

**Tito's children?: educational resources, language learning and cultural capital in the life histories of interpreters working in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

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Abstract

The foreign military forces and international organisations that have operated in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) since 1992 recruited thousands of local people, often young students, to work as interpreters. Drawing on 31 life history interviews conducted in 2009–10 with language workers who grew up in former Yugoslavia, this paper seeks to answer whether certain age groups and social strata that emerged from socialist Yugoslav society were better able to benefit in the ‘SFOR economy’ that resulted from the effects of international intervention in BiH. In the process, it combines applied-linguistics approaches to language-learning narratives with area-studies perspectives on postsocialism to show how particular forms of language learning equipped people to adjust to the socio-economic crisis. Although all Bosnian schools taught foreign languages, pupils were assigned arbitrarily to different languages and English was not available in all schools. This study suggests on a limited sample that education outside the state classroom was a more helpful source of the necessary cultural capital to work as an interpreter and was easiest to access for children of urban professional families. The interpreting jobs that these subjects found during and after the war made them more privileged than workers on local-currency wages but less privileged compared to their parents’ pre-war lives. The work-based identity they went on to construct was informal and has not produced a public narrative that constructs interpreters as a recognised social group.

At the first British Army base in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), located at Stara Bila just outside the town of Vitez, British officers who served as part of the UK's contribution to the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) remember that the base's original team of locally-employed interpreters nicknamed themselves 'Tito's children', an allusion to the team's multi-ethnic composition and the multi-ethnicity of pre-war Yugoslavia. The tight-knit group of four interpreters recruited during the winter of 1992–93 comprised young people from nearby towns in the Lašva Valley, who all relied on ad hoc knowledge of English rather than professional interpreter training in order to carry out their jobs. The most experienced, Dobrila Kalaba, had been an English language teacher in a local school; she helped the British military linguists at Vitez develop a rudimentary testing system for recruiting new local interpreters before she was killed by a sniper in July 1993. Like nearly all 'cells' of local interpreters who worked for foreign forces in BiH, the group at Vitez were multi-ethnic, or rather, each member had been interpellated into one of three ethnic backgrounds (Croat, Serb or Muslim/Bosniak) by the nationalist logic of the war and then by the foreign soldiers who took their ascribed ethnicities into account when making team assignments: 'Because I'm not a Croat or Serb I must therefore be a Muslim,' was how a former British commanding officer in Vitez recalled the personal narrative of one senior interpreter from Novi Travnik.<sup>1</sup> The same officer remembered that the next cohort of interpreters, ten more Bosnians hired under the system Kalaba had helped devise before her death, had accordingly acquired the name of 'Tito's grandchildren' (i.e. the next generation of interpreters following the 'Tito's children' team), but had not fully integrated with the longer-serving team during his tour of duty: 'they were viewed by the experienced interpreters as interlopers and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, May 2009.

amateurs and not up to scratch at all.’<sup>2</sup> The vignette from Vitez suggests a broader reflection on the life histories of people who became interpreters without ever anticipating that job as a career or even without expecting to pursue *any* career in languages. How valid could it be to think of interpreters generally as ‘Tito’s children’, a common post-Yugoslav figure of speech for generational cohorts whose expectations were formed through living in socialist Yugoslavia? And, if so, what experiences and opportunities under Yugoslav socialism had made it possible for them to become interpreters in their radically altered post-Yugoslav lives?

This paper, which employs an analytical methodology derived from applied linguistics in reading life histories as language learner narratives, is based on interviews with 31 people who were born and educated in former Yugoslavia and were employed by foreign military forces in language-based jobs at some point since 1992. Most lived and worked in BiH during the parts of their working lives they narrated in most depth in the interview. The study also contained a small number of people who had moved to BiH from another former Yugoslav republic during or after the war, a small number who had worked for foreign military forces in Croatia rather than BiH, and a small number (two) whose language-based jobs had been in the UK as language instructors or pre-deployment training participants.<sup>3</sup> Interviews followed a life history format where the author and interviewer began by inviting interviewees to narrate when and where they had been born and then used questioning to move chronologically through their upbringing and education, pre-war working lives, changes during the war, and the stages of their working lives during and after the period(s) when they worked as interpreters. These narratives of language learning, or narratives as language learners/users, are then used to reflect on the idea of educational resources as cultural capital (in Bourdieu’s sense of tacit knowledge and dispositions acquired through education) after

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> As part of a wider project on languages and peace operations (Languages at War: Policies and Practices of Language Contacts in Conflict, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council), the total number of interviews was 51 (the remaining interviewees were mainly British or Danish military personnel plus two British civilians who had worked as professional linguists in military headquarters).

systemic social change that appears in literature on postsocialism in central and south-eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Memoirs and narratives of language learning have become increasingly visible in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics over the last 10–15 years, as a consequence of the turn towards understanding language learners as social actors and of the growing reflexivity of pedagogical research.<sup>5</sup> Simon Coffey, in his study of British adults who have chosen to learn French, thus concludes that learners set out on ‘language learning projects’ in order to gain access to milieus they perceive as associated with the new language, and that they incorporate the narrative of *becoming* a speaker of another language into their life histories.<sup>6</sup> This leads to one research question regarding interpreters’ narratives: *how have current/former interpreters speaking in 2009–10 conceptualised their language learning projects?* A further research question is the consequence of linguists’ reflexivity on their use of these narratives as data. The linguist Aneta Pavlenko, who has studied cross-cultural autobiographies by migrants to/from the USA, thus makes the methodological observation that these narratives create and conform to conventions about how they will be told: they constitute a *genre*, not data which could be read without reference to its social context.<sup>7</sup> Oral history research, such as the work of Luisa Passerini on narratives of life under Italian Fascism, makes clear that oral narrators too speak within collective conventions and representations and gives further support to the arguments of many sociologists that people think within existing social norms (Bourdieu’s

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., David STARK and Laszlo BRUSZT, *Postsocialist Pathways. Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe*. Cambridge 1998; Craig YOUNG and Duncan LIGHT, Place, National Identity and Post-Socialist Transformations: an Introduction, *Political Geography* 20 (2001), n. 8, 941–55, 953–54; Elizabeth C. DUNN, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*. Ithaca (NY) 2004; Kirsten GHODSEE, *The Red Riviera. Gender, Tourism and Postsocialism on the Black Sea*. Durham (NC) 2005; Anastasia RIABCHUK, The Implications of Adaptation Discourse for Post-Communist Working Classes, *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 17 (2009), n. 1, 55–64.

<sup>5</sup> Simon COFFEY, Discursive Worlds of the Language Learner: A Narrative Analysis, *Revista Complutense de educación* 18 (2007), n. 2, 145–160, 145; Sandra G. KOURITZIN, Bringing Life to Research: Life History Research and ESL, *TESL Canada Journal/Revue TESL du Canada*, 17 (2000), n. 2, 1–35; Jill Sinclair BELL, Narrative Inquiry: More Than Just Telling Stories, *TESOL Quarterly* 36 (2002), n. 2, 207–213, 207.

