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## **Axiological and Ideological Reframing in the Interpreting of Syrian Refugee's Trauma Discourse: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Interviews as an Example**

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### **Abstract**

Trauma discourse can actively participate in truthfully reflecting victims' painful experiences. The importance of this kind of discourse increases when it is delivered at certain times, in certain places and to certain people. If the speaker succeeds in the convincing audience, different reactions take place the least of which is driving people's understanding towards a point that the speaker hopes to. This happens when both the speaker and his audience share the same language. When a discourse is delivered in a language foreign to the audience the only alternative is translation and interpreting. It is expected that throughout interpreting, refugees' feelings and ideas are and have to be reflected to foreigners. To achieve such a goal, interpreting has to be as transparent as possible. The interpreter's axiology and ideology may, however, play a decisive role in obstructing the transference of these significant experiences. The present article tries to investigate the degree to which Arabic trauma discourse is distorted in interpreting. It hypothesizes that interpreters are consciously or/and unconsciously socio-politically motivated to delete, add or improperly substitute the linguistic indicators used to convey emotional responses to the crisis. It adopts Baker's (2006) understanding of narrative reframing. It investigates the rendering of the interpersonal linguistic tools suggested in Martin and White's (2005) proposal of appraisal theory. The data is taken from the UNHCR's interviews with Syrian refugees. The thorough examination of the interpreting of these interviews reveals that the

interpreters play an effective role in discursively underestimating or exaggerating the interviewees' suffering.

**Keywords:** Trauma Discourse UNHCR institutional hegemony and interpreter axiology Ideology Syrian Refugees

إعادة الصياغة القيمية والفكرية في الترجمة الشفوية لخطاب صدمة اللاجئين السوريين:  
مقابلات المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشؤون اللاجئين كمثال

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#### الملخص:

يمكن لخطاب الصدمة أن يساهم بفاعلية في عكس التجارب المؤلمة للضحايا. تزداد أهمية هذا النوع من الخطاب عندما يواجه في أوقات معينة وفي أماكن معينة ولأشخاص معينين. إذا نجح المتحدث في اقناع الجمهور، فمن المتوقع ان تحدث ردود أفعال مختلفة أقلها هي توجيه فهم الناس نحو نقطة يأملها المتحدث. ويحدث هذا عندما يتشارك المتحدث والجمهور نفس اللغة. اما عندما يتم تقديم خطاب بلغة أجنبية للجمهور، فإن البديل الوحيد هو الترجمة التحريرية او الشفوية. من الضروري ان تصل مشاعر اللاجئين وأفكارهم الى المشاهدين والمستمعين من خلال الترجمة الشفوية. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، يجب أن تكون الترجمة الشفوية شفافة قدر الإمكان. وقد يلعب توجه المترجم القيمي والفكري دورًا حاسمًا في إعاقة نقل هذه التجارب المهمة. تحاول هذه الدراسة التحقق من مدى تشوه خطاب الصدمة العربي خلال الترجمة. وهي تفترض أن لدى المترجمين الشفويين دوافع اجتماعية وسياسية تقودهم شعوريا او لا شعوريا لحذف أو إضافة أو استبدال المؤشرات اللغوية المستخدمة لنقل التجارب العاطفية. وهي تتبنى طريقة فهم منى بيكر (٢٠٠٦) لإعادة الصياغة السردية. وتستخدم الدراسة الأدوات اللغوية المقترحة في نظرية التقييم لمارتن ووايت (٢٠٠٥). تتكون العينة من مقابلات المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشؤون اللاجئين مع اللاجئين السوريين. يكشف تحليل هذه المقابلات أن المترجمين الشفويين يلعبون دورًا فعالًا في الاستخفاف أو المبالغة في تقدير معاناة الأشخاص الذين تمت مقابلتهم. الكلمات المفتاحية: اعادة الصياغة القيمي والفكري، خطاب الصدمة، الهيمنة المؤسساتية، المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشؤون اللاجئين، اللاجئين السوريين



