English, and second is the ability to control the interview well enough that they can provide a clear and thorough simultaneous translation.

Dan Bilefsky, a New York Times reporter in London, called fixers “jacks-of-all-trades” because often they don't just translate but also serve as cultural ambassadors by setting up meetings and interviews, doing research and fact checking. Bilefsky said he finds fixers himself, or engages ones that come recommended by other journalists. For him, it is important the fixer or translator knows the newspaper he works for or at least understands the field of journalism. Interviews must be conducted with simultaneous translation, or translating to the journalist in their language as the source speaks in another, in order for the journalist to ensure everything is translated fully and accurately. When a translator listens for long periods before translating to the journalist, they often offer their own abridged version of what was said.

In crisis situations, where biased translation is common, be diligent about vetting translators.

Much of the international reporting that makes its way into American publications is done from crisis situations. These situations aren't the best conditions for finding the most reliable and talented translators. In many countries that are steeped in conflict and violence, communication and dissemination of information is inconsistent and often unreliable.

Furthermore, these places are often dangerous environments for journalists. Journalists run the risk of hiring biased translators in these places, where educated and experienced translators are already hard to come by compared to other parts of the world.

Hooper spoke of a situation during the war in Kosovo in which he accidentally corresponded with a biased translator:

“I speak about five words of Serbo-Croat and no Albanian. We went into Kosovo after the NATO bombings. I had an interpreter with me, and it was quite a different experience because you’re at their mercy and I remember one occasion where I came across a commander of the KLA, the guerrilla army that fought the Serbs, and we had been told — I was working with another correspondent — that there had been atrocities in that area. And my interpreter, who I realized more and more had really strong links to the KLA, he knew where to find people with suspicious rapidity and sometimes knew about things before they had happened. So I put a question like, ‘Had there been killings of Serbs here?’ and you’d hear this incomprehensible Albanian, and the guy would make movements and at the end my translator would say ‘No.’

Biased translators can be detrimental to a journalist’s reporting, and when reporting from a war or conflict zone, the time to find a new translator is scarce.

Similarly, Dionne Searcey has found it difficult to hire reliable translators where she works in West Africa. She started as The New York Times bureau chief in Dakar, Senegal, in October 2015 and is still learning to navigate the challenges of being a reporter in the various countries of West Africa.

“Everything is hard in West Africa. Communication in general is hard. Phone lines are terrible. Internet connections aren’t available. I’m traveling far away on unreliable airlines to get everywhere,” Searcey said. It’s not impossible to find someone who speaks English, but it’s definitely a challenge, and then there’s no certainty that they know how to translate. She says that she often has to train the translator she’s working

with while they are translating in order to get them to translate well what a source is saying.

Although she speaks French, which is the prevalent language in the countries she reports from, she deals with translators for the numerous tribal languages found across Western and Central Africa. She travels to many poor, rural areas, where English- and even French-speakers are much harder to find.

“In one case, I arranged for a translator who speaks English and Hausa, the Nigerian language, and, well, the guy *kind of* spoke English, but what are you going to do, you are in the middle of nowhere.”

She also deals with very sensitive sources, such as victims of severe violence. Good translators for her know how to deal with these types of sources in polite and professional ways. For example, she had a good translator in Bamako, Mali, who knew how to respectfully interrupt victims of a bombing while interviewing them in a hospital.

When it doesn't work out, it takes a lot more time and effort. “When you're reporting in really dangerous areas, you don't have the luxury of spending two hours in a town where Boko Haram is known to check, and when they know there is a Western journalist there, you are just a huge target.”

Use translators that make the source feel comfortable.

