

Ruiz Rosendo, L. (2022). Interpreting for the military: Creating communities of practice. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 37, 16-34. <https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2022.102>

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## **Interpreting for the military: Creating communities of practice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the creation of communities of practice in the context of military training and capacity-building missions deployed by Western armed forces in countries in conflict. It reports on a participatory study with Spanish military officers deployed in Afghanistan and civilian interpreters who worked for them. The discussion is framed in new military doctrines that advocate for strengthening local forces of countries in conflict and premised on Lave and Wenger's (1991) social theory of learning. The article argues that, when civilian interpreters start to work for the military, they lack knowledge of military procedure and of interpreting skills. For their part, the military personnel are generally not aware of the non-linguistic elements and culture-specific aspects of communication. Group cohesion is created, allowing for an iterative exchange of information and a constant learning process. Since civilian interpreters have not been trained before being recruited by the armed forces, their role as interpreters is contingent on their role as legitimate peripheral participants in the military sphere. The interpreters' personal background and their language proficiency in Spanish conditioned their degree of participation in the community of practice.

### **KEYWORDS**

Interpreting, military, situated learning, community of practice, legitimate peripheral participants.

## **1. Introduction**

In the new century there has been an increasing awareness of the role of interpreters in armed conflicts and an expanding scholarly literature on the topic. Current academic interest is due to factors such as the higher visibility of interpreters and the increasing need for linguistic and cultural mediation in conflict and post-conflict situations. However, there is still a dearth of studies addressing the specific nature of how interpreting skills are acquired in these settings, which hinders the comprehension of how interpreters develop their skills in the field. Moreover, there are ethical, cultural and professional issues raised by the involvement of civilian interpreters in armed conflicts, which have yet to be explored by academic institutions (Tipton 2011).

Civilian interpreters working for the military are not hired because they have received training as interpreters but because they speak the relevant languages; this means they have not previously acquired the necessary skills to interpret adequately. They are people who happen to end up interpreting rather than interpreters who happen to work in the military field. This said, one may wonder whether the traditional conception of what makes a professional interpreter, as held by professional interpreting associations, can be applied to the interpreter who works in armed conflicts (Askew and Salama-Carr 2011). Since these civilians are actually capable of working as interpreters, the traditional dichotomy of professional vs non-

professional interpreter as a mutually exclusive division appears to be simplistic and tenuous. Certainly, these interpreters have not learned to interpret before being employed to do so, which would be the case in formal training, but they are still able to learn through regular practice. In fact, some scepticism has been expressed about the notion that knowledge is exclusive to academic institutions and associated with appointed experts who seem to monopolise its possession and creation as their source of power (Pyrko *et al.* 2017). It is my belief that knowledge can be acquired from different sources and environments in more informal and spontaneous contexts.

Drawing on this debate, the present article reports on a participatory study with Spanish military officers who were deployed in Afghanistan and civilian interpreters who worked for them. First, the specific context in which the participants operated will be described, given its importance in understanding interpreting as a situated practice. Second, the role of interpreters in this context will be explored. Literature about the concept of a community of practice (CoP; plural CoPs) is then synthesised within the framework of Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of social learning, thus offering a consistent perspective on knowing and learning with the concept of a CoP. An argument is made around the notions of legitimate peripheral participants and constraints to participation in some communities. This argument is subsequently substantiated through the findings of the participatory study.

## **2. Context**

The nature of warfare in the twenty-first century has changed dramatically. After the 9/11 attacks, the United States declared a global war on terrorism. Since then, conflicts have been characterised by asymmetrical and hybrid warfare in which there are state and non-state or private actors, with each having different objectives and receiving external support. Frontal attacks are replaced by terrorist attacks, suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and ambushes (Tan 2014) which target both soft civilian and hard official targets as a means of attaining the insurgents' goals. In this context, the legitimacy of the government is questionable due to the existence of warlords who operate within the insurgency.

To respond to asymmetric warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States administration adopted a conventional war approach in the first phase, which was replaced in the second phase (after 2006) by a renewed concept of counterinsurgency. The objective of this new military doctrine was to empower the security forces and institutions in the countries in conflict and to transition security and other responsibilities from NATO forces to the host-nation authorities.