## 1. Introduction

Influenced by the Arab Spring uprisings launched in some countries in the region against their tyrannical rulers such as Tunisia and Egypt, pro-democracy protests erupted in the city of Daraa in southern Syria in March 2011. The peaceful uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has turned into a full-scale civil war. This conflict brought death to many people, destroyed Syrian cities and dragged other countries into it. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey struggle to contain about ninety-three per cent of the largest wave of displacement in modern history. The suffering of refugees continues after crossing the sea, as they have to cross several European countries on a journey of additional dangers that become more severe with the harsh climate, and the presence of children and women in refugee convoys. This suffering has also multiplied with the accumulation of thousands on the borders of European countries, some of which have resorted to closing their borders to restrict refugees and limit their use of their lands as transit countries to reach the target destination, which is often Germany or some Western European countries that have a good reputation for receiving refugees and providing them with the requirements of a decent life. The observation of the Syrian refugees over the past years reveals many facts that summarize the torment and tragedies of the war. Many of them left their homes without bringing any document proving their identity. Some died by drowning at sea without anyone hearing or knowing about them, and without even having their bodies recovered for proper burial. Some of them died of suffocation in trucks that were not intended to pile people up in such inhumane ways. Other refugees died in camps in neighbouring countries, either from the cold in the harsh waves of snow, or from burning when they tried to light their tents to protect them from the harsh winter.

Many humanitarian organizations champion providing relief for refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is among the pioneers as it 'has used its authority to shape how the world understands refugees and their circumstances, but also, potentially, to control their lives and determine their fates (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 120)'. The socio-political neutrality of humanitarian organisations, including the UNHCR, is however questionable, as these 'organizations are not immune to



the iron law of bureaucratization. As humanitarian organizations have become better established and more deeply involved in politics, they have become more deeply political (Barnett, 2001)'. That is to say, the UNHCR can 'manipulate the interests of stakeholders by publishing (or threatening to publish) reports on states' human rights violations and their failure to adhere to their obligations (McKittrick, 2008).' But basically, it 'has been understandably sensitive to the needs of the powerful states, and such matters have duly shaped its "pragmatic" character (Loescher, Betts, and Milner, 2008)'.

To observe Syrian refugees' living conditions and find out the causes that have led them to migrate from their cities, the UNHCR usually held periodic interviews and meetings with the affected families. Interpreters played an important role in transforming this pain and suffering to foreign observers, especially as these interviews were filmed and published live or recorded in the media or on the official websites. Therefore, it has played a decisive role in listening to the voices of these refugees and then transforming them to the whole world, as it was periodically broadcasting interpreted interviews of United Nations officials with the affected refugees. Among these officials was the American actress Angelina Jolie, who was appointed as a goodwill ambassador at that particular period. However, it is controversial that the observer can discover many violations in the English renderings of these meetings, which led to a distortion in the transmission of the refugees' traumatic experiences. Let's have a look at the following excerpt extracted from Angelina Jolie's meeting with the Syrian refugees, particularly a 9-year-old female orphan child at Naaman's Land Border Point in Jordan on Jun 20, 2013:

**Angelina Jolie (to the child):** *Can you tell us what happened to your family?*

**Female interpreter (to the child):** ممكن تزويينا شو صار للعيلة

الطفلة اليتيمة: بابا استشهد تحت النصف واحنا طلعا من البيت دغري.

**Back translation of the child's answer:** *My father was martyred because of shelling, and we left home right away.*



*Female interpreter: My father died because of the shelling, and we had to leave right away.*

As can be examined, the orphan child's message has been manipulated or rather reframed by the interpreter, especially the child's belief that her father's death is an act of martyrdom and not an accidental one. Such interpreting intervention may be affected by, and stemmed from, two main sources, the first of which is personal, i.e., axiological, which is the interpreter's emotions, feelings, and values, and the second is social, i.e., ideological, denoting the interpreter's influence by the beliefs, opinions, or hegemony, of her employing institution. In the following paragraphs, we will explain how can these two aspects impact interpreters' actions or reactions in a way that distorts the transmission of source messages. Afterwards, emphasis will be shifted to reviewing the rendition of the interpersonal devices showing occasions of reframing.

## 2. Axiological and Ideological Reframing

The understanding of the role played by translators and interpreters has changed significantly by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century as the primary focus became on the factors that guide their translation and interpreting behaviour. Here we must refer to many translation scholars who have investigated the role of the translator and interpreter in different contexts, and the consciousness or unconsciousness of the process of reformulation. Lefevere (1992:14), for instance, describes translators and interpreters as 'rewriters' where the perspective through which they 'understand themselves and their culture is one of the factors that may influence the way in which they translate'. On the other hand, Hatim and Mason (1997:122) treat them as 'mediators' who 'intervene in the transfer process, feeding their own knowledge and beliefs into their processing of a text'. From a different standpoint, Baker (2006:132) considers them as 're-narrators' or 're-framers' who 'can actively reframe the immediate narrative as well as the larger narratives in which it is embedded by careful realignment of participants in time and social/political space'. Similarly, Tymoczko (2006:453) views them as 'activists' who 'shape their words to the needs of the moment.' Moreover, all the contributors in Munday



(2007) emphasize the ‘interventionist’ or ‘intervening nature’ of translators and interpreters. Fundamentally, House (2008: 16) draws attention to the dangerous decisions that the translator and interpreter can take: ‘[m]anipulation or intervention for ideological, socio-political or ethical reasons, however well-meant they may be in any individual case, are generally risky undertakings.’

