



Interpreters as Technologies of Care and Control? Language Support for Refugees in Britain Following the 1956 Hungarian Uprising

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Title: Interpreters as Technologies of Care and Control? Language Support for Refugees in Britain Following the 1956 Hungarian Uprising

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Abstract:

This article investigates aspects of intercultural communication in relation to the reception and resettlement of refugees in Britain following the Hungarian uprising of 1956. The refugee crisis constituted Britain's first test as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951, against the backdrop of Cold War politics and the Suez crisis of that year. Although communication barriers feature periodically in accounts of displaced persons in 20th century Britain, a more systematic approach to the study of the lived experiences of interpreters and their interlocutors is merited to understand the social attitudes, recruitment practices and impact of interpreters on the early phases of refugee reception. The use of non-professional interpreters in the period in question is interrogated through the metaphor of the interpreter as a technology of care and control, which also serves as a broader critique of post-war refugee treatment in Britain. The article contributes to the growing body of scholarship in interpreting studies that seeks to establish a sociology of agents and structures in the translation process with a focus on the protagonists concerned with translatorial activity primarily, but not exclusively in the many reception camps set up during the period in question. Artefacts from the National Archives and accounts from the field serve to examine institutional approaches to mass population displacement and discourses generated about and by interpreters.

Keywords: camps, European Volunteer Workers, interpreters, National Coal Board, refugees, technologies of care and control

Introduction

The study of interpreters who were recruited to support the refugee crisis following the 1956 uprising in Hungary permits a window on relations between the state and refugees in the context of post-war and post-colonial immigration, and what was then a new international legal regime for refugees. The fact that the crisis involved one national group moreover supports an examination of the particular ecology of social relations that emerged in the reception phases and in which non-professional interpreters played a mediating role. Sociologically-oriented approaches to interpreting studies provide a useful interdisciplinary vantage point for this type of study since they permit emphasis on translatorial activity from the standpoint of the individuals involved *qua* individuals and as members of networks (Wolf 2006).

Attention to the wider ecology of social relations also means that there is less risk of unduly reinforcing ‘discourses of refugee vulnerability’ (Ager 1999: 13), which arguably occur in cases where translation and interpreting are considered in wholly discrete terms. In other words, the resilience and adaptability that characterise the experience of many displaced persons can be more positively valorised if translation and interpreting are viewed as part of a broader spectrum of inter- and intra-cultural interaction in moments of crisis and self-realisation. We are reminded of the importance of this through Dobson (2004) who describes refugees as ‘organising their own communication channels based upon their own social distribution of signifiers in order to gain control over feelings of power, meaning and Being. These exist in a more or less autonomous position to other communication channels’ (2004: 123-24). An ecological approach to the study of social relations between state and refugee is therefore promoted (following Pardeck 2015), through which the interrelation between environmental conditions (understood as the complex interplay between psychological, social, economic, political and physical forces) and the human condition is emphasised. This allows the physical, economic and cultural constituents of the environment in question to be foregrounded in the analysis, in addition to interpreting, English language learning and diasporic relations.

An ecological approach also supports an understanding of the conditions in which the migrant other is likely to be able to respond to so-called gestures of contact and the role of translation and interpreting in creating these conditions. This idea has been investigated by Cronin (2006) in relation to Ireland, drawing on Hall’s concept of ‘articulation’ (1985, 1986). The concept is described as a mechanism (among other things) for exploring the play of power in relations of domination and subordination (Slack 1996: 112). It permits investigation of how groups with specific interests reach out and connect with others in ways that encourage investment in a particular subject position (see also Hall and Du Gay 1996). While this may over-emphasise the subordination of social relations to a particular political (hegemonic) project, Cronin finds it useful for interrogating the relations between newly arrived limited proficiency speakers and the state, claiming that ‘it is arguably easier to invest in the subject-position of intercultural contact if the host society is addressing you as a subject with a specific identity than if you are treated as a generic other whose

language and cultural difference are simply ignored' (2006: 63). In this article, 'articulation' is evaluated in the context of Cold War politics and the assimilationist immigration policies of the time. I argue that reaching out to the new arrivals in this period through interpretation and translation was as much about responding to the very practical needs of the refugees as it was about being seen to promote a particular humanitarian message internationally.

The discussion is further supported by theorisations of capital in evaluating the body of interpreters recruited in particular by the National Coal Board. In this case, post-war population movements had led to the establishment of a small Hungarian diaspora whose accumulated human, social and cultural capital impacted to some extent on the translation and interpreting services provided after the 1956 uprising. The importance of capital is interwoven into areas of the discussion that build on Wolf's (2006) work on metaphors of interpreting in her examination of interpreting in concentrationary camp life. Understanding the forms of capital accumulated and held by interpreters (see section 1) is a first stage in interrogating the usefulness of the metaphor of the interpreter as a technology against the backdrop of discourses on the 'technologies of managing displaced persons' (following Gatrell 2011b: 4) in studies of forced migration, where 'technologies' are understood in Foucauldian terms.

The discussion is informed by analysis of field accounts, Ministry of Labour and National Coal Board records of recruitment and placement, and a small number of memoirs. The analysis is specifically concerned with the significance of the allochthonous and non-professional status of most of the interpreters and their involvement in reception processes and camp life. The data is also examined for evidence of clearly defined standards and norms against which the interpreters' work was evaluated to enable comparisons with contemporary approaches to interpreting practice and provision.