<sup>6</sup> COFFEY, Discursive Worlds, 145–146.

<sup>7</sup> Aneta PAVLENKO, Language Learning Memoirs as a Gendered Genre, *Applied Linguistics* 22 (2001), n. 2, 213–240, 237.

‘doxa’).<sup>8</sup> The significance of genre in understanding language learning narratives produces a research question with implications for the existence of interpreters as a social group in BiH:<sup>9</sup> *what are the conventions for narrating interpreters’ lives?*<sup>10</sup>

A third research question is suggested by the volume of applied linguistics research into second language acquisition (SLA) for work. Much of this is conducted in the English-speaking West with migrant learners who have chosen to learn second languages as adults for employment, promotion, border-crossing or residence. This is a context where people learn a language to achieve a specific identifiable goal, which was not the case for interpreters who worked in BiH. It is perhaps to be expected that SLA-for-work research sets up a stronger linkage between language learning motivations and potential new work-based identities than do studies of adjustment to postsocialism. These latter studies identify foreign language skills as a contributing factor in negotiating the free-market economy to obtain meaningful employment but focus on workers’ *adaptations* of existing skills to an unfamiliar socio-economic context rather than on job-based motivations. The anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee, who has studied the tourism sector in postsocialist Bulgaria, explains the adaptation process using the ‘trajectory adjustment theory’ of Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Ellen Townsley. Trajectory adjustment theory posits that individuals respond to socioeconomic change by altering their ‘habitus’ within what is made possible by their ‘portfolio’ of economic, cultural and social/political capital: forms of capital may be traded for others, and they gain or lose value depending on the new socio-economic order. While the value and use of each type of capital changes, the nature of the capital to which individuals have access is path-dependent

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<sup>8</sup> Luisa PASSERINI, *Fascism in Popular Memory. The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*. Trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield. Oxford 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Although this paper uses data concerning BiH only, the question is also likely to be relevant to Kosovo, where foreign military forces also recruited many interpreters.

<sup>10</sup> This question is formulated in terms of ‘lives’ rather than ‘experiences’ or ‘working identities’ following the idea of ‘women’s wartime lives’ used by the oral historian Penny Summerfield, who concludes that women war workers drew on pre- and post-war experiences in constructing their social identities through narration: Penny SUMMERFIELD, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives. Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War*. Manchester 1998.

on the structure of the previous order and their own positions within it.<sup>11</sup> This reading has a (somewhat) more optimistic view of workers' eventual prospects than the critique of postsocialist, post-war BiH that has been made by Stef Jansen. Jansen argues that the nature of the well-paid but insecure employment offered by the 'Foreign Intervention Agencies' in BiH (i.e. by foreign militaries, international organisations and NGOs) made precarious working a structural inevitability and turned jobs with international organisations into primarily sources of social, cultural and economic capital which facilitated mobility abroad.<sup>12</sup> Despite the differing amounts of space for hope in these two interpretations, they concur that previously-acquired and repurposed skills and contacts structure individuals' prospects for material security in postsocialism by giving them access to new forms of higher-paying work. This leads to the most practical research question of this paper: *what language learning experiences best equipped future interpreters for the jobs they could not even anticipate at the time of learning?*

While these research questions may have been inspired by authors in linguistics, they are relevant to social scientists' understanding of the former Yugoslavia because contemporary applied linguistics ultimately views language and language learning as matters of social practice and identity. The applied linguist Bonny Norton, for instance, writes of language learning as 'a social practice that engages the identities of learners in complex and sometimes contradictory ways'.<sup>13</sup> Social scientists are heavily concerned with these phenomena. The sociologist Richard Jenkins, for instance, recognises that language permits the symbolic interaction through which identities are claimed and acknowledged: 'Individual and collective identifications are inherently symbolised, particularly in the symbolic interaction of

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<sup>11</sup> GHODSEE, *The Red Riviera*, 10-15.

<sup>12</sup> Stef JANSEN, *The Privatisation of Home and Hope: Return, Reforms and the Foreign Intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, *Dialectical Anthropology* 30 (2006), 177-199, 192-193.

<sup>13</sup> Bonny NORTON, *Non-Participation, Imagined Communities and the Language Classroom*. In Michael P. BREEN (ed.), *Learner Contributions to Language Learning. New Directions in Research*. Harlow 2001, 159-71, 167.

language (...) This allows the individual to participate in the collective domain'.<sup>14</sup> Acquiring a new language permits participation in extra collective domains. Meanwhile, an understanding of learning and education is essential to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, in other words the acquisition of norms that guide people's behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Interpreters in Bosnia-Herzegovina had to convert pre-war norms into a new habitus for working as an employee of foreign troops in a wartime or post-war society.<sup>16</sup> By studying individualised accounts of experiences before and after this period of rupture, the social scientist can begin to understand how formal and informal learning equipped Yugoslavs for this habitus shift.

### **The linguistic capital of interpreters in BiH**

In the eyes of the foreign military forces and other international organisations who would recruit unprofessionalised interpreters in 1990s BiH (and Kosovo), the most important second language for a locally-recruited employee was English. English was the working language for UNPROFOR, for the post-Dayton NATO forces known as IFOR (Implementation Force) and SFOR (Stabilisation Force) and for the main multinational civilian agencies such as OSCE (Organization for Stability and Cooperation in Europe), the OHR (Office of the High Representative) and various branches of the UN. Large multinational NGOs would likewise use English as what is ironically termed a 'lingua franca' – a widely-spoken language of convenience that speakers of distinct second languages use to communicate without the need for separate translation or interpreting. The UNPROFOR and NATO headquarters, like most international organisations, were composed of individuals from many language backgrounds working together. Outside the headquarters, however, the foreign military presence was

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<sup>14</sup> Richard JENKINS, *Social Identity*. London 1996, 113-14.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre BOURDIEU, *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford 1990, 160.

<sup>16</sup> See Catherine BAKER, 'It's Not Their Job to Soldier'. Distinguishing Civilian and Military in Soldiers' and Interpreters' Accounts of Peacekeeping in 1990s Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 3 (2010), n. 1, 137-50.

mostly made up of formed units from specific armed forces which used English when interacting with other elements of the force but communicated in their own languages amongst themselves.