Larsdotter (2014) categorises and defines both the logic and tactics which characterise the new counterinsurgency strategy based on: 1) the main

audience of the operations—the logic may be population-centric or enemy-centric; and 2) the level of negative or positive incentives—forces may employ the “hearts and minds” approach, i.e., winning the allegiance and support of the local population, or the coercion or cost/benefit approach, according to which the population’s actions matter more than their preferences. In Afghanistan, the tasks accomplished by the coalition forces followed population-centric logic/positive incentive tactics in that the mentorship provided to the Afghan National Army (ANA) had the ultimate goal of increasing the security of the population and the state’s capacity to govern, avoiding kinetic military force. One of the components of the operations was aid in the form of human capital through the mentoring of the indigenous security forces provided by the Western nations. “Human capital” is defined by Savage and Caverley (2017: 545) as “a range of social, instructional and economic assets” whose “benefits consist in part of professional knowledge” that “enable[s] recipients to conduct military operations more effectively”. In fact, this enabling approach was embedded in the mentoring tasks conducted by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). As a member of NATO, Spain contributed troops to the international counterinsurgency efforts with the creation of the Afghanistan Spanish Force (ASPFOR), whose main objective was to mentor the ANA through joint planning and operations.

### **3. Interpreting and interpreters in Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan, Spanish forces were deployed as a national contingent and, therefore, had to recruit their own civilian interpreters to accomplish the tasks assigned by NATO.

Both national and local interpreters were recruited by the Spanish armed forces: the former were members of the Iranian diaspora living and working in Spain, recruited directly in Spain by the Spanish National Intelligence Centre (CNI) and who travelled with the armed forces to Afghanistan; the latter were directly recruited in Afghanistan (see Ruiz Rosendo 2020 for more information regarding interpreter categories).

This specific recruitment of interpreters by a national contingent is different to that carried out by multinational units. In the case of capacity-building missions in Iraq, for example, Spanish officers were deployed individually; not as members of a national contingent but as members of multinational military teams. In this case, the interpreters were directly recruited by NATO to work between the language of the local forces, Arabic in the case of Iraq, and English. This means that, in capacity-building missions, it is essential to recruit interpreters who speak the local languages and either the language of the contingent (Spanish) or the lingua franca of the multinational team (English), and, importantly, who are acquainted with the local cultures.

Cultural appropriateness in the communication with the local forces is considered as essential in these missions. In fact, cultural awareness is increasingly included in pre-deployment training programmes for military personnel. It is an aspect mentioned by General Petraeus (2013), who highlights the importance of appreciating local customs, practices and religions, and of understanding the countries and societies in which Western armed forces operate. This is even more the case in modern military doctrines, which emphasize collaboration with local forces. Along these lines, Johnson (2018: 2) refers to differences in “cultural norms” as one of the factors that led to distortion when Europeans encountered other societies in the past. For Western forces, the challenge lies in “understanding the operating environment and contending with differences in culture, language, and perception among indigenous populations” (ibid.). Johnson highlights the importance of framing local solutions within cultural points of reference and postulates that, in Western intervention, it is important to understand the position and views of the local populations in order to avoid potential conflicts. Armstrong (2013) concludes that cross-cultural frictions were one of the contributing factors in “green-on-blue” attacks<sup>1</sup> in Afghanistan. In turn, Shortland *et al.* (2019) state that cultural clashes and “green-on-blue” attacks are manifestations of cross-cultural organisational conflict. They both highlight the fact that cultural differences contribute to a sense of ingroupness and outgroupness, which may lead to attacks against outgroup individuals or collectives. In mentoring activities, interpreters played an important role in the building of bridges between the Western and the Afghan troops, and in helping both parties to have a greater knowledge of the culture of the other in order to avoid a sense of outgroupness.

Civilian interpreters recruited by the military had not received any previous training in interpreting or military discipline. Their recruitment was undertaken exclusively on the basis of the interpreters’ command of the working languages and cultures; they were oblivious to professional standards and competences in interpreting. However, they were actually able to do the job. Drawing on Lea (2009), whose interpretation of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) ideas of CoPs and legitimate peripheral participation sees the twin concepts as useful heuristics to understand a social model of learning as participation in practice, and following Tipton’s (2011) analysis of this theory, it is my belief that the interpreters who worked in Afghanistan in the context of new military doctrines learned by doing, through their participation in the military community as legitimate peripheral participants.