1. Non-professional interpreters and interpreting studies

Studies on non-professional interpreters, with the exception of a few (e.g. Tryuk 2010, Wolf 2013), have largely focused on contemporary practice especially in healthcare settings. A considerable amount of this scholarship is based on

experimental approaches and close discourse analysis aimed at identifying issues of competence and risk (e.g. Cambridge 1999, Dubslaff and Martinsen 2005, Meeuwesen *et al.* 2010). More recently, a broader range of theoretical perspectives has emerged, in part, as a response to shifts in global socio-political and socio-economic realities - perspectives that foreground motivation, participation and engagement. A Special Issue of *The Translator* (Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012) for example casts new light on the non-professional as a social actor, giving voice to the actors themselves in ways that reflect interactions in distinct socio-political contexts (e.g. Schouter *et al.*), political principles and praxis (Boéri) and service (Hokkanen, all in the same volume) in different domains and settings.

Paradigms of activism and voluntarism - as examples of participatory and engaged perspectives - in themselves do not fully account for the involvement of the interpreters in the Hungarian refugee crisis, although some parallels may be drawn in terms of underlying commitment to a particular political and social cause. However, the concept of engagement, broadly speaking, can usefully support an examination of the allochthonous status of many of the interpreters and its impact on attitudes and approaches to interpreting during the period. In this regard the discussion examines some of the implications of recruiting interpreters that had had first hand experience of institutional interactions from a relatively powerless position as new arrivals to Britain who were subject to stringent conditions of entry in the late 1940s.

I argue that studies on non-professional interpreters often underplay the nature of capital in interpreter mediation, which limits understandings of interpreter engagement and competence. For example, it is not uncommon for a non-professional interpreter (especially those with refugee backgrounds) to be or have been a member of another professional sphere, but any transferable skills and accumulated experience is seldom reflected in research accounts, if at all. It suggests that the nature of human capital - understood generally as knowledge and skills needed to perform particular economic activities - needs to be more explicitly acknowledged in investigations of non-professional interpreting. The situation is invariably complicated by the heterogeneity of human capital common among non-professional actors, which is why other types of capital need to be considered; I limit the discussion in this instance to cultural and social forms of capital in addition to human capital. Cultural capital

(understood in Bourdieusian terms) permits consideration of the social hierarchies in which interpreters were involved and the manner of their reproduction or transformation. Social capital - understood loosely in terms of the 'links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together' (Keeley 2007: 102) – supports consideration of the social and political values of the interpreters and the potential impact on their engagement.

2. Metaphors of interpreting: interpreters as technologies of care and control

The importance of metaphors of interpreting in the study of camp life is well illustrated in Wolf's (2013) work on interpreters in Nazi concentration camps. Wolf describes how the metaphors developed in interpreting studies reflect three main iterations of the interpreter's role from gatekeeper, machine to communication facilitator. These metaphors help to locate the work of the interpreter along a spectrum of intervention and involvement that ranges typically from a machine-like linguistic converter at one end to highly engaged participation and even advocacy at the other (see also Pöchhacker 2000). In Wolf's analysis of a large corpus of survivor accounts the metaphors serve to tease out the often morally ambiguous role of the interpreter in the concentrationary setting. She argues that they also legitimise a comparison of interpreters in concentrationary and modern day community interpreting settings.

The realities of life in the reception camps set up to administer the Hungarian refugees differed radically to those reflected in Wolf's research. Nevertheless, her use of metaphor to examine the social roles played by non-professionals and instantiations of power in camp life offers a comparably useful framework for this study that also seeks to contrast past and contemporary practice. I introduce the metaphor of interpreters as technologies of care and control to encapsulate the conflicting social relations interpreters are often caught up in (see also Inghilleri 2012) and as a means to interrogate the available data, which differs substantively from the survivor accounts on which Wolf's study draws. Despite appearing to overlap with the conduit/machine metaphors resonant of earlier iterations of the interpreter's role, here 'technology' is used in a broader, Foucauldian sense. This makes it possible to

develop a social and political critique of how interpreters were positioned (structurally) in the system of displaced person management.

Foucault's early theorisations of technology concerned the impact of machines and scientific approaches to the organisation of work on human life and social order in France (Foucault 1954), whereas his later work focused more on the notion of oppressive power technologies in broader terms (see Behrent 2013 for further discussion of the development of Foucault's ideas on technology). These shifting conceptualisations draw attention to the flexibility of the concept in considering matters of individual agency and social structure in forced migration. The period in question saw changes to the management of mass population displacement (e.g. from military to civilian structures) and the techniques of management evolved into what might be termed new bureaucratic technologies implemented by international bodies such as UNRWA and international NGOs. The scale of population movement meant that the technologies of management at both international and national level encapsulated a duality of care and control, i.e. the need to protect from harm and the need to ensure an orderly approach to longer-term resettlement, thereby highlighting their potential to both empower and disempower the individual. In some cases, this ambiguity led to an insidious form of social control at the national level of population displacement management (see section 3).

In relation to the Hungarian refugee crisis, interpreters can be said to have formed part of the technologies of displacement management. As such, their role also encapsulated a duality of care and control, albeit to varying extents. In order to understand how this duality operated, issues of position and positioning need to be investigated since it is unlikely to operate consistently across actors and/or systems. Questions arise, for instance, as to the nature of control and the source of power behind the control, especially given that interpreters are caught up in power relations that are generally beyond their sphere of influence, regardless of professional status (see also Inghilleri 2005). Nevertheless, they can and do exert control over interaction, whether deliberately or inadvertently. The use of professional interpreters, for example, may support the positive control of information flow between state and limited proficiency speaker as a result of confidence in the accuracy of message transfer. Such a perspective supports the positioning of the interpreter as a technology

of care vis-à-vis limited proficiency speakers. However, in certain domains structural constraints operate with regard to voice, i.e. who can say what to whom (e.g. in a courtroom), in ways that highlight a degree of ambivalence in the positioning process. In such cases, the intended positioning is compromised through forms of control over which interpreters have little or no influence.