The units in the multinational military force fitted three language profiles: a) one-to-one equivalence between force, state and language; b) a more complex language profile reflecting the language policy of the state itself; c) native language for internal use combined with everyday use of a lingua franca (English) because the unit belonged to a low-level multinational framework.<sup>17</sup> A language other than English was an *official* lingua franca for military interoperability in only one instance: Multi-National Division (South-East) was under French command and experimented in the late 1990s with using French among its French, German, Italian and Spanish units. Competence in French was advantageous for jobs in units with a strong French presence, such as UNPROFOR Sarajevo in 1992–95 and the French divisional headquarters in Mostar, and these organisations sometimes recruited interpreters to work primarily into French. With this exception, NNSE (non-native speakers of English) contingents hired interpreters to work into English rather than the contingent's own language(s) – in contrast to non-native-English-speaking journalists, who did seek out speakers of their own native languages where possible<sup>18</sup> Compared to journalists, the military preferred the efficiency of English as a lingua franca over the increased possibilities for

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<sup>17</sup> Profile (a) applied e.g. in Dutch units, where the language of command was always Dutch. Profile (b) applied e.g. in the armed forces of bilingual Canada, which contain English- and French-speaking units and expect bilingual competence of all officers at lieutenant-colonel rank and above. Profile (c) applied, for instance, in the Nordic-Polish Brigade of Multi-National Division (North), which contained battalions from several Nordic countries and Poland. The Danish battalion had been multinationalised further with the incorporation of a Baltic company with Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian platoons as part of Denmark's commitment to training those three states' armed forces. According to language policy, Danish and Baltic soldiers were to communicate in English, though informally Russian (which some Danish soldiers had learned during the Cold War) was used as an alternative.

<sup>18</sup> Foreign journalists, in contrast, did hire speakers of their native languages where possible. One Sarajevo-based graduate in French, Spanish and Italian had interpreted for French and Spanish journalists in 1992 before going to work for HQ UNPROFOR in 1993; Swedish journalists covering the Belgrade protests of 1996–97 similarly sought out interpreters through the Scandinavian Studies department at Belgrade University.



expression when translation/interpreting went directly between the foreigners' first language and the local language(s).

The most valuable linguistic capital for prospective interpreters in 1990s BiH was therefore English, with a niche demand for French. This did not match the language education priorities of socialist Yugoslavia, which had identified English, German, French and Russian as equally important for its economic and diplomatic needs. The Yugoslav state had devolved education to the republics in 1953 and each republic therefore set its own policy for foreign language education. Options and starting ages for foreign language learning could therefore vary between republics, meaning that language learning experiences in Bosnian schools could be different from those in Croatia, Serbia or elsewhere. Interviewees educated in BiH usually recalled that a foreign language had become compulsory in the fourth grade of primary school (ages 10–11) and was carried through to their secondary (high-school) education.

Though every secondary school taught at least one foreign language, not all students had access to the language they preferred. Some schools offered a more restrictive range of languages, and schools that taught more than one language assigned pupils to the various language classes by fiat not by student or parental choice. One form of *gimnazija* (the most academic form of secondary school) specialised in language education and typically prepared students for careers in the foreign service or journalism. These were located in large urban centres, whereas small-town secondary schools offered fewer languages. Since Russian had become less valuable after 1989–91 because the Soviet pole of the bipolar Cold War world had collapsed, to have attended a school that only taught Russian was the worst-case scenario for acquiring cultural capital and language skills that could be converted to economic capital after the transnational collapse of communism.

## Narratives of school language learning

As a result of the lack of student choice among languages, interpreters' narratives of language learning often reflected ambivalently on language learning in school.<sup>19</sup> By age 10–11, when most interviewees remembered starting a second language at school, some had already formed a connection with a preferred second language (English) and resented being assigned to German or Russian.<sup>20</sup> Boba (8), who had grown up in Sarajevo, said that 'our parents really did want their kids to learn one more language, not only Russian, but one of the western and other foreign languages'.<sup>21</sup> Jovana (12), growing up in Banja Luka and Belgrade in the 1980s, had already formed a positive impression of English through music and magazines before her primary school class had been assigned to learn German:

Q: So why did you decide to study English on your own?

A: Because it's [the] language that everybody speaks, and all the music is in English, and all cool stuff was in English. And I considered it... I actually wanted to, I was gutted, when in primary school, because you couldn't choose which language you were going to learn, you were told. 'OK, this class is going to learn German, and this class is going to learn French, Russian, or English.' And I was gutted. But then my parents explained to me that I'm going to learn English anyway at some point in my life, it's good to have German as a second language, so that's why I got, you know... OK, I have to, I suppose I don't have a choice.

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<sup>19</sup> Generalised statements in these narratives should be read as evidence of the speaker's perception, not as evidence of wider educational policy at the time.

<sup>20</sup> See Table 1 for a summary of interviewees' language learning experiences. Bracketed numbers after interviewees' pseudonyms refer to their numbers in this table.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, October 2009.

And, yeah. English was just – yeah, if you want to walk around this world you have to know English, everybody speaks English. And that was it. That’s why.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Saša (26) had resented having to learn German at his school in north-west Bosnia:

I was born in 1970, so it was still the communistic period of time, so Russian language was quite popular, a dominant language, in the schools. But, Yugoslavia at that time, even in the communistic culture, was quite modern, in comparison with the other communist countries. So actually we had our three main foreign languages in the primary schools. Still, in the schools in the countryside, Russian was the main language, so you couldn’t choose. In the towns and cities, like Banja Luka, Sarajevo, bigger [cities], Tuzla, we had German, English and Russian. The thing is that actually you couldn’t choose. It was just determined by, I don’t know, the school authorities, the directors or teachers. And I remember actually that I always wanted to learn the English language, but my class was actually (laughs) allocated to – my class was German language, you know. I tried to transfer my class to another one, but it was too difficult, of course, too many problems, there was a fight with the teachers, so I talked to my parents and we all decided just to leave it and I’d go and learn German language.<sup>23</sup>

Only one interviewee, Amira (13), narrated enjoyment of learning compulsory German, which she preferred to the private French classes she had simultaneously been attending after school:

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<sup>22</sup> Interview. November 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, May 2010.

I liked the way the teacher did it, and I remember we did some songs, and they were from a really popular programme called *Heidi*, about an Austrian girl growing up in [the] Austrian mountains, and there was a lovely song at the beginning of it. So we learned that in our German lesson and had all the words and so on. And I had a record at home with this song. And, you know, it was fun.<sup>24</sup>

Attending a languages-oriented *gimnazija* maximised the range of languages to which students had access and the chances to learn more than one language through school. Dejan's (16) languages *gimnazija* in the late 1980s had comprised two years of comprehensive education ('like maths and physics and chemistry') and two years of 'languages and typing and all sorts of – translating' which prepared students for languages degrees.<sup>25</sup>

Even a *gimnazija* education, however, did not necessarily leave students with an optimal combination of languages for negotiating post-war/postsocialist BiH. One woman (8) had learned compulsory Russian and optional German at primary school before transferring to what she described as 'a lycée for foreign languages' (using the French term for a high school oriented towards university preparation) where she hoped to learn French. Because of the way subjects were grouped on the school timetable, she could not study French with German, only with Russian; after the collapse of Yugoslavia, a French/German combination would have been much more useful than French/Russian. Surprisingly, the interviewee who felt best prepared by his secondary school education for working as an interpreter during and after the war had not attended a languages *gimnazija* but a Yugoslav military academy. Sinan (9), a Bosniak who had grown up in Serbia, had been in the half of his platoon detailed to learn

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, February 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, May 2010.