#### **4. CoPs and situated learning**

The concept of CoPs was first developed by Lave and Wenger in 1991. Their social theory of learning constitutes one of the most widely cited social theories and a central idea in situated approaches to learning. This theory has been used in different fields to investigate many topics, including in Translation Studies (e.g. Calvo Encinas 2015; or Berthaud and Mason

2018). However, it has seldom been used in Interpreting Studies. A noteworthy study is Tipton's (2011) article on the relationships of learning between military personnel and interpreters in armed conflicts, with special reference to Iraq.

This conceptual framework assumes that learning is a social process which is situated in a cultural and historical context, a social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time (Farnsworth *et al.* 2016) and which entails the social formation of a person. The theory posits that the negotiation of meaning<sup>2</sup> is at the core of human learning as opposed to the mere acquisition of information and skills, challenging the basic premise that "learning is a process by which learners internalise knowledge through transmission from teacher to learner in formal educational contexts" (Lea 2009: 183). Learning occurs in the lived-in world that encompasses different formal and informal contexts in which participants are viewed as active beings (Berthaud and Mason 2018), and where there is no tidy boundary between experts and novices. The academic institution is not considered as the privileged bastion of learning, but as part of a broader learning system in which life, and not the class, is the main learning event (Lea 2009).

The members of a community of practice care about the same problems and topics and, consequently, get involved in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015), mutually engaging in sense-making and placing themselves as a group with respect to the world around them (Eckert 2006). Interestingly, learning can be the reason why the community comes together or an incidental result of members' interactions. However, not all communities are CoPs: belonging to the latter must be enacted through a shared domain of interest (mutual engagement); an engagement in joint activities and in information sharing (joint enterprise); and the development of a shared repertoire of resources (experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing problems). In this context, newcomers become legitimate peripheral participants who develop skilled identities in practice and who help to reproduce and transform the CoPs. This participation takes different forms, from full to more peripheral or occasional participation, and participants are not always aware that they actually belong to a community of practice. What is important, according to Pyrko *et al.* (2017: 392), is that people:

... experience a sense of togetherness when, often owing to facing similar real-life problems, and not necessarily because of liking each other, they organise themselves around negotiating a practice that they all share and identify with.

Whilst Lave and Wenger (1991) describe in great detail the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, a key notion in their theory, less is said about the legitimacy of participants when trying to become members of the community. Along these lines, Harris and Shelswell (2009) introduce the

concepts of “illegitimate peripheral participation” and “legitimation of conflicts” to refer to the questioning of a participant’s legitimacy by other members of the community. In the words of Wenger-Trayner when interviewed by Valerie Farnsworth (Farnsworth *et al.* 2016: 154), the community has developed a competence, which inevitably leads to “old-timers” having more power than “newcomers” to assess claims of competence. However, power can prevent further learning by silencing voices. Communities can create intentional barriers to entry, and these boundaries could be problematic for innovation and change. Some groups of learners may be marginalised if their claims to competence are consistently rejected by the community. If the person strongly identifies with the community, rejected claims may result in an experience of marginalisation, but if the person does not identify with the community, they will try to find their identity elsewhere. Conflicts are also present between different CoPs to which an individual belongs. If the claims are rejected in one of them, the individual may want to turn to the other community that does feed their identity; this can lead them to feel even more marginalised in the original CoP. These individuals feel the need to resolve the complex issue of identity that they face. If potential members have almost to forget who they are to belong to a CoP, the experience will probably not carry much into the rest of their life (Farnsworth *et al.* 2016: 155).

This debate is of the utmost importance in the context of this paper because military personnel constitute a well-established CoP, and newcomers (officers) enter the community as legitimate peripheral participants. The military constitutes a total institution (Goffman 1961) with solid narratives that establish how things ought to be, what is acceptable and valuable (Subotić 2016), legitimizing the in-group members and the defining characteristics of the group, and where insiders are clearly separated from outsiders to the community and its culture. As Kier (1996: 202) posits:

Few institutions devote as many resources to the assimilation of their members as does the military. The emphasis on ceremony and tradition, and the development of a common language and an esprit de corps, testify to the strength of the military's organizational culture.