Although it may seem reasonable to assume that the differences in human capital between professionals and non-professionals are likely to have the greatest bearing on how the self is positioned, questions of ethics and morality further complicate matters as these are often culturally rooted in ways that impact on consistency of approach, even among professionals (see Rudvin 2007). In sum, behaviours that appear as unduly controlling (e.g. where the interpreter positions the self as someone with a duty to protect the community to which s/he belongs) may be viewed as fully warranted by some interpreters. For other interlocutors in interaction, the lack of transparency with regard to the drivers behind interpreter decision-making impact on expectations. While this might be more problematic among non-professionals, it is not limited to this category of interpreter.

3. Post-war migration to Britain: structural constraints and lived experience

To understand how the Hungarian diaspora that would play a role in the recruitment of interpreters in 1956 became established, this section provides a brief outline of the approach to post-war migration and its management in Britain. In the immediate post-war period, the recruitment of migrant labour was instrumental to reconstruction efforts, agricultural and industrial productivity and support for the newly established National Health Service (Kay and Miles 1992: 1). The European Volunteer Worker Scheme (EVWS), for example, led to the recruitment of approximately 80,000 displaced persons in the period 1946-48 from among the stateless and homeless persons housed in camps in Germany and Austria, for whom ‘home’ and ‘home coming’ were deeply contested notions (Gatrell 2011a). It is noteworthy that the term ‘displaced person’ was privileged over ‘refugee’ to avoid impressions that long-term settlement in Britain was inevitable (Wasserstein 1996). Individuals were subject to strict terms of entry and conditions of employment; in fact the stringent conditions

and approach to managing the scheme have led to it being described by some as akin to a slave market (Gatrell 2011b: 14).

Individuals who arrived through the scheme joined others who were permitted to settle through other means. For instance, civilian status was awarded to around 25,000 former prisoners of war in 1949 (Isaac 1954) and approximately 100,000 Polish forces personnel who had worked under British command were permitted to settle. Migration from Ireland and the 'New Commonwealth' (Caribbean and South Asia) also increased around this time. Due to severe housing shortages, many were housed in camps on former army bases where they remained in some cases for over a decade, reflecting the bitter irony that freedom and stability were made available through a built environment redolent of the constraints and suffering of recent experience. Expressions of horror were recorded, for example, by Polish arrivals at Northwick camp on seeing the watchtowers and barbed wire fences (Biegus and Biegus 2013).

The historiography of post-war immigration in Britain places emphasis on racialised approaches to recruitment of migrant labour in a context in which concerns about assimilability were prominent (e.g. Kay and Miles 1988, McDowell 2008, Messina 2001, Paul 1997), although this account has been contested by some (e.g. Hansen 2000). The favouring of certain nationalities over others was observed even within the EVWS (Baldwin-Edwards and Schain 1994). Relatively few Hungarians arrived through the scheme: 2,407, compared with the largest single national group of Latvians 12, 488 (Isaac 1954:182, Tannahill 1958), which accounts for the very small pool of potential interpreters available following the uprising in the following decade.

3.1 Balt Cygnet

Limited accounts exist of the experiences of those recruited through the EVWS and the communication challenges faced on arrival. However, McDowell's (2004) study based on the oral testimonies of 25 Latvian women recruited through the Balt Cygnet programme provides valuable insight into issues of intercultural contact and selfhood. The study explores the impact that different types of work had on the future lives of the women and their experiences of social and geographical mobility. The testimonies

reveal the complex interplay of issues of identity, class, race, family and work life in the process of translating the self, building resilience and reconciling difference.

Many of the women were educated and came from reasonably wealthy backgrounds. The testimonies show how the women established their own communication channels and how their continued contact with their home culture and language led to a very cautious investment in the subject-position of intercultural contact. Language issues are not afforded a central place in their recollections of resettlement, possibly due to poor recall (the women were all retired at the time of the study). However, it seems that the workplace offered both a refuge of identity preservation and a mechanism for opening up to difference, with many of the women expressing a 'commitment to their vocation rather than some notion of shared Englishness' (p. 50). In this case, being treated as a 'generic other' engendered a strong sense of in-group solidarity and manual labour (for which language proficiency was not a pre-requisite) enabled them to assimilate on their own terms. Conflicts in relation to class, expectations about and capacity for hard work - which was often considered greater than the indigenous population - and not, it appears, communication barriers shaped the women's sense of being and control over their lives in the initial phases of resettlement.

The experiences of these women cannot be used as a proxy for the experiences of the Hungarians who arrived through the same scheme. In gender terms, we may also assume that their experiences differed considerably from those of the Hungarian men sent to work primarily in the mining industry and who were seconded to work as interpreters by the National Coal Board as discussed later. However, the role of manual labour in creating intra-group solidarities together with limited geographical and social mobility serve in some respects to illustrate Dobson's (2004) earlier description of how social signifiers are created among refugee groups outside of other communication channels and the impact that the accumulation of social and cultural capital has on this process.

3.2 Language, public order and social control

During the immediate post-war period other national groups appeared to feel the language barrier more acutely and experience less control over assimilation processes,

even where assimilation was viewed as desirable. In particular, many in the Polish community reported a lack of understanding of the hardships they had endured on the part of the receiving population (Kushner and Knox 1999). These perceptions were exacerbated by the linguistic and cultural isolation of the camps in which they were housed. There is no suggestion in these accounts that interpreting provision was an anticipated form of support for acculturation and assimilation. Instead, issues of provision appeared limited to problems of public order that arose periodically. Kushner and Knox (ibid.) for example draw attention to the criminal activity prevalent among some sections of the Polish community for whom discipline could be problematic as a result of difficult experiences prior to travelling to Britain. Problems with inter-lingual communication meant that some of the indigenous population considered deportation too draconian in such cases, although the systematic provision of an interpreter in the court system was not necessarily understood as either reasonable or desirable:

The problem of the alien accused of an offence and unable to understand English is, as you realise, not one confined to the Poles and it would be impossible to make special arrangements for them...A foreigner in some respects is in a more favourable position than a native in his country. The proceedings are explained to him through an interpreter and the magistrate is most scrupulous to explain what is happening.

