

Interpreting for refugees: Empathy and Activism

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Interventionist and activist approaches to the study of medical, legal, and political interpreting (Baker, 2006; 2008; Inghilleri, 2005) have recognized interpreters as active socio-linguistic participants in the interpreting process whose “intervention is often culturally and ethically necessary” (Todorova, 2014, p. 228). From an interventionist standpoint, “interpreters are unavoidably and actively involved and connected to issues of responsibility towards others” (Baker, 2008, p. 102). This paper draws on relevant theory in the area of interpreting, with a particular focus on working with refugees, supplemented by the real-life experiences of field interpreters. Tackling the question of the discrepancy between the prescribed neutrality of interpreters and their real-life experience, the article will look at some specific aspects of work for interpreters for refugees in emergency situations, especially interpreters as agents for empowering the vulnerable, drawing in the analysis on aspects of intersection between translation theory and mediation theory. When conducted as an impartial process which closely follows a prescribed protocol, mediation can pressurize parties and even further marginalize vulnerable parties (Grillo, 1991; Pavlich, 1996) because the mediator is preoccupied with the form, rather than the parties, their participation, and their needs. Mediation cannot always protect the weaker party and depends on the skill and knowledge of the mediators to effectively address power imbalances among parties. Similarly, when conducted as a neutral activity, interpreting shows no interest in the power inequalities among interlocutors. The role occupied by interpreters in conflict-related and humanitarian situations—as the ones who from the onset are positioned well inside the conflict situation, belonging to one (or more) of the parties to that conflict—allows them to empower the vulnerable party in the mediation process. Thus, empathy emerges as an important trait of interpreters in such situations.