

CSSH NOTES

Ellen Elias-Bursac, *Translating Evidence and Interpreting Testimony at a War Crimes Tribunal: Working in a Tug-of-War*. Palgrave Studies in Languages at War. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, xx, 311 pp., \$95.00 cloth.

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For the past two decades, some of the world's best translators and interpreters have diligently practiced their craft in relative obscurity at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague. The Tribunal, established by the UN Security Council in 1993 to try those accused of war crimes during the Yugoslav succession wars from 1991 to 1999, is only now (2016) nearing the end of its mandate and wrapping up its final trials. The translators and interpreters employed there have been indispensable to the trials. In this volume, Ellen Elias-Bursac systematically examines their lives and labors, describing vividly their many roles in the trials and the multiple challenges that bedevil their work. As a veteran translator at the Tribunal and an accomplished scholar of South Slav languages, she calls upon personal experience and scholarly expertise to reveal the complex intermediation that takes place among court participants who share no common language.

In the first of the book's two sections, "Translators and Interpreters," Elias-Bursac profiles the backgrounds, qualifications, and personal attitudes of her subjects. She shows the vast majority of them to be highly competent and dedicated but not immune from occasional gaffes, politically shaded interpretations, and even rare disruptive spontaneous outbursts. Many linguistic experts working at the Tribunal once lived in Yugoslavia and were profoundly affected by the wartime violence there. Not surprisingly, some have been traumatized by interpreting day after day for some of those accused of ordering the deaths of their kin and neighbors. None think of themselves as heroes, but the reader will readily infer that they require considerable personal courage and concentration to interpret calmly and impartially.

Elias-Bursac offers many insights on the everyday operations of war crimes trials from the viewpoint of translators and interpreters. The book's second section, "The Courtroom," analyzes a large number of courtroom instances in which trial participants struggled through complex linguistic issues that arose. The general public often conceives the processes of translation and interpretation as literal, rote conversions of words in one language into their counterparts in another. Elias-Bursac makes short shrift of that naive

preconception and shows instead that the work requires sophisticated cultural and contextual knowledge as well as the ability to convert individual words into a second language. Interpretation is more of an art than a science, so misunderstandings and ambiguity occur every day in Tribunal courtrooms. Judges want interpretations to be unambiguous and clear, but interpreters are hobbled in fulfilling those expectations by guidelines that bar them from offering explanations or commentary to identify, clarify, or amplify ambiguities.

Perpetrators of war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, calculatingly seeking to disguise their guilt, commonly communicated among themselves with euphemisms, codes, metaphors, innuendoes, and implied orders. That practice poses a challenge to translators and interpreters, who must seek to discern meaning through a thicket of linguistic ambiguity and deceptive language. Elias-Bursać ably analyzes several such instances and shows that interpreters' knowledge of local linguistic and cultural practices is critical to explicating the context and multiple meanings of certain phrases. Occasionally, interpreters and translators have been called as expert witnesses to clarify such uncertainties, but in the main they have responded to judges' queries without leaving their booth.

Interpreters in courtrooms at the Tribunal are physically located in an elevated booth to the left of the three trial judges. From there, they look down on the proceedings through one-way glass that assures their anonymity. Though they are physically situated on the periphery of the courtroom, Elias-Bursać shows how they are functionally at the center of much courtroom contention. As they render the proceedings audible to all participants in English, French, Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS), and in certain cases Albanian, their work products are periodically second-guessed by multilingual witnesses, judges, attorneys on both sides, and their supervisors (the "tug-of-war" referenced in the book's title).

This book is one of the few richly descriptive works in the small but rapidly growing field of translation studies. As a case study of linguistic issues at a single institution, it is appropriately free of linguistic theory, post-modern critiques, and structured comparisons with similar situations. In addition to providing a solid factual foundation for her conclusions, Elias-Bursać has pioneered a method of inquiry that combines personal observation, survey research, and a systematic review of transcripts available online for each trial. Her work implicitly invites similar studies of language issues in other multilingual international institutions. She leaves to others, and to her own future work, the inviting prospect of drawing theoretical and comparative conclusions from several such studies.

———Robert Donia, University of Michigan