(PRO, N4133/725/55, 23 August 1948, in Kushner and Knox 1999: 234).

In an addendum to this correspondence, it was agreed that 'a reliable interpreter' should be made available in court, but this person 'should not be an advocate to plead the accused's case' (PRO PR 80/2, 18 September 1948, in ibid.). This strongly suggests that there was a lack of available normative frameworks for interpreting activity such as it was provided during the period in question, although we may infer from the comments that reliability was - at least in part - equated with impartiality.

The various government ministries, voluntary organisations and workplace welfare officers involved in arranging employment and accommodation for individuals recruited through the EVWS made English language learning a priority during this

period, albeit with mixed success. Steinert (2011) describes how English language classes were set up in camps and hostels. According to a 1949 survey, take-up was poor (only 5% did so), chiefly because of tiredness after the working day and also because many thought they would be returning home within a short period of time (Steinert *ibid.*: 241). Such sentiments echo the experiences of Bosnian refugees who were granted temporary leave to remain in Britain in the 1990s (Kelly 2004). These accounts also show the relatively minor position occupied by translation and interpreting in the ecology of social relations following the initial reception phases and so any unwillingness to engage with English language learning cannot be attributed to the idea that they served as a disincentive.

The situation with regard to language learning was further complicated, however, by the ambivalence towards the long-term settlement of those recruited under the EVWS. As individuals grew more frustrated at the precariousness of their position, some started to feign limited English proficiency to avoid being recruited into certain jobs (Kay and Miles 1992), thereby reflecting a tension in the approach to reaching out to others that was premised on short-term labour gains. The reaction of some of the workers in subverting the gesture of intercultural contact (i.e. the provision of employment, accommodation and English language classes) as a means of protest is one example of the refugee voice being asserted to challenge dominant power structures and counter perceived abuses. The conscious re-appropriation of the native language in order to assert difference becomes a powerful element in the process of subject-constitution and ability to self-realise in the new context. This is an example of self-reflexivity that is enabled by investment in intercultural contact but that also draws attention to the potential limits of that investment as it reveals the level of social control the individual is actually subject to.

4. The Hungarian refugee crisis

The refugee crisis that followed the uprising of October 1956 constituted the ‘first large-scale resettlement’ undertaken within the framework of the 1951 Convention and the Statute of UNHCR (Ziek 2013: 43). It was the first time that Britain’s commitment to the Convention had been put to the test and it also served as a first test of Austria’s newly concluded neutral status (Granville 2006, 2010). At the

international level, the crisis marked an important milestone in the development of humanitarianism and re-cast the refugee problem as an international issue as opposed to a military one (Malkki 1995, Gémes 2009). The UNHCR coordinated the emergency relief effort and by 1958 approximately 200,000 refugees had been helped to emigrate to Western European and other countries with the support of voluntary agencies such as the International Red Cross and the Inter-Governmental Committee for European Migration (Holborn 1960).

Among the competing narratives about the reasons for the uprising on 23rd October 1956, the seeds of what is often described as a spontaneous ‘people’s revolution’ have been most commonly attributed to the reform movement that gained momentum following Stalin’s death in 1953 (see Litván 1997). Criticisms of Stalin’s methods by First Secretary Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956 raised hopes that reforms would be undertaken. When nothing changed in the months that followed discontent spread: students took to the streets of Budapest in protest and strikes broke out across the country. A small delegation headed to the Radio Building on 23rd October in an attempt to broadcast a sixteen-point list of policy reforms, which ranged from calls to remove Soviet troops to better economic planning (see the UN Report 1957). The violent clashes that followed led to further unrest around the country and the creation of Revolutionary and Workers’ Councils, which took over the responsibilities of the local government offices. Imre Nagy was installed as the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and persuaded the Soviet troops to withdraw, only for them to return in early November following his announcement that Hungary intended to abolish one-party rule, withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and become neutral. Soviet rule was re-established through the appointment of János Kádár to the head of government after Imre Nagy was removed. Despite initial assumptions that numbers seeking to leave the country would be limited, following the very violent repressions by the Soviet troops in early November 3-5,000 started crossing the border into Austria daily (Gémes 2009), forcing the Austrian government to seek support from the international community.

The crisis coincided with the military phase of the British-French intervention in the Suez, a development that divided the west (Boyle 2005, Gorman 2001). The Suez crisis generated its own refugee crisis after approximately 40,000 Jews were expelled

by Egypt (De Arango 2013), but the treatment of both groups differed markedly. De Arango's comparative study of the British and French responses to Hungary and Suez draws attention to the political instrumentalisation of the Hungarian refugees who had the potential to serve propaganda purposes in the context of the Cold War. These refugees served to deflect attention away from the Suez intervention, at least temporarily, allowing Britain to promote its humanitarian credentials. However, as with the EVW scheme, the way in which refugees were selected revealed that the focus of the British authorities was on finding suitable labour rather than offering humanitarian support *tout court*.

Public support for the refugees in Britain was broadly forthcoming, despite early government reticence (see Gatrell 2011a). The profile of the 'vigorous, courageous and politically active anti-Communist escapee' (Cohen 2012: 158) also served to boost support for their reception as individuals who could contribute to the life of the nation at a time of continued labour shortages. Unprecedented media attention to the crisis also impacted on public opinion (Beckett and Russell 2015) and served to promote the political instrumentalisation of the refugees. For the first time, as Gémes (2009) observes, the unfolding of events was captured on film and disseminated across media publications and newsreels. Many British families offered accommodation and in return were able to access financial, linguistic and cultural support in the form of language guides and advice on food preferences (see Taylor 2015). This level of media support contrasts markedly with the portrayal of more recent migrant crises and helps to explain levels of antipathy among the general population towards free interpreting provision for the most vulnerable in the contemporary age. This being said, concern was raised in the House of Commons for interpreting to be discontinued as soon as possible:

Sir P. Agnew: Could my right hon. Friend say whether encouragement is being given to refugees to learn English so that the expense of interpreters will no longer be needed?