English (the other half learned Russian) and had been training as an air force navigator until the war began in BiH:

It was important because I was the navigation systems [officer], and as a navigator I had to know English quite well in order to operate all the devices, and in order to be able to understand and speak to the people flying. That is why my English had to be really good, that was the reason. And I had a tough teacher, again. She was really, really tough, I have to say. She was quite demanding. And thanks to her, really, I quite often go back to those times, in high school. Without her I wouldn't have been here. Simple as that.<sup>26</sup>

This specific-purposes language training gave Sinan experience in military English, one of the fields of language (alongside regional dialect and slang) which usually had the most alienating effect on new interpreters. Becoming accustomed to military abbreviations, slang, and unfamiliar accents and regionalisms played a major role in constructing the new working identity of 'interpreter for the foreign military'. These were sometimes evident in narrators' spoken English when they used military slang in an unmarked way, and one interpreter who had worked with French soldiers remarked that French civilians had become able to notice a military influence on her spoken French. Although one purpose of Yugoslav languages *gimnazije* was to educate the interpreters of the future, Sinan, who had not attended one, ended up better equipped than languages *gimnazija* pupils to adapt quickly to the particular challenges of interpreting for the foreign military in BiH.

In most interpreters' narratives, their childhood exposure to what had become their second language had come through transnational English-language cultural products available in

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, October 2009. Unlike Sinan's primary-school English teacher, this teacher had created an immersive environment by using only English for classroom management, and had supported the military academy ethos of hard work and high standards (where a failing grade of 1 meant expulsion).

former Yugoslavia: cartoons, music, magazines. Maja (10), an interpreter who had acquired a British accent without ever residing in the UK, believed she had an inductive learning style which meant she had learned more effectively through listening to English-language texts than through classroom instruction:

People tend to think that I have some genetic mistake or something like that, but when I was – in our schooling system at the time, the introduction of the second language started about in the fourth grade when I think you were about nine or ten. But even before that I was picking up English, I guess from the movies and cartoons, so that's how it all started. And the way I learned English is by listening, not by learning, like in an academic way, so to speak. [...] Somehow English always made sense to me, and I could always – if I was doing, for example, a grammar test, I was always playing sentences in my head, I didn't know the rules, like, you know, present tense and all that, and how the rules are; I just sort of did it in my head and it all made sense.<sup>27</sup>

Maja was one of two interviewees who had been assigned to learn Russian at primary school and who referred to English-language media to draw comparisons between the visibility and usefulness of English and the restricted usefulness of Russian. Both these speakers believed they had not been able to reinforce their Russian through the media in the same way:

[asked how long she had spent learning Russian for] Not even six months. And that was when I was ten, so, nothing major. And I couldn't sort of pick it up as quickly as English, in my opinion, because there was – I couldn't hear it. I

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, October 2009.

couldn't hear Russian on TV or... there were no cartoons in Russian, and things like that. Or that's my opinion, anyway.<sup>28</sup> (Maja (10))

[asked what learning English felt like compared to learning Russian] I'd say it was tougher, but more interesting for me at the same time. Tougher because English language is in no relation to South Slavic languages, obviously, and Russian is so related that any Bosnian person could, from time to time, understand a few words in Russian language. Not so much in English. To me it was more interesting, because of... [...] it was nice to, for example, watch a movie and understand what they're talking about without reading subtitles. It kind of pushed me to learn more and more.<sup>29</sup> (Tarik (29))

One man who had never learned English in a classroom before working as an interpreter (his assigned language at school had been German) connected a listening knowledge of English to his identity as a rock fan and musician:

I always loved English language. I wanted to learn English, but I didn't have a chance, in school. But my big love is music, and I was listening [to] a lot of rock music from that time, and I kind of picked some words from my favourite bands. And that's the first contact I actually had with the English language, just learning some words from the songs, and, I don't know – later, in maybe a couple of years, I found the big records with the lyrics on, and then I bought my first dictionary, so I was translating for myself, and that's the way I got involved with the English language.

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, October 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, May 2010.

Q: OK. So did you ever learn English in a classroom before you became an interpreter?

A: No, never.<sup>30</sup> (Armin (31))

These interpreters narrated personal success in language learning *despite* rather than *because of* formal education. Primary and secondary school language teaching, in their view, had not used the most suitable methods for their own learning style, had not aligned with their access to foreign languages outside the classroom, had not been able to meet their language preferences – or had displayed all three shortcomings at once.

The concept of ‘language ideologies’ helps to make sense of the hierarchy of languages these narratives establish: at the top, English learned through whatever means possible, and at the bottom, Russian learned unwillingly in the (socialist) classroom.<sup>31</sup> Speaking of ‘language ideologies’ reminds us that value judgements about language are socially and politically produced.<sup>32</sup> The anthropologist Elizabeth Dunn, in her study of a privatised factory in Poland, has argued that the replacement of state socialism in eastern Europe by contemporary flexible capitalism forced workers to remake themselves according to new ‘flexible, agile, self-regulating’ subjectivities in order to retain agency.<sup>33</sup> BiH differs from Poland both in the forms of socialist governance it experienced between 1948 (the year of Tito’s split with Stalinism) and 1991 and in its experience of violent conflict in the 1990s; however, Dunn’s observation still calls attention to the rupture in work-based identities and expectations that

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, May 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, German and Russian, though instrumentally useful to the Yugoslav state, *both* also represented national Others in Yugoslavia: German, the language of the Partisans’ main adversary, and Russian, the language of the Soviet Union and the mirrored socialist Other.

<sup>32</sup> Kathryn A. WOOLARD and Bambi B. SCHIEFFELIN, Language Ideology, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994), 55-82.