Therefore, becoming a member of the military community as a civilian is not devoid of difficulties. In this sense, it is not difficult to presume that civilian interpreters are exposed to some kind of rejection, given their lack of clear identification with the institution and the organisational culture, particularly if the interpreters are foreign to the military personnel’s homeland. A priori, national interpreters might be considered as more legitimate than locals because the former have lived in Spain and are more integrated into Spanish culture, while local interpreters are outsiders to both the community and the culture. Additionally, locals could belong to what the military may consider to be CoPs related to the insurgency; this may lead to a lack of a clear identification and conflicts of interest. However,

even if, in principle, interpreters are not full legitimate peripheral participants in the military community, in missions abroad both the military and the interpreters are sometimes united in their process of thinking together. This is a new dimension added by Pyrko *et al.* (2017) to refer to a process by which people guide each other through their understandings of the same problems in an area of mutual interest, sharing tacit knowledge. These authors introduce the notion of “shared indwelling” and of a “trans-personal dimension” to illustrate that people with different personal knowledge can share their tacit knowledge in a spontaneous way by extending their identities into the same knowledge area. Individuals engaged in trans-personal processes redevelop their tacit knowledge based on an experience of mutual performance in the shared lived practice. This means that people learn together and from each other becoming more competent:

Sharing knowledge involves guiding someone through our thinking or using our insights to help them see their own situation better. To do this we need to know something about those who will use our insights. The problems they are trying to solve, the level of detail they need, maybe even the style of thinking they use (McDermott 1999: 107-108).

Therefore, interpreters and military personnel have opportunities to think together under non-routine problematic circumstances. These circumstances are created by the very nature of collaborative intercultural missions in which there is a need for a more engaged mutual form of knowledge (Kuhn and Jackson 2008).

## **5. Methodology**

The following sections will present the results related to the nature of learning and the CoPs created between military personnel and interpreters in Afghanistan. The results belong to a wider project whose aim was to explore experiential understanding of the phenomenon of interpreting in capacity-building operations (Ruiz Rosendo 2020, 2021). The study is framed within participatory research, a research strategy within qualitative social research that is geared “towards planning and conducting the research process with those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study” (Bergold and Thomas 2012: 192). The purpose of this study is not to make generalisations, but to make some relevant exploratory claims about interpreters and the users of interpreting services within the context of the ASPFOR. Therefore, the findings of this study are not necessarily reflective of what happens in other conflict zones.

The participants were military officers who had been deployed in Afghanistan (6 officers) and interpreters who had worked in Afghanistan, both nationals and locals (4 and 7, respectively). All of the participants were male, with the exception of one female national interpreter.



Unstructured interviews were used to collect the data, a commonly used method of data collection under the naturalistic (qualitative) paradigm (Halcomb and Davidson 2006). Recruitment of participants was facilitated by a high-ranking officer who used his contacts to access other participants, both officers and interpreters. These participants then helped me contact other potential participants, leading to a mix of purposive and snowball sampling (Teddlie and Yu 2007). Interviews were conducted in Spanish via one-to-one sessions, and ranged in length from one to two hours. Since it was not possible to record the interviews, notes were taken and the interviews were reconstructed. Given that the process of transforming uninterrupted dynamic oral language to written language may entail the loss of relevant information, these reconstructed transcriptions were shared with the participants for their verification, i.e., member checking, considered by Cho and Trent (2006) as a crucial technique for establishing credibility and assessing validity. The purpose was to correct bias or misinterpretations (Thomas 2017), to empower the participants through their active involvement in the study and to maintain a power balance<sup>3</sup>.

The analytical process involved listening to what the data was telling me following inductive logic. The first step was to read the data and understand what the participant was conveying. In a second step, each reconstructed account was analysed in order to identify statements that told the story of each participant's experience. Formulated meanings were created from the significant statements following a process of reflexive iteration, arranged into categories and then collapsed into higher-level themes. A total of 35 categories was grouped into 7 higher level themes: description of the mission, participant's background, category of interpreter, working environment, interpreter's roles, relationships between the different stakeholders and perceptions (Ruiz Rosendo 2021). The accounts and categories were reviewed by an independent researcher with a background in interpreting in conflict-related scenarios and who provided critical comments to the identification of the different categories. An important category was training and learning by the interpreters and the military personnel. Since the objective of analysis is to produce a coherent and valid account (Dey 1993), the third step consisted of writing a narrative based on the data, focusing on the nature of learning in this context.