Unlike the other journalists, Elizabeth Dickinson, a freelance journalist in the U.A.E., doesn't like to use fixers because they can be expensive. She doesn't speak Arabic, but that doesn't always hinder her reporting because so much of the population is able to speak English. Often, when setting up an interview with a source who doesn't speak English, she will ask the source if they know someone who speaks English who

can translate. She finds this helps to make the source feel more comfortable. “For example, if I’m speaking with a cleric in Kuwait, he’s going to feel much more comfortable speaking through his friend than if I show up with a Western-educated Kuwaiti student,” Dickinson said.

Record all interviews as a backup to notes.

Note-taking while interviewing in a foreign language can be stressful. From personal observations, I’ve found that when I’m interviewing in Italian, it is best to take notes in Italian as well because my memory in Italian is weaker than it is in English. If I take notes in English, I have a hard time recalling exactly what a source said in Italian.

The journalists I interviewed had mixed opinions for note-taking, but one thing they all agreed on is that the interviews should be recorded in case one’s notes are confusing.

Bilefsky takes notes in English unless there is a word with a specific connotation or meaning, then he jots that down as well. Dickinson as well takes notes in English. Searcey said her notes are a mix of English and French. She has only been working from Dakar since October 2015, and therefore, is still figuring out the best way to take notes when interviewing in French. Winfield said she takes notes both in the language the person is speaking and does the translation in her head as she goes.

Rely on multiple channels to rigorously fact-check a story.

Fact checking is especially important when dealing with multiple languages. All of the journalists agree that interviews should be recorded when having to translate or when using a translator in order to ensure accuracy.

Bilefsky always fact checks with one or two other native speakers to make sure that his own translation is correct. Dickinson and Searcey both mentioned that they will send recordings to someone they trust to double check the translation afterward.

Follow standard practices of transparency in disclosing the extent of translation used in a story.

When asked about standards they follow in interviewing in other languages and translating information, all the journalists mentioned the importance of maintaining journalistic standards of transparency and accuracy. Each journalist has their own method of interviewing and translating, but there is overlap in these methods. Despite the importance of these two practices, some of the journalists acknowledged that there is flexibility in how something can be translated.

Not everyone would translate something in the same way. For this reason, a journalist has a lot of power when translating information to readers who don't understand and almost never come into contact with the source information. This was mentioned often in the research of my literature review. Journalists such as Gorney see this as an advantage, a way to add nuance and depth to a story, but it's also something that has to be kept in check. Some of them have ways of making sure they double check their translations, usually through another person.

Some of the journalists said that there's no point in disclosing that a quote or citation is translated by a journalist or translator. It is a behind-the-scenes process and the responsibility of the journalist to get it right.

According to Bilefsky, "Two translations might be slightly nuanced in different ways depending on who is doing the translation." The key is to be as accurate and clear as possible.

For the most part, all the journalists agree that translation is implicit in international reporting, and including disclosure of the translation process in writing is to be done on a case-by-case basis. For example, if an interview is conducted through a biased translator, such as someone from a local government, that might be something to note in the story.

Winfield said she tends to lean towards a more conservative translation. “I sometimes sacrifice flow of a quote for the sake of a literal translation, so I err on the side of caution.”

Use source language to convey precise meaning and add color to a story but not when it hinders readability.

In many of the stories written by international journalists, the fact that information or dialogue has been translated is invisible to the reader. Some journalists believe there’s no need to use source language, or words in the original language it was spoken or communicated in, because they write for English-speaking readers; and therefore, the source language is irrelevant. But others believe the source language is a tool that can provide valuable context and garner interest from readers. However, it should be strategically and intentionally placed and not interfere with the readability of the story.

Gorney’s writing often contains traces of the language she is speaking to her sources in, using them as cultural references. In *Cuba’s New Now*, she frequently inserts Spanish words into the text, like in this sentence at the beginning of the story:

“He had borrowed a friend’s *máquina*, which means “machine” but is also what Cubans call the old American cars that are ubiquitous in the Havana souvenir postcards.”