<sup>33</sup> DUNN, Privatizing Poland, 7.



had occurred between most interpreters' formal education and the moments at which they became conflict interpreters. Narrating their childhood from the other side of this rupture, they draw on a widespread ideology of the English language as global and without parallel as a lingua franca for leisure and for work. It is no coincidence that Russian, the language of the USSR and the lingua franca of the Soviet bloc, is perceived as the language most detached from actual language learning needs and preferences (the historical and religious significance of Russian language and culture in South Slav lands did not operate to make Russian attractive even in the narratives of interpreters who identified as Serb/Orthodox). An ability to learn English on one's own initiative, through informal means, also corresponds to the ideal of the entrepreneurial postsocialist self-starter, even for persons who did not expect to become an interpreter (i.e. they were able to use initiative to take advantage of an opportunity that had suddenly materialised). The only Bosnian interpreters who received systematic professional training were approximately 40 employees at SFOR headquarters after 2000, when a centralised and professionalised language unit was introduced; others, who were directly employed by troop-contributing armed forces or their private contractors, were left to learn on the job from more experienced colleagues or from officers-in-charge who had previously worked as military interpreters. Demonstrating a childhood and adolescence where they had even then been capable of intuitively learning by doing helps narrators to establish a consistent narrative of themselves as language learners, users and workers. Interpreters' accounts of initiative-driven language learning thus give shape to educational and working lives which have been fractured through the collective and personal impact of war and the collapse of socialism.

### **Language learning outside compulsory education**

Managing to learn a foreign language outside the framework of state education was not an entirely individual endeavour: access to expanded language learning opportunities was easier in families where parents supported language classes as an appropriate use of family earnings and pushed for their children to take part in education outside school. To the extent that supplementary classes had to be privately financed, this would be in keeping with sociological findings that access to education is greater when families have higher economic capital.<sup>34</sup> Six interviewees stated that they had had private lessons, including the oldest Bosnian respondent who had been at secondary school in the 1960s, taught English at a primary school for twenty years and then worked as a Ministry of Defence language instructor in the UK between 1992 and 2009:

At school, secondary school, I studied French. But my parents were very pushy – no, not pushy, really, but they said that's not enough to learn one foreign language, you should learn English, because English is the first language of the world. So I had private lessons with my mother's colleague, my mother used to teach French in a secondary school. So she would come maybe twice a week and teach us English. (Alma (1))

A man from Sarajevo who had attended secondary school until the war broke out in 1992 took private lessons with his mother in 1989 when her work as an engineer required her to learn English herself:

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<sup>34</sup> See William H. SEWELL, Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education, *American Sociological Review* 36 (1969), n. 5, 793-809, 794; Frances STEWART, Crisis Prevention. Tackling Horizontal Inequalities, *Oxford Development Studies* 28 (2000), n. 3, 245-62, 250; Daniele CHECCHI, Inequality in Incomes and Access to Education. A Cross-Country Analysis (1960-95). *Labour* 17 (2003), n. 2, 153-201, 179; Jo BLANDEN and Stephen MACHIN, Educational Inequality and the Expansion of UK Higher Education, *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 51 (2004), n. 2, 230-49, 247.

English I picked up mainly from TV, music and stuff like that... I couldn't tell you when it all started. Probably when I was a very young child. I mean, as soon as I started watching TV, more or less. And then... in second year of high school, when I was about fifteen years old, something like that, my mother persuaded me to take an English course with her. She wanted, she was an electrical engineer. And she worked a lot, well, she used to design transformer stations. And that meant that she was constantly in contact with people from, I don't know, Iraq, Malaysia, France, and other places where they sold those. And so she had to learn English, and she persuaded me to accompany her, which I did not want, but I was ordered to, so I did. And as it turned out, because it wasn't in school, because it was an extracurricular activity, I liked it. And it went very well. It was a very good course also. Extremely expensive, and very very advanced, and very very rapid. It was divided into four [...] courses, basically, that you had to finish to gain the certificate that you possess active knowledge of a foreign language. And there was a fifth course which was more occupation-related [...] I did not go for that one, because at the time I was a high school student so I did not know what I wanted to do, and, but I did finish all four courses, for the active knowledge of English, and it took I think about eight months altogether, with a pause for my summer break, which I spent down at the sea coast. So it was very rapid. But it was also very high quality. All the teachers were either postgraduates or PhD holders from Oxford, Cambridge, Stanford and places like that, locals who went to mostly Great Britain and the United States to get their postgraduate [degree] or PhDs. And then I did not use it until 1995. (Goran (3))

Access to language learning is linked in this narrative to several signifiers of the family's pre-war social identity (ability to afford intensive language classes with instructors who had foreign qualifications; the profession of electrical engineering; constant contact with clients from around the globe; parental insistence on supplementary education) and even of the city's and country's social identity before the war (leading the world in the design of transformer stations). Private tuition in the six narratives referred to above had all taken place before the war; a seventh narrative by an interpreter from Tuzla involved private tuition *during* the war as part of her trajectory towards interpreting work. This narrator stated that a private language college had opened in Tuzla during the war in response to the demand for local people with English language skills to work as interpreters. Her first foreign language at school had been Russian and her high school, which prepared pupils for engineering degrees, had given her two years of English lessons 'for engineering books and et cetera'. After studying at the private college, which offered up to a year's English tuition, she was shortlisted for two interpreting jobs and ended up working for the Swedish battalion until 1997:

But after I finished high school, my knowledge of English language was really basic, like I could introduce myself, tell you a bit [about] where I'm coming [from], and who is in my family, father and mother and et cetera, and that was it. I mean, my knowledge of English was really really basic. But when war started, some time in 1993 a friend of mine got a job with UNPROFOR. She was working with the Swedish battalion. And, of course, it was a difficult time for all of us, and my family also needed money, so I thought, 'OK, if we invest some money in my lessons in English language perhaps I could also get a job.' So we paid, at the time it was a hundred German marks, for three months in a school of English language. [...] It was called Stefanel, and they were giving four levels of three

months, like in a year you could be professional in English, but I doubt that anyone got to that level, really. But because of the fact that internationals came here and that if you knew the language you could get a job, many people were interested, and if you had the money of course you would invest that in that education.<sup>35</sup> (Azra (30))

An eighth interviewee had originally acquired her English proficiency through a different route that was still attributable to her parents: they had spent three years working in Iraq and she had attended an international school with English as the language of instruction:

The school was in English, but there were people from all over the world – I don't know – from Sweden, United States, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Nigeria, you name it. It was an international school and these were really the years of very rapid development for Iraq, so all the embassies were there, many foreign companies were there. Actually, at the time, despite the fact that it was already in a war against Iran, the country was still managing to boost its economy. [...]

Q: And this was the first time that you learned English?

A: Yeah. Because, for the first semester I had all Ls, like 'language difficulty'. But then I had to do extra English classes, and I was an A student at the end of the year.

Q: So what was it like, learning English for the first time?

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<sup>35</sup> Interview, May 2010.