## **6. Findings of the participatory study**

The findings confirm, firstly, that the interpreters who worked for the Spanish armed forces in Afghanistan were civilians who came from a variety of backgrounds but had not previously received specific training in interpreting. They were recruited because they spoke Farsi and Spanish, in the case of national interpreters, and Dari, Pashto and Spanish, in the case of locals. Importantly, the main difference between both categories in terms of skills is that the latter had limited skills in Spanish while the former spoke Spanish fluently due to their having lived in Spain for many years. Interestingly, most of the officers who were interviewed thought that

training interpreters beforehand, particularly locals, is difficult due to the urgent nature of these types of missions and the desperate need to recruit interpreters on the spot. They declared that a short training course could be envisaged for nationals on both the basics of interpreting techniques and military terminology. Officers posited that the interpreters' linguistic skills, even if poor, were enough to facilitate communication between the parties, given that the original conversation was rarely very high level itself. However, the officers made the distinction between the competences needed in different situations. Even if a lower-intermediate level of Spanish was generally enough to interpret the daily conversations on the base, for some operations it was of the utmost importance that the interpreter transmitted an unequivocal message, usually via radio. Daily meetings were more relaxed, and there was more time to correct or repeat what was said, which contrasted with the stressful nature of field operations, in which a lack of precision on the part of the interpreter could even put the whole operation at risk. This being said, all the participants agreed that it is possible to work as an interpreter without previous training, through learning by doing. As a matter of fact, both groups of interpreters learned to apply problem-solving strategies and developed coping strategies in order to meet the users' expectations, mainly through regular practice and also by following advice given by more experienced interpreters on the job. In addition, locals were able to improve their language skills in Spanish through practice and thanks to the help provided by some national interpreters:

[local interpreter] It was difficult for me at the beginning because I lacked the linguistic skills in Spanish, but I gradually improved and found the task less challenging.<sup>4</sup>

[officer] Local interpreters relied a lot on national interpreters, and they asked them questions about all their concerns related to the work in order to improve their performance.

Secondly, interpreters lacked knowledge of military procedure and were unaware of how the armed forces are organised and function. Learning the military terminology was considered as a challenge by all the interpreters interviewed, who declared that they learned it through time and practice, thanks to the help of the military personnel. For the military personnel, an added challenge was that the interpreters were not familiar with the objectives of the mission. Furthermore, the Afghan trainee soldiers did not always understand what the Spanish officers told them, having received no previous training in certain technical matters either. Therefore, it took time to train the trainee Afghan soldiers in the advanced technical devices and strategies, and the local interpreters in the nuts and bolts of military discipline. The interpreters' insufficient knowledge of military discipline and of Spanish language and culture (in the case of locals) was mitigated by on-the-spot training by the recruiting military forces, channelled through what they called the "interpreter manager", who was in charge of assigning the interpreters to different tasks. Moreover, the interpreters also learned through their regular contact with the military personnel.

[local interpreter] We had a supervisor of interpreters, a captain, who explained many things about Spanish culture. In Kabul we had read books and seen movies describing life in the Western world, so we were aware of the culture. However, the captain explained many things we did not know: how to behave on a base, how to address a high-ranking official, etc.

Apart from this informal, deliberate training, they all recognised that they learned by doing, and this practice helped them gain a lot of experience. However, those who really wanted to excel in their job as interpreters had to work hard, as reflected on by one of the national interpreters:

I realised that I had to pull my finger out and work hard if I wanted to succeed in my job. I created my own bilingual dictionary, a dictionary of military terms, military idioms and general words. I realised that knowing the military terms was of the utmost importance to the success of a meeting. Let's take an example: there are different types of police in Afghanistan, and if the interpreter is not aware of the distinctions, it is not possible to adequately transmit the associated information to the Spanish military personnel. The same thing happens with the military ranks: it is important to know what the ranks are in order to act accordingly. I had to study a lot.

Officers were able to identify those interpreters who made this additional effort, which had a conspicuous impact on the quality of their performance; these interpreters were subsequently chosen to work in high-level meetings. By the same token, interpreters who were more inexperienced were first of all sent on humanitarian and patrolling missions, and when they had acquired more experience, they started to interpret at meetings held on the main base. Those whose performance was deemed of a better quality worked at high-level meetings and those with poorer skills were sent to interpret in battalions. Interestingly, it was national interpreters who were usually assigned to high-level meetings, since the officers considered them to be higher skilled. However, they often judged this quality in terms of the interpreter's proficiency in Spanish and not on their proficiency in the local languages or their interpreting skills. Importantly, officers did not take into account the national interpreters' shortcomings: they did not speak Pashto, which was the language of the indigenous forces' personnel, nor Dari, the language spoken in Afghanistan (speaking instead Farsi, which is linguistically similar, but distinct).