Mr. Macleod: Yes, Sir.

(House of Commons debate, 11 April 1957 vol 568 cc1286-8).

Refugees started arriving in November 1956 and by October 1957, over 21,000 had arrived in Britain, their immigration status having been determined overseas (Council of Europe 1957). Support was chiefly coordinated through the Lord Mayor of London's National Hungarian and Central European Relief Fund, which allocated £1 million of the funds raised to the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR) (Van Selm-Thorburn 1998: 216). Refugees arrived in Britain through various schemes, including 'bulk schemes' under the auspices of the BCAR, a National Coal Board scheme and individual visas. The Red Cross, in conjunction with the National Coal Board and the Inter-Governmental Committee for European Migration, arranged transportation of 7,500 refugees to Britain and provided welfare, accommodation and assistance once they had arrived (Red Cross Website).

Many arrived at Blackbushe airport in Surrey from where they were taken to temporary accommodation to be interviewed before being moved on to hostels, former medical facilities and military barracks, especially at Aldershot, and later at RAF Hednesford in Staffordshire (De Aranjó 2013). The camps were never intended to be a long term housing solution as the government wanted to avoid the levels of stagnation observed earlier among the displaced 'hard core' following the Second World War that manifested itself in an unwillingness or even psychological lack of fitness to cope with life outside (Van Selm-Thorburn 1998: 216). Although it proved difficult to move families out of temporary accommodation, most individuals spent a couple of months at most in the reception camps. The distribution of refugees around the country was led more by employment considerations than accommodation availability (Hynes 2011). By the end of 1957 only around 1,000 were without work, most having been found employment by the Ministry of Labour or through their own connections (Council of Europe 1957).

4.1 Interpreter recruitment: navigating forms of capital in service provision

The administrative and logistical arrangements for bringing refugees to Britain were facilitated by interpreters who were recruited by the Ministry of Labour and the National Coal Board as part of its own programme to recruit miners from the refugee camps in Austria. Very limited data is available on the recruitment of interpreters by

the Ministry of Labour; however a House of Commons debate on 11 April 1957 reveals that the Ministry had employed (after some form of security screening) a total of 342 interpreters on a full and part-time basis within a relatively short period of time. Of these 188 were British subjects, 124 were Hungarians and 30 were of other nationality.

The most comprehensive data available on interpreter recruitment is found in the archives of the National Coal Board. The focus was on encouraging Hungarian speakers to come forward to undertake a secondment from the mining industry. The urgent need for language support is evidenced through requests such as one sent on 10 December 1956 to help recruit interpreters willing to be seconded from their mining jobs: ‘the best kind of interpreter in the circumstances is probably a Hungarian who has already established himself as a British miner’ and one who has been naturalised as ‘this reduces the passport difficulties’¹. The type of human capital valorised in the request shows concern for bureaucratic efficiency, although at the interview stage the candidate’s general level of English and character were evaluated, as well as his pit record.

Interviews were held at different locations around the country, although it is not known how many were interviewed in total. Written comments produced following the interviews provide insight into the human, social and cultural capital of the candidates, showing a range of motivations and constraints: ‘He was anxious to do all he could to help Hungarian refugees’, ‘He had no objection to leaving the locality for short periods as an interpreter, but expressed the disire (sic) to spend his weekends with his family’, ‘This man’s English was not good, and I was not happy about his background and family life’². One internal communication describes a male who had come forward to offer services as an interpreter and English teacher as having left Hungary in 1944. His previous occupation is listed as ‘barrister’ and current occupation as ‘kitchen hand’³, and suggests that interpreting may have been a way to enhance social capital by breaking free of the rigid social hierarchies governing his

¹ TNA COAL 751/2465/613514 W.P. Speak Industrial Relations to All Industrial Relations Directors 10 December 1956.

² TNA COAL 751/2465/613514 Interviews held at Bridgetown Hostel, 17 January 1957.

³ TNA COAL 751/2465/63514 T.L. Evans, Deputy Labour Director, West Midlands Division to V.C.C Saunders, Industrial Relations Department, 7 December 1956.

residence (albeit temporarily), and an opportunity to draw on the human capital accumulated through a previous professional role. Similar profiles are found in the data proving this was not an isolated case.

The matter of salary proved a thorny issue for some interpreters due to the long working hours and working conditions. In fact, the difficult conditions led to the withdrawal or threat to withdraw service in some cases. This reflects the irony that while they may have been positioned as a technology of care in relation to the refugees, they were not necessarily afforded similar care within the broader system. In a letter to the Coal Board dated 17 June 1957 one interpreter explains: ‘When I gave notice at Knutton Hostel I did it because conditions there were a bit too rough’⁴. Limited cooking facilities and antagonisms over other shared facilities contributed to feelings of unease, not just among interpreters but also among some of the refugees for whom the cultural shock of the new environment was overwhelming. The threats over the withdrawal of labour on the part of some of the interpreters echoes similar resistance shown by professional interpreters in the contemporary age to exploitative treatment by state and private agencies, and is a reminder of the ease with which structural considerations can override human concerns and portray the interpreter as a form of technology in a more literal, dehumanised sense.