A: Well, you know what they say, when you are a child your brain is like a sponge, it can consume much more than when you grow older. And I believe that... as a child you are usually very curious, so it's like investigating, you know, like learning a lot about a new world. And it helped that it was an international environment, so, of course it was easier for the people who came from countries where English is of course the official language. But for me it was an asset, because I learned a new language. [...] [W]hen I came back, my parents of course wanted me to keep the knowledge that I gained in Iraq, so I continued with English language courses, then we also travelled a lot, and... I always was among the best in English, of course (laughs), when I came back here, so I don't think that I lost my English, on the contrary, I just think I kept improving it over the years.<sup>36</sup> (Lejla (5))

Among the present collection of interviews, the narrative by Azra was unusual in that the narrator *had* undertaken this phase of language learning with the specific goal of working as an interpreter, bringing it closer to the 'motivation for work' paradigm in Second Language Acquisition research than the 'adaptation' paradigm in postsocialist studies. Private language learning in the other seven narratives had been part of socialisation for a technical career or for functioning in cosmopolitan settings. One can perceive both pragmatic reasons and philosophical values in this parental encouragement of active language learning. Speakers of 'small' languages need to learn more widely globalised languages in order to access academic and technical literature, bringing the prestige and identity of linguistic communities

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<sup>36</sup> Interview, October 2009. This interviewee was the only participant to narrate acquiring *English* skills while living abroad: two others had lived in Greece/Bulgaria as adults and acquired Greek/Bulgarian, though did not use it routinely in their work.

into conflict with practical communicative needs.<sup>37</sup> Philosophically, middle-class Bosnian professionals reproduced an ideology in which to have culture (*biti kulturan*), to be educated, to be modern and to be urban went hand in hand, at the top of a moral hierarchy that distinguished urbanity/modernity from an imagined ‘uncultured’ (*nekulturan*) village or provincial mentality.<sup>38</sup> (Interpreters too were often speaking within these conventions.) The parents of Alma, in the extract above, had considered English ‘the first language of the world’ and instilled a belief that it was ‘not enough to learn one foreign language’. Amira’s narrative described her father as a scientist who had maintained competence in several languages for cultural rather than professional reasons, typifying this worldview:

I think in my family there was also interest in languages. My father was very good at it. He was also in education, he was a professor of physics, but when he worked in places where they didn’t have a Latin teacher then he would step in as a Latin teacher, because he was very good at that. And he also spoke German, and he was very interested in learning English, even as an adult, and he also spoke French, and there was always kind of the idea present that to be properly educated you need to know another language – more than one other language – and it was kind of a very important part of being educated, really. (Amira (13))<sup>39</sup>

In a very different context, the same worldview had been expressed in a comment during an infamous 1993 interview given to a Croatian journalist by the pop musician Neda Ukraden (who grew up in Sarajevo and had studied for a law degree before becoming a professional singer): Ukraden explained that she had left Sarajevo for Belgrade to avoid Bosniak religious

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<sup>37</sup> Snježana KORDIĆ, *Jezik i nacionalizam*. Zagreb 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Tone BRINGA, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton 1995, 58-59.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, February 2010.

nationalism, stating that she ‘want[ed] her daughter to wear a miniskirt and speak English. That’s a civilizational difference and I don’t want to belong to an environment where people only celebrate Ramadan or only have a slava [a Serb/Orthodox family celebration]’.<sup>40</sup> Interpreters’ narratives of their families’ attitudes to language learning frame the same principle very differently: here, what they imply is a resistance to parochialism in general which could be manifested through the mastery of European languages.

One final site of language learning, university, was not an important turning point in most interpreters’ narratives. This is a significant divergence from the trajectories of international conference interpreting and professional translation, which expect an undergraduate languages degree followed by postgraduate qualifications in interpreting or translation. Its absence or downplaying in the language learning narratives analysed here can be explained by the fact that war disrupted the higher education of many interviewees who had expected to attend university and enter the career for which their chosen degree had prepared them. Some male interviewees had been conscripted as soon as they left secondary school and had become interpreters as soon as their military service ended, bypassing university; some had been students when the war began and had never had time to complete their degrees; some had switched to a different subject when they did resume their studies.<sup>41</sup> The student of medicine had also intended to take English language as a minor, but he remembered this as being disrupted when the English professor at his university left shortly before the war:

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<sup>40</sup> Pero ZLATAR, Neda Ukraden tuži Republiku Hrvatsku za 200.000 DEM! *Slobodni tjednik*, 16 April 1993.

<sup>41</sup> The three changes of degree subject were: tourism to English language; mechanical engineering to English language; pedagogy to human resources management. Among interviewees who had attended university, 4 had studied English before the war (1 more took English as a minor), 3 chose English during the war or afterwards, and 2 had studied Romance languages, for a total of 10 people who had completed at least some university language study. Another 7 had studied for non-languages degrees (3 engineering, 1 human resources management, 1 mathematics and computing, 2 tourism, 1 law and 1 medicine) and 2 mentioned a degree but not its subject.



[I]t happened to be that my professor of English language at the university was a Muslim, which is – here in Banja Luka, a predominantly Serbian area, wasn't quite good – so unfortunately she had to leave, and because of everything that happened, many people left the area, they couldn't actually find a replacement. So literally we didn't have even English language [as a] subject. (Saša (26))

This contrasts with 12 interviewees whose narratives did not include any period at university even though they might have attended a *gimnazija* oriented towards languages, engineering or political science, after which students would normally have expected and been expected to enter higher education.

University was most important in the narratives of the two interviewees who had completed degrees in more than one language before the war and had always intended to become professional linguists. One woman, based in Croatia, had experienced interpreting for UNPROFOR in Zagreb as a far more exciting, higher-stakes form of professional language work than would have been on offer in a non-wartime context – reminiscent of the volunteer European Community Monitoring Mission interpreters from Croatia studied by Zrinka Stahuljak<sup>42</sup> – and had gone on to build a career in the language units of international organisations abroad. The other, from Sarajevo, had experienced the war as a much greater rupture in her working identity: she had been starting to work as a literary translator when the war broke out and she began to interpret for French and Spanish journalists, then to work into French at the Sarajevo headquarters of UNPROFOR. She stayed in this job until the end of the war, when she moved to a press agency and later became a freelance press consultant. This trajectory was uncommon: even among those interviewees who had worked at the language services unit of the SFOR headquarters, HQ SFOR, after 2000 (which had the most

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<sup>42</sup> See Zrinka STAHULJAK, *Violent Distortions. Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators*, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction* 13 (2000), n. 1, 37-51.

rigorous entry requirements), higher education was usually a story of disruption, interruption and the revision of life expectations. What united the HQ SFOR cohort were not qualifications but aptitude and field experience which enabled them to pass tests assessing accuracy and fluency. The skills taught in language classrooms were not the skills needed for the work in which interpreters came to use their languages. Perhaps this was to be expected, since the purpose of education in Yugoslavia had not been to prepare students to survive war and the collapse of the Yugoslav economic system.