The different situations described by the participants are related to the different nature of the tasks carried out by the interpreters. Beyond the basic task of translating the linguistic elements of communication, they had to provide explanations of the cultural and religious aspects. Additionally, they would provide guidance on how to address the Afghan interlocutors, advice on how to present information in a meeting and on how to deal with the situation, and information about the Afghan interlocutor's mood. Interpreters were even given leeway to negotiate directly with the local population:

[national interpreter] On one occasion we visited some farmers and were allowed by the military forces to negotiate their salary with them. The interpreters negotiated with them directly and then told the military personnel what the outcome of the negotiation had been. On another occasion we did the same with some construction workers. The military personnel gave us a maximum amount of money and we then started negotiating with the workers.

Furthermore, whereas there was a turnover of military personnel every six months, interpreters remained on the base, and thus explained how to do things, as well as how to avoid tense situations, to the new officers in charge.

[local interpreter] When the new unit arrived every six months, we gave them some lessons on how to address and treat Afghans, how to eat, sit down, even how to clean their nose. For example, Fridays are a very important day in Afghanistan, it is better not to work, and I said so to the Spanish armed forces. They listened to me, they considered me a cultural mentor. This was really important for the success of the mission.

[national interpreter] I remembered the previously transmitted information, and I passed this information on to the new lieutenant colonel. This was very positive because it allowed the conversations to advance more quickly. At the end of the day, the purpose was for the Afghans to collaborate, and the interpreter was a key element in achieving that. If he was not able to create a solid relationship between the parties, he could not be considered a good interpreter.

Given that the interpreters carried out myriad tasks, the officers considered that they were essential to attain the mission's goals, particularly the goal of creating trust with the local officers and among the local population:

[officer] In Afghanistan the objective was to train the local armed forces, and the figure of the interpreter became essential, as well as that of the trainee soldier. It was important for the trainee soldiers to be motivated and want to learn. In turn, the interpreters were essential for keeping the local armed forces motivated and eager to learn. The interpreters became an essential tool for accomplishing the mission, in which trust building was crucial.

[officer] Even if the interpreters mainly worked between the Spanish forces' personnel and the ANA, on many occasions there were some who went with patrols to villages in order to win over the local people. It is essential to show support to the local populations by going to village squares with medical equipment and providing easily accessible medical services for five to six hours, for example. Interpreters are needed in these situations to talk to nurses, doctors, children, old men, and so on.

Consequently, since the interpreters found themselves in the same challenging and even dangerous situations as the officers, they got personally involved.

[officer] Interpreters tend to get involved because they are in the same risk situation as you are. Let me tell you an anecdote. One day, in a village we had a casualty, a legionnaire from the parachute unit. It was extremely hot and we did not have any water. The local interpreter who was with us ran to a dangerous area to get some water. He behaved really well, he was really helpful. He could have left us, but he did not. He was one of us. He went beyond his duties. What I want to illustrate with this anecdote is that the interpreter becomes one of us because if we have a problem, he has a problem as well, if we don't come out alive, he won't come out alive either.

Interestingly, interpreters in this community did not view themselves as future peers of the military or as future fully-fledged interpreters, so they created a temporary identity to learn what they needed. Their motivations to act as interpreters were mainly financial. In the case of locals, they also cherished hopes of changing the situation in their countries and/or leaving it after the withdrawal of the foreign forces (see Ruiz Rosendo 2021). This means that their participation in the CoP was occasional in nature and was an incidental result of their interaction with its members.

An interesting finding is related to the nature of participation in the community, in which not all members had the same access to full participation. National interpreters were more trusted by the military personnel because they were outsiders to the conflict, had been directly recruited in Spain—and were, therefore, thought to better defend the interests of the Spanish forces—and their level of Spanish and interpreting performance were often deemed to be of a higher quality. They had also gone through a thorough background check before being recruited. Therefore, they had access to confidential documents and usually worked in high-level meetings with high-ranking officers who generally established an ongoing working relationship with an individual national interpreter, who would work with the officer on a daily basis. In contrast, the rest of the military personnel worked with a different interpreter every day, and the local interpreters were not generally assigned to a specific officer. Moreover, national interpreters lived in the same building as the military personnel, while locals stayed in another building. Consequently, national interpreters were considered as more legitimate peripheral participants than local interpreters, who had to make more efforts to prove their trustworthiness and integrate into the community.