Hooper, as well, includes words in the source language in some of his stories. In a story about Francesco Totti, captain of AS Roma soccer team, Hooper wrote the following:

“A revered figure in his native city — his nicknames include that of *Il re di Roma* or “the king of Rome” — he has patronized many good causes.” When asked why he included the nickname written in Italian, Hooper said it adds detail.

Bilefsky, however, said it depends. He said he uses words from the source language if it is something particularly colorful or culturally relevant. Readability is key, he said, which in news writing means being scrupulously clear and concise. “You don’t want the article to be peppered with a foreign language,” Bilefsky added.

The difference might be in the style a journalist is writing in — where the story is a feature or a short news piece, although not all of the journalists agreed on this.

Dickinson said that only if it’s a word English speakers might already know, such as the common greeting “Inshallah” in Arabic or if there really is no translation for the word in English, will she include it in the story. The remaining journalists also agree that it is not often relevant to the story.

In my personal observations, I found that source language can be useful in conveying certain meaning in a story. Sometimes people break from one language to speak in their own language, and sometimes that break can show emotion or meaning beyond the words they are speaking.

Dialogue is a powerful literary technique, and the depth that bilingual dialogue provides pushes it to the next level. For example, one day I was interviewing a Filipino mother. She was talking about her daughter back in the Philippines, describing her

character, and at a certain point she couldn't think of the Italian or English equivalent to a Filipino word she wanted to use to describe her. I asked what the Filipino word was and we translated it online. It came out to mean something like "troublesome." But it was clear that the word reminded her of her daughter, that that word meant more than just "troublesome." For her, it meant "Serena," her daughter.

Conclusion

This research sought to understand and record the practices of multilingual journalists and the decision-making processes of translation while reporting in the field. Through the discussion of the interviews I conducted, I have collected a series of practices that most if not all the journalists have in common.

All the journalists interviewed for this study agree that their knowledge of the language and culture of the countries in which they report is indispensable to their job as an international correspondent. In addition, they follow other similar practices, outlined above, that govern the way they interview sources in foreign languages and how they translate those interviews back into English.

Here are the eight practices again that the research developed:

1. Speaking the local language provides a strategic advantage.
2. When using translators, it is important that they have a strong command of both the reporter's and the source's languages, the ability to control the interview and an understanding of the purpose of journalism.
3. In crisis situations, where biased translation is common, be diligent about vetting translators.
4. Use translators that make the source feel comfortable.
5. Record all interviews as a backup to notes.
6. Rely on multiple channels to rigorously fact-check a story.
7. Follow standard practices of transparency in disclosing the extent of translation used in a story.
8. Use source language to convey precise meaning and add color to a story but not when it hinders readability.

I found these practices to be common among the journalists with the exception of number eight, using source language, for which there were stark differences in opinion. Some believed that using source language to be beneficial to the story while other believed that it mostly hindered readability.

Those in the first camp, namely Gorney, Bilefsky, Winfield and Hooper, use their translation skills to explain cultural difference in addition to syntactically translating interviews and text. As this research primarily focused on the reporting phase of the journalist's job, further research is needed in order to fully understand how the lack of consensus on this point plays out in the writing and editing processes.

If we think of translation as a gatekeeper, for many of these journalists, that gate closes as soon as the writing begins. For a few of them, however, translation as gatekeeper serves two purposes. The journalist translates the information linguistically from source language to English and then in writing the story translates or explains information about one culture in a way that readers of another might understand it.

“Translation is an imprecise art. You can have a very literal translation, or you can have a more figurative translation. We allow ourselves that wiggle room to present the quotes as accurate as we can while conveying what we understand the intended meaning to be,” Winfield said.

For example, she spoke of the idiom ‘It’s raining cats and dogs.’ If someone were to use the Italian idiom for a lot of rain — “Piove a catinelle” — it wouldn’t make sense to translate it literally. Instead, the phrase ‘It’s raining cats and dogs’ would be used to convey the same meaning.