Based on these in-depth proposals, the re-framing of texts (to use Baker’s terminology) and utterances may be driven by personal factors such as the translators’ and interpreters’ emotions, judgements, and valuations, or what Bakhtin (1981:305) calls, the ‘axiological belief systems’ as well as ‘the tacit assumptions, beliefs, and value systems which are shared collectively by social groups’ known as ideologies (Hatim and Mason, 1997:120). Fairclough (2003:10) asserts that ‘ideologies are representations of the aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining, and changing social relations of power domination and exploitation.’ The UNHCR interpreters’ outputs may, therefore, be affected by the power of their and their society’s belief systems. The more influential aspect is the social represented by the interpreters’ conscious or unconscious subscription to the beliefs of their employing institution throughout a strong invisible power. Bourdieu (1991:163-164) underlines this ‘symbolic power’, and assumes that it ‘can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it’. In terms of this, the UNHCR interpreters could be socio-political agents that are consciously or unconsciously manipulated by their employer to pursue certain agendas. They can provide a concrete example of how power is first exercised and then reproduced, in the way that the organisations policy offers to be transformed to their English-speaking audience.

### 3. Research Methodology

To assess the degree to which Syrian refugees' traumatic experiences are deformed by the UNHCR interpreters, the present study follows a qualitatively descriptive product-oriented approach, where 'the analysis of texts in their context of production and reception offers evidence of translators' decision making, which allows some insight into the translation process (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2014: 50). That is to say, the utterances being analysed are not considered as an end in themselves but as vehicles that can derive to certain ends, especially drawing inferences on the individual and social factors urged interpreters to consciously or unconsciously reframe. Speakers', or in this context the UNHCR interpreters', subjectivity or agency is best conveyed at the interpersonal level of language (Halliday, 2004:29-30), therefore, carrying a discourse analysis to the interpreters' outputs is significant. In this respect, since 'evaluation, expressed of course interpersonally, is central to communication and central to translation (Munday, 2012:11)'; the investigation of evaluative language both at the axiological and ideological axes can reveal the positions in which the UNHCR's interpreters have obstructed the transference of the speakers' messages. White (2001) underlines that appraisal provides 'the linguistic resources by which text speaker's come to express, negotiate and naturalise particular intersubjective and ultimately ideological positions.' The UNHCR interpreters are also text speakers where they can also express, negotiate, and naturalise axiological and ideological positions throughout appraisal semantic resources (these positions may not necessarily be identical with those of the original speakers). Because of the wide semantic area covered by the appraisal framework, it is divided into three 'interacting domains': 'attitude' (emotions, judgements and evaluations), 'engagement' (stances or positions), and 'graduation' (adjusting value positions) which are, in turn, subdivided into more specific semantic resources as in 'attitude' which is composed of 'affect' (registering human feelings), 'judgement' (attitudes of people's behaviour concerning conventions or rules), and 'appreciation' (evaluations of things and natural phenomena) (Martin and White 2005: 35-152).

#### 4. Data Analysis

For the economy of space, the data to be investigated here consists of only two UNHCR interpreted interviews (subsequent subtitled versions were also released by the UNHCR). The first one includes Angelina Jolie's, the UNHCR' Goodwill Ambassador, conversation with two women, Um Mohamed and Um Basil in Zaatary Camp, Jordan on June 21, 2013. The second indicates Jolie's meeting with some orphan children in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon on July 10, 2015. These interviews are transcribed to qualitatively identify locations of the interpreter's conscious or unconscious reframing. Back translations to the refugees' utterances are suggested to act as reference points. Priority will be given to tracing three main strategies of reframing: deletion, addition, and substitution of appraisal indicators, then attempts will be made to establish some sort of interrelatedness between these reframing decisions and the interpreter's individual and social belief systems. Now let's investigate an excerpt from the transcription of the first interview:

**Jolie (to Um Mohamed's son):** *What do you think about your mother working as a nurse suddenly? Are you proud of?*

محمد: هي أووية.