## **7. Discussion of findings**

As we have seen in the previous section, the interpreters and the military personnel were able to solve problems, share ideas and increase their knowledge through mutual assistance. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, these civilian interpreters became legitimate peripheral participants in the world of the military personnel from the moment they were recruited. Even though the interpreting and military domains intersected, the latter was undeniably stronger, being understood as "the area in which a community claims to have legitimacy to define competence" (Farnsworth *et al.* 2016: 143). This is due to the fact that the military community identifies with a mutually negotiated competence around this domain and has, over time, developed regimes of competence that reflect their social history of learning and to which learners are accountable. By contrast, the interpreters in this context are individuals who end up interpreting, often because it is the only way to earn a reasonable income in the conflict zone, rather than interpreters who happen to work in the military field. Given that they had not been trained before being recruited by the armed forces, their role as interpreters was contingent on

their role as legitimate peripheral participants in the military sphere. Instead of being interpreters who were recruited by the military, they became interpreters precisely because they had been recruited by the military. Indeed, in the absence of prior interpreter training or experience, the professional positionality of these interpreters was largely shaped by interactions with members of the military and with more experienced interpreters whose positionality had, in turn, been contingent on their participation in military practice. In short, interpreters were allowed to become legitimate peripheral participants in the military world. The collaboration between the two groups—interpreters and officers—and the cohesion in the group were conducive to the negotiation of meaning and to the reproduction and transformation of the main CoP.

This necessarily meant that both interpreters and officers, without being consciously aware, invested their time in thinking together to become competent in translating their learning into practice. Interpreters genuinely cared about various real-life problems surrounding interpreting for the military and were willing to invest their time in learning more about it. Officers cared about the linguistic and cultural aspects that had an impact on the accomplishment of the mission and invested time in learning more with the help of the interpreters. They came to have a common goal: the success of the mission, i.e., earning the trust of the indigenous forces and of the local populations, and training the former, according to the vision of the new military doctrines. In this situation, one may wonder to what extent the interpreters share the responsibility with the military personnel for the acts they jointly engage in.

In contrast with the traditional view of learning as internalization, learning as legitimate peripheral participants allowed the interpreters to participate in the military CoP. Participation in social practice suggests a focus on the individual as a member of a sociocultural community. In this context, learning involved the whole person, implying not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to a community. The activities, tasks, functions and understandings did not exist in isolation, but as a part of broader systems of relations in which they had meaning. Learning in this context is not concerned with the use of pedagogical practices in authentic, real-world professional settings and “the ability to transition from a classroom community of practice to a professional community of practice through situated learning” (González-Davies and Enríquez-Raído 2016: 2), but with the ability to learn directly in a real-world professional setting with no previous training. Therefore, and contrary to what is usually stated in the literature, these interpreters are not mere “untrained interpreters”, but interpreters who were untrained before being recruited but who developed their expertise after recruitment by learning by doing, directly in the workplace. It is also worth mentioning that, in addition, the military invested time in engaging with them. Similarly to the participants in Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s (2014) study, the participants in the present study learned about interpreting by interpreting, in ways that they often

described as trial and error, and they reacted to different learning opportunities and pressures in different ways.

Interpreters and officers started to engage in more or less intensive forms of participation, thus establishing the more peripheral layers of the emerging CoP. National interpreters became more legitimate participants than locals because of their positionality as outsiders to the conflict and insiders to the Spanish culture. Along these lines, and based on Lea's (2009) perspective, it is important to consider not only the transition from peripheral participation as a novice to full membership, but also to take into account the more contested nature of participation in CoPs, when participants are excluded from full participation.

Therefore, CoPs have to be understood as a heuristic concept that allows us to understand the ways in which learning does or does not take place and to identify limitations and constraints on learning and on full participation. In other words, the purpose is to examine how some members might always find themselves excluded and at the margins and never able to fully participate in the community's practices due to their positionality. Another question that arises concerns the ways in which language and institutional practices contribute to marginalisation and exclusion and in which CoPs might operate to keep some participants permanently at the periphery. This will allow us to understand more about the learning context in question, in particular its successes and failures. After all, peripheral participation can:

...be enacted in different ways by different members of a community of practice, and choosing to remain on the periphery may be one way in which students retain power, and maintain their own sense of identity, in the learning process (Lea 2009: 190).