Here are the first few lines of an earlier example from Gorney's *Cuba's New*

Now:

"I want to show you where we're hiding it," Eduardo said.

Bad idea, I said. Someone will notice the foreigner and wreck the plan.

"No, I figured it out," Eduardo said. "You won't get out of the car. I'll drive by, slowly, not so slow that we attract attention. I'll tell you when to look. Be discreet."

He had borrowed a friend's *máquina*, which means "machine" but is also what Cubans call the old American cars that are ubiquitous in the Havana souvenir postcards. This one was a 1956 Plymouth of a lurid color that I teased him about, but I pulled the passenger door shut gently, the way Cubans always remind you to, out of respect for their máquinas' advanced age.

The first few lines of dialogue are translated from Spanish; although, it's not noted as having been translated. Essentially the fact that Gorney had to translate what her sources said from Spanish is invisible to the reader. Then, in the fourth line we are offered a glimpse of the translation being done. Not only does Gorney show the reader that she is translating, but she uses the translation as a way to explain cultural nuance — the significance of vintage cars to Cubans. In this way Gorney is not only very transparent and clear, but also a cultural translator.

The difference might fall along news versus feature lines. Journalists who deal in only news stories are pressed for time and translate on the spot; whereas, feature writers have more time to reflect on the importance of language and the translation process.

Bilefsky said that in some cases, particularly with feature stories, journalists can allow themselves more poetic license when translating. He noted a story he wrote about a French Nobel Prize winner that required a higher degree of linguistic and literary

dexterity, and he felt he had the time to play with the language more than he would a news brief about the Paris terrorist attacks.

Despite how they think about translation or the ways they use it in their reporting, all the journalists agree that their ability to speak a local language is indispensable to their job as an international journalist. Whether it is useful in their writing or not, crossing linguistic borders helps reporters to connect with their sources, which in itself makes for more nuanced and profound reporting.

Limitations and Future Research

In this research, I was limited with my access to the journalists I interviewed. Because all of the subjects were in different parts of the world, almost all my interviews were conducted by phone or Skype call, which is much more limiting than a face-to-face interview. In fact, the only interview I conducted in person, with John Hooper, was one of the longest interviews and provided me with much more in-depth information and examples. Many of the subjects had little time to talk, and therefore provided much less detailed information.

There are many findings from this project that can be developed for future research. It would be interesting to approach the topic with a different methodology. For example, I could do a textual analysis of a journalists stories compared to their translations to see if the practices outlined in my findings are useful and successful. Whatever the method, here are some topics and questions that could frame future research projects related to my analysis of the translation practices of foreign correspondents:

1. I interviewed one freelancer, and she explained that she often had to be creative with limited funds and resources, unlike a reporter with The New York Times or Associated Press. With the decline of established foreign correspondents in the last decade, are there more freelancers taking on the role? How are freelance journalists in foreign settings finding translators and fixers? Are they having to use alternative methods? How does this affect the way they translate, obtain translations, maintain accuracy and fact-check? Do these differences affect their job in any way?
2. All of the journalists I interviewed work with the written word, which is commonly less transparent about translation than TV or radio. How might showing subtitles and playing transcripts in another language be beneficial to the viewer? In what ways is print transparent about translated content that radio and TV aren't? Why are print journalists less transparent about the translation process of their stories?
3. A few of the journalists said that there can be flexibility in how something can be translated because the literal translation might not mean the same thing as a figurative translation. A textual analysis of translated content might show how much flexibility is allowed. Are conservative or flexible translations more readable, clear and contextual? How much flexibility is generally accepted? What benefits might a more liberal translation provide the reader?
4. I believe there is a difference in how news writers and feature writers approach translation. Deadlines are a major factor in the amount of time

that can be spent on a translation, so exactly how much of a difference in translation is there between stories written on tight deadlines compared to those that aren't? Is this difference observable in stories? Are journalists on tight deadlines generally more conservative or liberal with their translations? Why?