**Back translation of the child's answer:** *She is Strong.*

**Female interpreter:** *She is very strong.*

**Jolie (to Um Mohamed):** *Have women been facing much abuse inside Syria?*

ام محمد: خصوصاً اللي جوزها معتقل او مطلوب او ابنا معتقل او مطلوب.

**Back translation of Um Mohamed's answer:** *Especially whose husband is detained or wanted or her son is detained or wanted.*

**Female interpreter:** *Yes, especially women whose husband or sons are detained.*

**Jolie (to Um Mohamed):** *Do they target women in revenge?*





ام محمد: اذا الزلثة مختفي او ما موجود بياخدو مرتو مشان تعترف وين جوزها. وين جوزك؟ اذا عندها ولد ازغير بياخدوه ما عندها وين جوزك؟ بدون ياخدوها بيفزعوا فيها الضرب الاغتصاب كل شيء ما بيخلو شيء.

**Back Translation of Um Mohamed's answer:** *If the husband is hidden or not there, they take the wife so that she can confess where her husband is. Where is your husband? If she has a little son, they take him. If she has not, 'where is your husband?'. They take her to terrorize her, beat and rape. They have no limits.*

**Female interpreter:** *If the husband is not there, they take the wife. They interrogate her. They ask 'where is your husband?' They may even take the children. They terrorize beat and rape them. They have no limits.*

ام محمد: هني ليش ما حدا بيؤوف مع الشعب السوري؟ بدون يساوو مثل فلسطين؟

**Back translation of Um Mohamed's utterance:** *Why is no one is standing by the Syrian people? They want to do as in Palestine.*

**Female interpreter:** *Why is no one is standing by the Syrian people? No one is helping us.*

The careful examination of the interpreter's version shows that the refugee's utterances have not been transformed transparently, i.e., the interpreter's agency is strongly present in many occasions. First, when Jolie asks the child to evaluate his mother, he judges her as (اووية) which means (strong), nevertheless, the interpreter intrudes and inserts her evaluation throughout adding the graduation (appraisal) indicator 'very'. This conscious or unconscious reframing decision has strengthened the rendered evaluation. It may stem from the interpreter's influence by the mother's experience. Second, the interpreter overlooks twice providing acceptable equivalence to Um Mohamed's emphasis that the women abused by the Syrian regime are those whose husbands or sons are not only detained (معتقل) as appears in the rendered version but also (مطلوب), i.e., (wanted). Throughout the deletion of this judgement (appraisal) indicator, the listener is driven to believe that abused women are only those whose husbands or sons are detained. The interpreter's de-selectivity here may be motivated by her dissatisfaction with

this particular cause of abuse which can be seen in a subsequent occasion when she also disregards Um Mohamed's insistence that a woman can be detained even if her wanted husband is hidden. This can be observed in the interpreter's deletion of the judgement (appraisal) indicator (مختفي), i.e. (hidden). The most influential aspect of reframing can, however, be monitored in altering Um Mohamed's criticism of the international community. Out of her pain and suffering, Um Mohamed asks Jolie about the justifications behind the international community's powerless stand with the Syrian people. She thinks that they want to follow the same scenario they are following in the Palestinian issue (بدون يساوو مثل فلسطين؟). She draws a very impressive comparison between the victims, i.e., Syrians and Palestinians, from the one side, and oppressors, i.e., the Syrian regime and Israelis, from the other. The utterance she uses is socio-political charged. Rendering this socio-political stand into English may not satisfy the interpreter's employers (UNHCR officials) because it may impact their long-term interests. To avoid the tension and embarrassment that could be resulted, the interpreter changes Um Mohamed's message from (بدون يساوو مثل فلسطين؟), i.e. (They want to do as in Palestine), into (No one is helping us.).

It is both possible and productive to see that some interested researchers may view the above-mentioned occasions of reframing as interpreting mistakes, though the employed interpreters are supposed to be specialized highly-trained professionals. The recurrence of these 'mistakes' not only in the single interview but also within at least two of them may, however, strengthen the present study's hypothesis. This is what can be arrived at by examining the rendering of Jolie's second interview which was with the refugees, especially Nemer's family, in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon on July 10, 2015:

نمر: هي جابت كتير يعني انا بنفسي تجي بنت لأسميها على اسم امي وخلص مشان اخواتي مو مشان حنا.