Interpreters were often recruited to perform multiple roles such as hostel wardens or teachers of English, which contributed to their long working hours. However, an individual’s suitability for interpreting appeared to be valued above his/her teaching ability due to the small pool from which interpreters were recruited: ‘people who can speak Hungarian are very hard to get and worth taking on for their nature as interpreters whether they are much good at teaching or not’⁵. Several communications also attest to the problems of obtaining timely authorisation for interpreter payment, leading to fears that the services of certain interpreters would no longer be guaranteed: ‘This man who was originally appointed as an instructor has proved to be our most reliable, and efficient interpreter...I would like your approval quickly,

⁴ TNA COAL 751/2465/613514 Letter from Mr L. Freisinger, Hungarian Interpreter, 17 June 1957.

⁵ TNA751/2465/613514 Urgent letter from D.B.J. Kensit, Training Branch to T.L. Evans, Deputy Labour Director, West Midlands Division.

please, otherwise he may be lost to us'⁶. For those sent to accompany the National Coal Board on visits to Austria, a communication dated 8 March 1957 determined that interpreters seconded from pit work 'should receive an ex gratia payment at the rate of 10/- a day to take account of the excessive hours and dislocation of domestic life to which they had been subjected'⁷.

Despite the rigorous interview process, lingering doubts hung over the motives of some interpreters who came forward. Rumours were quick to circulate about the intentions of some interpreters recruited to support the work of the Ministry of Labour in the reception camps that even reached the attention of the House of Commons in 1957:

Mr. Fisher asked the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether he is satisfied that the security screening of Hungarian interpreters is adequate and that they correctly interpret the Government's policy for the refugees; and if he will make a statement.

Miss Hornsby-Smith: The recruitment of interpreters for employment in connection with the Hungarian refugees is now carried out by the Ministry of Labour and National Service with the help of the Home Office. My right hon. friend is satisfied that the arrangements are adequate to exclude unsuitable persons. It is no part of the function of the interpreter to explain Government policy to the refugees.

Mr. Fisher: Would not my hon. friend agree that in the early days, at any rate, there were instances of interpreters with Communist leanings who actually advised refugees not to accept work in the coal mines here because, they said, it would be equivalent to slave labour and like a concentration camp? I have heard of cases. Have these misleading statements now been corrected?

⁶ TNA COAL 751/2465/613514 Letter from T.L. Evans, Deputy Labour Director, West Midlands Division, 21 January 1957.

⁷ TNA COAL 751/2465/613514 Letter from Departmental Secretary, G.S. Crook, to All Divisional Industrial Relations Directors, 8 March 1957.

Miss Hornsby-Smith: If my hon. friend has evidence of any case, we shall be only too ready to look into it. It must be realised that Hungarian is not a very common language for people in this country. In the very early days use had not unnaturally to be made of some of the refugees who spoke English, and there were one or two cases in which, perhaps, the authorities were not altogether satisfied with the translations. We have done our best to find and provide reliable interpreters.

(Hansard record, House of Commons Debate on Hungarian Refugees: 07 March 1957 vol 566 cc510-3).

It is interesting to observe that the problems are articulated in terms of a Communist narrative when it seems plausible that the comments were made by interpreters who had been involved in the EVWS and who were simply reacting against the conditions of their employment. Without access to the interpreters themselves it is impossible to tease out the full complexity of the impact of their social and cultural capital on the interpreting process in this case. The evidence suggests that the limited pool of potential interpreters created tensions for officials who needed to meet the needs of the displaced expediently, which meant compromising on certain politically-oriented recruitment ideals. The absence of normative frameworks for recruitment and monitoring (i.e. we do not know what was understood by 'reliable' interpreters) is further evidence of the short-term approach taken to interpreter provision.

5. Interpreters in camp life: accounts from the field

In the post-war period the refugee camp 'became emplaced as a standardized, generalizable technology of power in the management of mass displacement' Malkki (1995: 498). In the context of the Hungarian crisis, the camp plays an important role in understanding the role of translation and interpreting in the lived experience of the new arrivals. Although the camps in question were always destined to be places of transit, they invite analysis as an assemblage of people, institutions and organisations and the built environment, and as linguistically and culturally mediated spaces in which particular values and practices are produced (following Ramadan 2012).

An account by Red Cross Welfare Officer (1957), Mr Brian Ruscoe, assigned to work at RAF Hednesford sets out recollections of his involvement in the reception of refugees in February, March and April of 1957. He describes the myriad organisations involved in administering to the new arrivals, including the BCAR and Women's Voluntary Service. Hednesford accommodated a total 1,200 refugees between 1956 and 1958 when the camp was closed. Ruscoe describes the camp in militaristic terms with reference to the guardroom and gates and the Camp Commandant's bungalow but mention is also made of activities organised to help relieve the boredom experienced by new arrivals, thereby highlighting the camp's ambivalent status as a technology of care and control. The camp regime and spatial organisation appeared to allow for little general interaction between the interpreters and the other workers, leading to questions about their working conditions and revealing a lack of understanding of what interpreting entailed:

One thing that always puzzled the British staff was that the Hungarian Interpreters were always given the afternoon off duty to rest before the intake but we had to work through the day, we would have our evening meal and then prepare for the intake or, if we were lucky, relax for a couple of hours.

(Ruscoe 1957, n.p.)

In the following extract a desire is expressed for continuity of interaction through the form of a single interpreter, whose accumulated social capital through previous professional experience is clearly valorised in the account, albeit in a highly gendered manner. The connection of the interpreter in question to the Red Cross in Hungary was deemed advantageous, despite initial criticism of the level of initial language competence shown. The rather glib comment at the end, however, again suggests a lack of understanding of why and how individuals came forward to offer their services as interpreters and a tendency to view the interpreter as a non-specialist whose language skills could be employed as needed:

Our interpreters came from the 'pool' so we didn't have a particular one... one of our favourite people was Ferenc Glock; he was friendly, cool, calm and collected, a lawyer by profession. His sister Edit 'Edith' had come over

with him and since she had belonged to the Hungarian Red Cross... we took her on as our own personal interpreter. She was a bit uncertain of her translation at first but soon improved and everybody was happy, we had our own Interpreter and Edith had something to occupy her time.

