



# Interpreters in the United States Army Military Government in Korea: “A Government of, for, and by Interpreters”?

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Article abstract

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## Abstract

This paper will apply a Bourdieusian theoretical framework to analyze the military field and evaluate the interpreting habitus that emerged during the U.S. military occupation of South Korea (1945-1948). Despite its position of military dominance within the military field, the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) was unable to assert the normal hierarchical structure of an occupational force during interpreted events. This provided interpreters with the freedom to, when necessary, actively intervene in interlingual exchanges rather than be limited to function as “conduits.” This paper theorizes that interpreting activity is a site for the recontextualization of social hierarchical relations and proposes that while dominant agents and institutions typically dictate the terms under which the norms of interpreting are (re)established, under certain conditions, empowered interpreters may challenge the authority of these dominant institutions and redefine the interpreting habitus.

**Keywords:** interpreter, habitus, Korea, USAMGIK, interpreter’s government

## Résumé

Cet article mobilise un cadre théorique bourdieusien dans le but d’analyser le champ militaire et d’évaluer l’*habitus* d’interprétation qui est apparu pendant l’occupation militaire américaine de la Corée du Sud (1945-1948). Malgré sa position dominante dans le champ militaire, le gouvernement militaire de l’armée américaine en Corée (USAMGIK) n’a pu établir la structure hiérarchique standard d’une force d’occupation lors d’événements nécessitant des interprètes. Cette situation a donné aux interprètes la liberté, si nécessaire, d’intervenir activement dans des échanges interlinguaux plutôt que d’être limités à fonctionner comme des « canaux ». Cet article théorise

l'activité d'interprétation comme site de la recontextualisation des rapports hiérarchiques sociaux et propose que, bien que les agents et institutions dominants dictent généralement les conditions dans lesquelles les normes d'interprétation sont (ré)établies, dans certains cas, des interprètes devenu(e)s autonomes peuvent contester l'autorité de ces institutions dominantes et redéfinir l'habitus d'interprétation.

**Mots-clés** : interprète, habitus, Corée, USAMGIK, gouvernement de l'interprète

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the topic of translation and interpreting in situations of violent conflict has generated considerable research in Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS). Scholars have examined the role of interpreters in World War I (Heimburger, 2012a, 2012b; Cowley, 2016) and World War II (Gaiba, 1998; McNaughton, 2006; Takeda, 2009, 2010; Tryuk, 2012; Footitt and Kelly, 2012; Footitt and Tobia, 2013), as well as the recent conflicts in the Darfur (Hari, 2008), the Former Yugoslav Republics (Stahuljak, 2000, 2009; Baker, C., 2010a, 2010b; Kelly and Baker, 2012), Iraq, and Afghanistan (Baker, M., 2006, 2010; Inghilleri, 2008, 2009, 2010; Rafael, 2007, 2012; Tälpaş, 2016). This growing body of literature continues to add to an already wide-ranging picture of the complex role interpreters play in influencing the progression, representation, and memory of war in their respective historical and geo-political contexts.

Despite the burgeoning interest in the role and positionality of interpreters in conflict situations, little attention has been paid to the circumstances seen in Korea leading up to, during, and following the Korean War (1950-1953). The existing literature focuses primarily on the technical and emotional challenges interpreters faced during the Korean Armistice Negotiations (1951-1953) (Fernández Sánchez, 2012, 2014, 2019; Wang and Xu, 2016). These studies reveal that interpreters at the negotiation table abided by an ethical code that dictated they act as loyal members of the military institutions they served rather than functioning as neutral linguistic mediators, the norm of professional interpreters in other settings.

This article, which builds on my previous work on the shifting positionality of interpreters during the preparatory, engagement, and conclusionary phases of the Korean War (Kim, H., 2021), examines the prominent role local Korean interpreters assumed during the U.S. military occupation of Korea between 1945 and 1948. Interpreting is defined as a socially regulated activity between social agents, rather

than as a purely linguistic exchange. The article thus focuses on the socio-political context in which interlingual communication took place, the conditions of the linguistic market, the interplay between interlocutors during interpreted events, and the varying expectations held by social agents regarding the interpreters' role, as these were the social variables that decided the form interpreting would take during the occupation.