**Back translation of Nemer's utterance:** *She has brought us a lot. I wanted a daughter so I could name her after my mother just for the sake of my brother and sisters, not anyone else.*

**Female interpreter:** *She has brought us a lot of happiness. I wanted a daughter so I could name her after my mother.*

نمر: انشاء الله تتحمل البرد والجوع وتاكل رغيفة. بس اول ما جت توترت شويه تليكت صار... كان عندي مسؤولية وصار عندي مسؤولية اكثر. تمن اشخاص برئيتي هاي. ما يعرف شو بدي اعمل. يعني بدي طعميهن ولا بدي بحكمهن ولا بدي دير بالي عليهن ولا بدي اؤعد عندهن مثل بيهن وامهن ولا بدي روح اشتغل واديهن. ما يعرف حيل شو بدي اعمل بصراحة يعني.

**Back translation of Nemer's utterances:** *I pray she will afford the cold and hunger. When she was first born, I was nervous, a little anxious.... I had a responsibility, but now I had a bigger one. Now eight people depend on me. I don't know what to do. Should I feed them, care for them and sit with them as a father or mother? Or go to work to give them. I don't really know what to do honestly.*

**Female interpreter:** *I pray she will survive the hunger and bad situation we are in. I was nervous when she was firstborn. I already had a huge responsibility. Eight people depend on me. I don't know what to do. Should I feed them, care for them and sit with them as a mother? Or go to work to support them like a father.*

نمر: يعني لما يتذكر الحكي اللي اولت لك اياه يعني عن جد اضل ابكي أكثر من ساعتين.

**Back translation of Nemer's utterances:** *Really when I remember what I have just said to you, seriously I start crying for more than two hours.*

**Female interpreter:** *The aid is not enough for all of us to live on.*

Nemer's utterances convey not only his painfulness, suffering and depression, but also his responsibility to take care of his wife, newborn daughter, and traumatized brother and younger sisters. It is the same story of hundred refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and some European countries. He wants to share this experience with Jolie who is supposed to transform into an English-speaking audience. The transparent follow of the conveyed messages has, nevertheless, been obstructed by the interpreter's recurrent intervention.

The first obstruction is clear in the utterance on the value of having a female child at this particular time. Nemer assumes that she evoked a lot of positive feelings (such as hope, intimacy, happiness, sweet memories, etc.). The suggested rendering reduces these feelings to happiness, which is inadequate. The deformation of meaning is yet more influential in the interpreter's disregard of the justification behind naming this child after Nemer's mother. Nemer says he did so (مشان اخواتي مو مشان حدا) for the sake of his brother and sisters, an aspect which is totally neglected in the interpreter's version.

In the second utterance, Nemer reflects on his hope that this child could survive cold and hunger. In addition, he confesses that her arrival has intensified his responsibility because he already had a burden to act as a father and mother at the same time. His fear of the unknown future is apparent even in his hesitation and closing the discussion by saying that he does not know what to do. These revolutionary feelings of painfulness have been variably devalued in the rendering: the reference to coldness is substituted by 'bad situation we are in'; his state of being little anxious (شويه) was removed; his reporting that he already has a responsibility and now it has intensified (كان عندي مسؤولية وصار عندي مسؤولية اكثر) is shifted to 'I already had a huge responsibility; his role to stay at home to guard his family as a father and mother (ولا بدى اؤعد عندهن مثل بيهن وامهن) is reduced to that of the mother, and his task of bringing food (ولا بدى روح اشتغل واديهن) is attached to that of a father. The most influential decision of reframing is when his whole utterance (يعني لما يتزكر الحكي اللي اولت لك اياه يعني عن جد اضل ابكي أكثر من (ساعتين), which literally means 'Really, when I remember what I have just said to you, seriously I start crying for more than two hours' is substituted with (The aid is not enough for all of us to live on).

## 5. Conclusion

In light of the surveyed evidence, the following insights could be proposed.

1. Contrary to the common perception, the transparency and, therefore, the neutrality of interpreting outcomes produced or sponsored by the UNHCR is questionable. This has to be publicly clear for the refugees, UNHCR officials, and the international audience to determine their stand towards such process of reframing.



2. Different individual (such nationality, faith, political stand) and social factors (such as hegemony, power, ideology), may motivate the UNHCR interpreters to consciously or unconsciously intervene to reframe the victim's traumatic experiences. The intensity of the impact of these factors may vary from one situation into another.
3. Processes of individual or institutional reframing can be materialized in the target utterances throughout patterns of deletion, addition, and substitution of evaluative language. The most productive devices that can dispose this kind of interpersonal intrusion are the semantic resources of appraisal framework.
4. The role played by the UNHCR interpreting monitoring authorities may be totally absent or inactive. No revised edition of the renderings provided was presented. No official statements apologizing from the victims or the audience for deforming the messages were issued.

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