### **Working identities**

Most of the interviewees who had studied or graduated before the outbreak of war in BiH were among the last young people to enter higher education in socialist Yugoslavia. They had made choices about degree subjects, future careers and advantageous extra skills – such as a foreign language to support knowledge of a profession – within the context of a very different economic structure from that in which they would eventually seek work. Future doctors or teachers would see their professions paid in local currency, at meagre rates compared to the salaries offered for interpreting jobs by foreign military forces, NGOs and international agencies.<sup>43</sup> Future engineers, a group spotlighted in previous sections of this paper, found their intended profession in an even worse position. The break-up of the Yugoslav state and economy, the privatisation of state resources for quick profit instead of sustained social return, and the damage to factories and industrial plants during the war had destroyed the world-leading position in engineering expertise and export that narrators believed pre-war Yugoslavia to have had. Industrial recovery – or rather the reshaping of Bosnian industries within the neoliberal economy in which post-war BiH was incorporated – was further

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<sup>43</sup> Memory of pay scales in narratives spoken 10–15 years later is regrettably fallible, but interpreters who had been working for foreign forces in the late 1990s typically remembered being paid at least 1000 Deutschmarks (equivalent to €511) a month with salaries of up to 1800 DM (€920) available for the highest pay grades

inhibited when foreign forces chose as their bases vacant factories. The convenience of these sites for short-term troop accommodation, with large halls suitable for military equipment and external space for parking military vehicles, was counterbalanced by the difficulty of restarting industrial activity when a potential source of local employment and trade income was in indefinite use as a battalion or brigade headquarters. When an engineering student or graduate reported for work at the UK divisional headquarters in Multi-National Division (South-West), the so-called Banja Luka Metal Factory at Ramići, the transformation of the facility from a manufacturing site into a site of foreign military power and well-paid but insecure local knowledge work could not have made the alteration of his or her employment trajectory and working identity any more material. This transformation exemplifies the ruptures in working lives that were caused by war and the collapse of socialism in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Expectations were still transformed for those who had studied languages under socialism, if not to quite the same degree. As seen above, language acquisition was perceived in professional Bosnian families as a signifier of a ‘cosmopolitan’ mentality which would enhance the thinking and working self, and would therefore complement education in another subject. In more narrow terms of professional preparation, in education that specialised in languages at *gimnazija* level and university could be expected to lead in one of several directions as recalled by interviewees: language teacher in compulsory education; university professor (who might combine teaching with translation); private language tutor; diplomat or foreign correspondent. Conflict interpreting was self-evidently not one of these anticipated directions. Educational capital in this case was not a matter of *expecting to prepare* for a future of uncertainty; rather, it was a matter of happening to have the resources when uncertainty struck. Success and wellbeing in the basic job of interpreter would depend on

interpersonal skills and resilience more than on perfect grammatical knowledge or advanced flair in translation.

One might expect that adjusting from a non-languages degree to interpreting work was a more difficult adjustment; however, other professional degrees were also represented in interpreters' narratives. Engineering in particular played a significant part in the education and upbringing of a number of interpreters, most of all in Sarajevo. Of the 31 former Yugoslav interviewees, 9 had studied engineering subjects at high school and/or university and 1 more had had one or more parent who worked as an engineer, for a total of 10 who had been influenced by engineering while acquiring an expected working identity. 5 of these 10 were among the 8 interviewees born in Sarajevo, meaning that (in this limited sample) many more Sarajevo-born participants narrated themselves as coming from an engineering background. No other subject apart from language study and teaching was so strongly represented in interviewees' accounts of their education. Engineering required people to use technical literature in foreign languages, which accustomed them to using their language skills for work-related purposes. In some cases, the social situatedness of engineering in pre-war Yugoslavia had provided a person with hands-on experience of using spoken English in an immersive environment such as an international school abroad: military supervisors who hired untrained local interpreters in bases across BiH and who contributed interviews to the wider project from which this paper derives are known to have valued this type of experience (and prior ad hoc interpreting work such as tourist guiding) as evidence that the applicant would be able to function in the foreign-language environment of a military base and keep up with the pace of interpreting. A third explanation may be that speakers with an engineering background *chose to narrate* that background in more detail than others – perhaps in an attempt to establish some vestige of continuity between the flourishing Sarajevo of their

childhood, where engineering enterprises had been important employers, and the Sarajevo of today.

The working identities these speakers narrated were, nonetheless, not the fixed professional identities of ‘engineer’, ‘doctor’ or ‘teacher’ that they had expected before 1992 and in some cases practised. The only interviewees to establish substantial continuity between their pre-war and post-war trajectories were the working professional linguists, and even in their narratives the war had led to an unexpected interpreting job and a different trajectory within the linguistic profession. In other cases the war, or the condition of post-war BiH for those who had come of working age after 1995, represented a much deeper rupture in what had appeared to be a predictable and secure working identity. Perhaps the most regretful of these narrators was Saša, the medical student who had started work as an interpreter in 1998 and now looked back negatively on the poor contractual terms of his employment which would leave him without welfare or pension coverage. The narrative that was most dramatic and ‘successful’ in fixing a new working identity on the basis of interpreting was that of Goran, who had passed from what could be considered one stable working identity (a professional engineering family) through wartime military service and post-war employment uncertainty (a period working as a glazier) towards another stable identity as an interpreter with a well-paid post in a professionalised language service unit. Younger interpreters, particularly those from small towns in former front-line areas, had already seen the working identities of their parents thrown into crisis by the time they began to make decisions about their own educational options. Interpreters in this group had often worked for foreign forces for several years between or during high school and university and had attempted to move into other jobs as they entered their thirties.

These children of Bosnia’s professional–cosmopolitan stratum did not belong to the same socioeconomic group as their parents in terms of employment status or security. The

consequences of postsocialism and war had altered their parents' own economic status as pensioners or as recipients of salaries in local currency, but had affected this younger generation even more fundamentally by removing the knowable work trajectories of life in Yugoslavia. This group were not part of the outright new elite of those who had achieved substantial material security by taking advantage of the wartime and post-war period (such as politicians, organised criminals and large-scale black- and grey-market traders): if still working as interpreters, they feared for their standards of living after the inevitable redundancy that would accompany the final withdrawal of foreign troops from BiH, and often aimed (enthusiastically or reluctantly) to seek work or further study abroad. In this regard, they resembled the emerging 'precariat' that the sociologist Guy Standing has observed in the financialist West: a group of workers who are unable to build 'a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle' and who cannot be professionalised because their jobs offer no opportunities to specialise or grow in competence or experience.<sup>44</sup> Too many interpreting jobs corresponded to that profile. With experience and long service, an interpreter could advance one or two ranks on a foreign force's generalised pay grade for local civilians, but usually no further (only at the SFOR headquarters after 2000 did any element of the foreign military professionalise its language service under the guidance of professional linguists). This 'interpretariat', more privileged than workers on local-currency wages but less privileged compared to their parents' pre-war lives, had nonetheless formed a kind of work-based identity: field interpreters who had worked on the same base or shift, living together in shared rooms and experiencing physical hardship and fatigue on outdoor assignments, would often stay in touch physically or virtually and could provide each other with bridging social capital. This work-based identity had been developed informally rather

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<sup>44</sup> Guy STANDING, *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*. London 2010, 16, 23.

than through policy and professionalisation, but did not lead to the desirable future or career that a work-based identity in Yugoslavia had used to create.