### **1. Sociological Approaches to the Study of Interpreting**

The work of sociologist R. Bruce W. Anderson (1976) was the earliest research to draw attention to interpreting as a socially situated activity. Anderson modelled interpreting as a three-party interaction, with the bilingual interpreter mediating between the monolingual producer and the monolingual consumer. The interpreters' power arises from their position in the middle, which has "the advantages of power inherent to all positions which control scarce resources" (Anderson, 1976, pp. 218-219). Combined with the relative ambiguity of the interpreter's role, the interpreters' positionality allows them considerable latitude in defining their own behavior vis-à-vis that of the monolingual clients. Unfortunately, Anderson's seminal work was not taken up by interpreting scholars until more than a decade later.

It was Miriam Shlesinger (1989) who, applying Gideon Toury's theory of translation norms to interpreting, paved the way for research that viewed interpreting not merely as a linguistic activity, but as a social act. Toury was amongst the first translation scholars to highlight the fact that translation takes place in complex socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts, and, like all forms of social behavior, it is regulated by multiple norms. He considered norms to be "the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community—as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate—into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations" (1995, pp. 54-55).

Sociological approaches to the study of interpreting were further developed by Cecilia Wadensjö (1998), who drew on the work of Erving Goffman (1961) to highlight the triadic nature of interpreter-mediated events. Both micro-sociological approaches, which often use discourse analysis as a theoretical framework, and macro-sociological approaches, which draw on social theories to account for interpreters' agency in interpreted social interactions, emerged from this body of work.

Moira Inghilleri (2003) presented a theoretical model to examine translation norms in interpreting by incorporating Toury's notion of norms with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, and Basil Bernstein's (1990) pedagogic discourse, which pioneered the macro-social approach to the study of interpreting. Her work came in response to an earlier attempt by Daniel Simeoni to apply Bourdieu's theories to translation in his article "The Pivotal Status of the Translator's Habitus" (1998) in which he argued that the translator's "voluntary servitude" significantly contributed to the secondariness of their activity and the low social prestige of the profession (1998, p. 6). The question of the translator's alleged subservience was directly addressed by Inghilleri (2003, 2005b), who offered an alternative reading of Bourdieu's theorization of the habitus of translators and interpreters, asserting that they can be "both implicated in and able to transform the forms of practice in which they engage" (2005b, p. 143).

### **1.1 A Bourdieusian Approach to Interpreting: Field, Habitus, and Capital**

Over the past two decades, a significant number of scholars have applied Bourdieu's sociological approach to TIS (Simeoni, 1998; Gouanic, 2005; Inghilleri, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Wolf, 2007a, 2007b; Guo, 2016). Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus," "field," and "capital" are interrelated and have been employed to analyze the practices of social agents, as well as the dialectical relationship that emerges between agents within social institutions (Bourdieu, 1991). Inghilleri notes that his sociological approach "provides a set of powerful tools" (2005a, p. 126) for conceptualizing interpreters' practices, especially their "reproductive or transformative" roles in particular historical and socio-cultural contexts.

According to Bourdieu, social space is a "multidimensional space" comprised of multiple fields in which agents' positions are defined by the types of capital they possess or accrue (1991, p. 229). All fields, both large and small, are profoundly hierarchized, with dominant agents and powerful institutions holding considerable power over what happens within these social spaces. Bourdieu understands "fields" to be relational spaces in which individuals and institutions struggle for the production, attainment, and dissemination of capital. Here, "capital" refers to any assets (cultural, economic, social, etc.) that are collectively or individually viewed as valuable. These assets

are associated with both material and symbolic wealth. An agent's "habitus," understood as an acquired schema or set of dispositions, is formed through their position in a field, which is dictated by the forms of capital they possess (or lack) (2000, p. 11).