(Ruscoe 1957, n.p.)

Ruscoe's account also highlights the multiple roles interpreters were required to undertake in addition to their core function in the camps, echoing earlier multi-role functions expected of those interpreters recruited to work in the hostels. For example, when Red Cross workers tasked with trying to trace relatives experienced very high workloads they seconded interpreters to help out:

When we first started, tracing took up most of our time, but, as we settled down and became used to the system and more people were on the camp and demanding our attention we would set an Interpreter at a table with a supply of forms and would only become involved if there was a problem.

(Ruscoe 1957, n.p.)

Although it is impossible to extrapolate from one account how widespread such requests were among the camp, the positioning of the interpreter as a source of general administrative help is reflected in more recent accounts of interpreters in public services in Britain where photocopying duties and even statement-taking for police services are reported (e.g. Tipton 2012). This lack of understanding of the specialist skills of the interpreter contributes to the creation of the heteronomous social field in which interpreters operate. Arguably, Ruscoe's status as a volunteer also influenced the emergent social relations in the field, in particular through expectations that everyone would be disposed to contributing to the general effort in whichever way required. Although this might not have seemed unreasonable at the time, the persistence of such attitudes in modern day community interpreting settings has served to the detriment of professionalisation and continued under-valorisation of interpreting as a skilled occupation.

A second account of camp life is provided by Dr Elizabeth Schenk⁸, a naturalized British subject, who came to Britain from Czechoslovakia in 1948 and who worked as a technical librarian in the Office of the Receiver for the Metropolitan Police. The account reflects her experiences as an interpreter at Crookham camp near Aldershot and was sent for the attention of the Home Office in 1957. The report was not commissioned by the Home Office and was simply presented as a series of reflections on her experiences and suggestions for improvements to interpreting service provision.

Dr Schenk's report reveals tensions between the areas in which cultural brokerage by interpreters is seen to be advantageous and the lack of direction given to interpreters by their employer, thereby corroborating the absence of normative frameworks governing interpreting activity during the period. Her own actions attest to the desired level of cultural brokerage in relation to new arrivals who often demonstrated mistrust of authority figures: 'I explained to [the new arrivals] that there is no reason to be scared because the English police are here to help.' Later in the report, she describes what she sees as warranted intervention by interpreters with regard to the choice given to new arrivals about employment opportunities. As many had simply been directed to jobs under Hungary's political regime, the idea of choice was confusing for many. Further, the lack of experience in understanding the value of the Pound led Dr Schenk to assert that the interpreters should be encouraged to help manage expectations of the new arrivals.

The report also details reflections on both the interpreters and refugees with whom Dr Schenk worked. Among the different categories of refugee mentioned, special attention is given to those who had been released from prison during the uprising and did not leave for political reasons. These are described variously as 'adventurers', 'work shy', 'weak', and 'bad types', epithets which are further qualified: 'There are those who told me bluntly that they do not intend to work at all as the Red Cross has the duty to look after them'; '[some] look upon life in a camp or hostel as an opportunity to misuse the freedom here', leading to the comment: 'I'm afraid this sort of refugee will have to be treated in a more firm way.'

⁸ TNA HO 352/145/C613513 Report by Dr Elizabeth Schenk on her work as an interpreter at Crookham Camp, 1957.

Dr Schenk's comments show clear alignment with the receiving country authorities and suggest a sense of duty to serve as the eyes and ears of the government and report on anyone deemed to be non-compliant or abusing the good will of the country. This level of self assertion is unlikely to be echoed by interpreters working in today's public services as it would be deemed to breach their impartiality (commonly set out in professional codes of ethics) and duty not to pass comment on matters beyond the interaction for which they have been employed. The moral outrage felt by this interpreter at the attitude of some arrivals led her to believe that she could influence decision making in a way that demonstrates how the duality of care and control could play out at the interpersonal level.

The report also describes dealings of other interpreters working in the camps and perceived role transgressions. The Ministry of Labour set up an office in the camp as it did in other camps, but soon realized that the refugees appeared highly suspicious with regard to its work. One month before the office opened it transpired that one of the interpreters had recruited some of the refugees on behalf of a local agency to work in domestic service. The working and living conditions were deemed so poor that many had returned to the camp and were fearful of being given similar roles. In another example, an interpreter was known to have given advice on having an artificial abortion. The report recognises that these were isolated examples and that interpreters often acted often out of a sense of goodwill without realising the harm they were doing. This seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that some individuals came forward to interpret (having seen adverts in the local press) but only stayed for a few days before leaving.

The report culminates in a number of recommendations to the Home Office, among which screening and vetting, and control over information dissemination are cited as desirable. Recommendations are also made in relation to the way in which interpreters interact with refugees, based on comments such as: '[refugees] should not be told that 'they better get out of here if they do not like it' and 'I heard very rude and offensive language being used [by interpreters]. The level of interpersonal verbal aggression observed is of particular interest as there is evidence of non-professional interpreters in the contemporary age adopting similar attitudes (see Tipton and Furmanek 2016).

These comments also attracted the attention of a Home Office official⁹ who made connections between the earlier experiences of some of the interpreters as EVWs:

There is apparently some jealousy among resident Hungarians at what is being done for the new intake, and a feeling that the new refugees should be tied to employment in the same way as they were when they came as EVWs.

A letter dated 1 Feb 1957 from New Scotland Yard¹⁰ describes a new scheme for the recruitment of interpreters designed to ‘meet a good many of the problems’ noted by Dr Schenk, although no data are available on the nature of changes or how they were implemented.