## Conclusion

The attention to narratives of language learning in this paper has been inspired by the turn in applied linguistics towards using a narrative methodology to study the language learner as a social actor: by analysing the life histories of language learners and bilinguals, scholars aim to understand how learners' social worlds constrain them and also how learners themselves create a social world.<sup>45</sup> The experiences of learners who entered the new occupation of interpreter during and after the conflict in former Yugoslavia necessarily involve the *destruction and replacement* of a social world by people and forces outside the learners' control. Bosnian interpreters were 'Tito's children' in the sense that they had acquired their language competence in – or on the margins of – the socialist education system, yet during this 'childhood' they did not know the specific purpose to which they would eventually put it. Those who learned language(s) in conjunction with other forms of learning within a certain professional trajectory, such as prospective doctors or engineers, expected to use that competence *in that profession*, not in the role of conflict interpreter. On an even more basic level, they did not expect a state of affairs in their country – Yugoslavia – where the position of conflict interpreter could exist. Interpreters thus used their second language skills in a job which, when they learned the language, had simply not been meaningful or conceivable. Rather than actively renegotiating their identity through employment-related language learning, their formal learning had usually occurred *before* their renegotiation of work expectations and identity. Identity renegotiation through learning had much less formal

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<sup>45</sup> John FLOWERDEW and Lindsay MILLER, Social Structure and Individual Agency in Second Language Learning: Evidence from Three Life Histories, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 5 (2008), n. 4, 201-224, 202.

referents and occurred instead in the work of acclimatisation to military abbreviations and slang plus the accents and regionalisms of native speakers of their second languages. This acclimatisation, which can be viewed as a less formalised language-learning project, could lead, as in the projects of Simon Coffey's adult French learners,<sup>46</sup> to an emotional attachment to the target language and foreign country, manifested in online and offline reunion practices. However, this identification rested on social bonds created through shared work (and sometimes risk) rather than primarily on an abstracted nexus of education and imagination.

The case of Bosnian interpreters supports the findings of other studies of postsocialist employment, exemplified by Ghodsee's writing on Bulgaria, in which access to language learning opportunities improved the chances of a positive 'trajectory adjustment'. Foreign language competence mattered in socialist Bulgaria as one precondition for the study of tourism, a degree which opened up desirable holiday resort jobs under socialism; after socialism fell, resort workers had above-average prospects for stable employment and material benefit because the jobs and their language study had equipped them with the necessary social and cultural capital to find a path through this unexpected situation. In postsocialist Bulgaria, that cultural capital was becoming harder to acquire because access to higher education favoured wealthy applicants who could afford private tutoring and language lessons.<sup>47</sup> The Bosnian language learning narratives suggest that, even before postsocialism, in a socialist Yugoslavia where education was normatively meritocratic, people whose families had the resources and desire to supplement classroom language learning with reinforcement outside the classroom (through private lessons, through media or through travel) were those best equipped to 'adjust trajectory' after a socio-economic transformation that affected BiH even more deeply than Bulgaria. The findings of this paper suggest that,

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<sup>46</sup> Simon COFFEY, Stories of Frenchness. Becoming a Francophile, *Language and Intercultural Communication* 10 (2010), n. 2, 119-136, 130.

<sup>47</sup> GHODSEE, The Red Riviera, 42.



with further research, the Bosnian example could contribute to a theory of adaptation to sudden systemic shock.

Having drawn information from these narratives, one must also bear in mind that language learning narratives also have value as – and *must* be understood as – a narrative performance within a set of conventions; a shared understanding of those conventions (‘genre’) between the interviewee and interviewer; a co-construction of meaning through the process of eliciting narrative by questioning.<sup>48</sup> The work of constructing a narratable ‘interpreter’ identity did not finish into the workplace but continues into the setting of the research interview. Some of the genre conventions that emerged in interviews were constructed by the interviewer’s decision to begin interviews with the invitation to narrate ‘when and where you were born’ then to ask about educational experiences. On the level of a broader social context, however, the practice of making meaning through mobilising genre conventions is complicated in interpreter interviews by the problem that *there are no public conventions* for narrating the lives of the former Yugoslav ‘interpretariat’. Compare the position of the interpreter to the foreign soldier s/he was working alongside: any narration of military experiences and lives is able to refer to many conventions and tropes, rehearsed in many previous fictional and non-fictional representations of military experience and conditioned by public attitudes towards present and past conflicts at the time of narration.<sup>49</sup>

Certain standard moments in a military life, such as basic training and (for combat soldiers) the first time under fire, provide collective reference points for the construction of many distinct narratives. In British oral history interviewing, these are codified in a standard interview guide produced by the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive for soldier interviews and supplied to the author as a potential basis for preparing her own interview guides for this

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<sup>48</sup> See Aneta PAVLENKO, Narrative Study. Whose Story Is It, Anyway?, *TESOL Quarterly* 36 (2002), n. 2, 213-218.

<sup>49</sup> See, on military memoir, Yuval Noah HARARI, Martial Illusions. War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs, *Journal of Military History* 69 (2005), n. 1, 43-72; on military oral history, Alistair THOMSON, *Anzac Memories. Living With The Legend*. Oxford 1994.

project.<sup>50</sup> Former Yugoslav interpreters had no external reference points beyond the genre conventions they had developed while retelling their experiences in (offline and online) friendship groups, since public representations of this group have been far more limited than representations of other archetypal roles constructed during and after the conflict (the soldier, the veteran, the refugee, the mourner, the war victim). The conflict interpreter in BiH has not been constituted as a social role and is not represented in the web of war participants' organisations; global awareness of the interpreter as figure is similarly emergent. In the future, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan – where large numbers of foreign forces have relied on locally-hired interpreters in even riskier conditions than BiH – may produce first-hand interpreter memoirs/narratives and begin to fix the conflict interpreter narrative as its own genre in a way that could be taken up in other conflict zones. In the meantime, the conventions of Bosnian interpreter narratives are formed personally or within affinity groups, within concepts of professionalism that owe more to military identities than the linguistic profession's own norms, and with more emphasis on non-linguistic skills than the cultural capital of formal educational resources.

Table 1 [see print edition]

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<sup>50</sup> This cooperation with the IWM Sound Archive came about because the Museum was a partner in the wider research project to which this study belongs. The author's interviewees were offered the opportunity to contribute the recording of their interview to the Sound Archive after the end of the project.