Along these lines, one may wonder if local interpreters had an interest in maintaining their own sense of identity instead of becoming more legitimate peripheral participants. Was their wish to become legitimate participants based on their willingness to learn or on other motivations, such as leaving the country after the withdrawal of the Spanish forces?

## **8. Conclusion**

This study has explored the social and cultural nature of learning in a particular context in order to understand learning as a social activity in which the autonomous learner takes responsibility for their learning. The finding that interpreters and officers shared their knowledge in order to learn and think together is as important from an academic perspective as from a professional standpoint. We need to understand more about the lived experiences of learners and the importance of different CoPs in the learning process, which challenge the simple notion of the novice moving from the periphery to the core of the community. In this study, thinking together was associated with knowledge development under non-routine and complex

situations. In this context, knowledge cannot be easily transferred from one person to another; instead, it is necessary to think together because tacit knowledge is shared (in the sense that it is redeveloped as people discover each other's knowledge in practice). This is why it is difficult to design or manage a CoP: thinking together cannot be imposed on others; in a real CoP knowledge leaks through the practice because practitioners from different contexts learn from each other to address similar real-life problems. Learning also entails changes in the participants' own identities, as well as the renegotiation of meaning for their experience, along the lines of the idea that learning in a CoP is a social formation of a person rather than only the acquisition of knowledge. In well-established communities such as the military, the scope of the CoP is delineated by sustained thinking of the core members enriched by less intensive forms of participation of those who have meaningful access to that thinking together. More thought has to be given to the prevention of learning by silencing voices coming from less legitimate peripheral participants and to how (un)intentional barriers can be problematic for innovation and change.

Interpreting is a constantly evolving profession, and interpreting training and learning should adapt to its needs, evolving to ensure that these needs are addressed. With the rising number of conflicts around the world, and considering the implications that these conflicts have, interpreting has become essential. However, a gap still remains between interpreter training and existing needs. Formal training institutions provide extensive training in conference interpreting and also in community interpreting, but less so in interpreting in conflict zones, with some noteworthy exceptions, such as the University of Geneva's InZone project, which offers interpreter training courses in conflict zones, and the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross)-University of Geneva joint course to train ICRC interpreters. Additionally, the language combinations offered by training institutions are not adapted to the needs of these interpreting contexts, which usually require interpreters for languages of lesser diffusion. However, there is some doubt that traditional training schemes could accommodate the needs stemming from these contexts, given the difficulties that speakers of these languages have in accessing formal academic institutions and the lack of trainers who are well equipped to provide such training. It is not unreasonable to ask whether higher education institutions are in a position to offer a formal scheme to train interpreters who will work with the military in a conflict zone or whether a training scheme away from the field will prove valuable. In the absence of available prior training at formal institutions, informal learning schemes have emerged to satisfy these needs. CoPs provide a model that allows learning to take place in settings for which there are no established training programmes or for which formal training schemes are of limited value.

Since this study has focused on the Spanish armed forces, and given that it is well established that there are particular, national military behaviours (Liddell Hart 1932; Uz Zaman 2009), more studies could be carried out to



analyse how interpreters and officers learn in the framework of other national armed forces or multinational teams. Also, given that the present study has focused on capacity-building missions, it would be interesting to explore other contexts and settings.

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## Biography

**Lucía Ruiz Rosendo** is an Associate Professor at the University of Geneva. She carries out research on the role of the interpreter in conflict-related situations. She is the author of a number of scholarly papers on the topic of interpreting in armed conflicts. She is the coordinator of the AXS project, whose objective is to generate evidence-based data with the aim of informing training programs for interpreters working at different stages along the evolution of conflicts.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shortland *et al.* (2019) define these attacks as those where friendly military forces fire upon each other. They argue that since 2007 these attacks killed over 140 coalition soldiers and injured over 180, mainly on ISAF bases and involving small arms fire.

<sup>2</sup> Negotiation of meaning is defined by Tusting (2009: 37) as "the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful", something that not just happens but something "which people actively produce by engaging in all the activities which living entails".

<sup>3</sup> Data collection has been undertaken in line with the ethical procedure of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Geneva (Directive relative à l'intégrité dans le domaine de la recherche scientifique et à la procédure à suivre en cas de manquement à l'intégrité) [Guidelines on Scientific Research Integrity and on the Procedure to Follow in the Case of Breach of Integrity].

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<sup>4</sup> The extracts of the interviews are not verbatim. They have been taken from the reconstructed accounts (written on the basis of the notes taken during the interviews).