5.1 Communication issues in meeting the healthcare needs of refugees

The healthcare services were in particular need of support in the initial months after arrival both within the camps and the National Health Service. Due to the technical demands it proved most challenging to recruit interpreters for this area, but debates revealed limited understanding of the tension between expectations of language learning and the need for medical care as reflected in a House of Commons on November 1956 in the earliest phases of refugee reception:

We are very happy and honoured to have the Hungarian visitors here, but I hope that they will learn English rather than that we shall have to learn Hungarian. We have, in fact, found that the matron of one hospital speaks Hungarian, and in a number of cases special English classes are being organised.

(Ian Mcleod, MP for Enfield West, House of Commons, 22 November 1956).

In considering the wider context of immigration, Bivins (2015: 70) draws attention to the tensions around the health of the new arrivals and eligibility to remain, particularly due to the anticipated incidence of tuberculosis. However, she asserts that

⁹ TNA HO 352/145/C613513 Home Office response to Dr Schenk’s report, 14 January 1957.

¹⁰ TNA HO 352/145/C613513 Letter addressed to J.I. Elliott, New Scotland Yard, 1 February 1957.

Britain wanted to promote a very open door approach to humanitarianism in the context of the Cold War and usual restrictions on entry on grounds of health were relaxed. Engagement with a mobile screening programme was limited as a result of communication barriers preventing ‘proper explanation of its purpose’ (ibid.: 71). The subsequent recruitment of interpreters served to convey the message that medical examination was not going to be ‘used as a tool of social or territorial exclusion’¹¹ and take-up increased as a result.

Refugees required medical attention for wounds sustained as a result of the conflict and travel overland to the border with Austria, and even airsickness. As Dormandy *et al.* (1978) observe, the language barrier led to feelings of unease among medical personnel at making diagnoses of airsickness ‘after a cursory glance’ (p. 1184). It is not known what training, if any, the interpreters received but it seems clear that very little direction was given, leading many to wander around the camps interacting with refugees making ‘vague promises’ and ‘giving hopeful but inaccurate information’ (ibid.), echoing comments in Dr Schenk’s report above. Some tended to embellish information with ‘homely advice’ and even remonstrate with patients perceived as difficult (ibid.), again evidencing the unwarranted involvement that can arise among non-professional interpreters acting out of a misplaced sense of care.

Generally speaking, the health of the refugees was good on arrival and incidence of mental health problems reasonably low. The language barrier, however, was particularly problematic in the context of psychiatric care and the lack of suitably qualified interpreters led to a temporary clinic being set up at Maudsley Hospital with a Hungarian-speaking psychiatrist (Mezey 1960). Dormandy *et al.* (1978: 1187) observe that psychological issues were more likely to emerge a few months after settling in the new context: ‘In a heterogeneous, ill-organised and often disillusioned crowd, comradeship, leadership and respect for those left behind – the familiar foundations for front-line morale – were lacking’. Mental anguish also occurred as a result of misinformation circulating around the camps (some of which, as observed above, came from the interpreters themselves), with paranoid states emerging in some people who found themselves in complete linguistic isolation. These were often found

¹¹ TNA MH55/2275 Minutes Central Health Services Council Standing Tuberculosis Advisory Committee Meeting, 2 April 1957.

to resolve themselves once verbal communication was made possible (Mezey 1960: 636), suggesting that in-group solidarity within the camps was not automatically generated or made possible within the structures of camp life.

Conclusion

This article has examined archival evidence of the recruitment and use of non-professional interpreters in the reception of refugees who came to Britain following the 1956 Hungarian uprising. It introduced the metaphor of the interpreter as a technology of care and control as a means to interrogate recruitment practices and discourses about and by interpreters during the period. The metaphor serves as a useful complement to others that have emerged in interpreting studies as it permits a broader conceptualisation of the interpreter's activity and understanding of position and positioning in the wider system of refugee management. Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisations of technology, the metaphor has helped to illuminate the nature of epistemological structures of the period in terms of how refugeeness was constructed and managed in response to very different international imperatives in the 1940s and 1950s.

The discussion pointed to the impact of accumulated social and cultural capital on the construction of interpreter selfhood and the approach to interpreting observed in the available reports, although the small number of such reports precludes generalisation. The sense of frustration expressed by some of the interpreters in relation to the unequal treatment as displaced persons they had received a decade earlier means that the (psychological) control they sometimes tried to exert over the new arrivals needs perhaps to be understood as a mechanism of their own sense-making processes as their new identity confronted pre-war identities and memories of their homeland, and not necessarily as a desire to further Communist political ideals.

Retuning to Cronin's position set out in the introduction, the selection and screening processes undertaken in Austria prior to arrival on British soil permitted the government to treat the refugees in effect as a 'generic other' and rely on manual labour as the principal mechanism for reaching out and encouraging the investment of individuals in the subject-position of intercultural contact, as was also seen in the case

of the Latvian women recruited through the Balt Cygnet scheme. This contrasts markedly with the situation facing many refugees today for whom the gestures of contact in so-called 'superdiverse' societies (see Vertovec 2007) are less assured. In this sense there is arguably a greater onus on states to avoid treating migrants as a generic other, but in practical terms the ecology of language support is more problematic due to literacy rates being more variable than in the case of the Hungarian refugees and limited diasporic solidarity.

The artefacts provide some evidence of the heteronomy of the interpreting field and why it persists in the modern day. The lack of understanding of what interpreting involves, how non-professionals handle interaction are problems that continue to hinder professionalisation and quality service delivery in Britain and beyond. This suggests that Dr Schenk's recommendations did not help to lay robust foundations for the future organisation of language support services and that interpreting was simply viewed as a short-term problem during the period in question. Further research would provide greater insight into how the ecology of language regimes has developed in less culturally and linguistically homogenous crises which have come to characterise the contemporary age.

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