Inghilleri outlines this conceptual approach in relation to interpreted events in the political asylum system as follows:

In interpreted events, where multiple fields and habitus intersect, social agents representing well-established professions (e.g., judges, solicitors, civil servants) will reproduce with some certainty what they feel to be the "objective" structures of their respective fields. Such agents will possess culturally significant forms of capital linked to their respective fields, in this case the legal and political fields, which confer prestige, status and authority upon them. [...] But what of interpreters if, as suggested above, the interpreting profession occupies a far less certain social position? Their relationship to any or all of the inter-locking fields that converge on the interpreting context may reflect this positioning, making it more likely that others will define and control the social/interactive space through the imposition of their respective habitus. (2005a, p. 5)

Nevertheless, she indicates the potential for what she refers to as an "interpreting habitus" to emerge in which interpreters can and do exert equal or greater control over interpreting activity, including in situations where this involves the disruption of pre-established power relations:

I would argue that a specific interpreting habitus can emerge from interpreting activity that simultaneously disrupts power relations and structures interpreted events in such a way as to allow all participants to operate with a shared understanding regarding interpreting activity. However, the specific ways that a particular interpreting context is structured by and structures the interpreting habitus—which or whose normative practices prevail—will depend on the interplay in social/interactional space between social agents, field(s) and their accompanying habitus. (*ibid.*)

My analysis is grounded in the assumption that interpreted events are a crucial site for the convergence of competing fields, their accompanying habitus, and capital. In the following sections, I first provide a brief historical summary of the U.S./U.S.S.R. occupation of Korea insofar as the relationship between agents and institutions, as well as their respective habitus, can only be identified after the field in which they are located has been fully analyzed

(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104-105). Second, I provide background information regarding the sociopolitical conditions under which interpreted events took place. Third, I discuss the particular identities of the social agents engaged in interlingual exchanges, the communicative challenges these interlocutors faced, and the emergence of an interpreting habitus that empowered the interpreter and lent them the authority to dictate the terms under which interpreted events would be mediated. The findings of this study challenge normative assumptions regarding the interpreter's invisibility or subservience. In doing so, I demonstrate that through the accumulation and monopolization of linguistic capital in social contexts where the significance of interlingual communication is exceptionally high, the interpreter emerges as an influential, and even dominant, social agent.

## **2. A Brief Overview of the U.S./U.S.S.R. Occupation of Korea**

The U.S. military occupation of South Korea began on 8 September 1945, when General John Hodge and the 24th Corps arrived at Incheon Harbor (Cumings, 2005 [1997], p. 189). From 1910 to 1945, the entire Korean peninsula had been under the colonial control of Japan but following the Japanese surrender to the Allies on 15 August 1945, the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel and occupied by the United States in the south and the Soviet Union in the north. On 11 September 1945, Hodge “[terminated] the Japanese civil government and replaced it with a military governor, General [Archibald] Arnold” (Millet, 2005, p. 59) who took office as the head of the USAMGIK the following day. The Soviet Union entered North Korea on 14 August 1945, arrived in Pyongyang on 24 August, and established the Soviet Civil Administration (SCA) as the occupying government on 3 October. In December 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed on a five-year bilateral trusteeship over Korea, during which they would establish a Joint Commission to assist in preparations for a free Korean democratic government. However, this agreement proved impossible to implement: by early 1946 “Korea was effectively divided and the two regimes and two leaders who founded the respective Korean states in 1948 were effectively in place” (Cumings, 2011, p. 109).

The 38th parallel was not initially meant to function as an iron curtain dividing the two Koreas into political camps as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Occupied Areas John Hilldring noted:

In no sense was this agreement more than a military expedient between two friendly powers. The line of demarcation was intended to be temporary and only to fix responsibility between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R for carrying out the Japanese surrender. (cited in McCune, 1947, p. 605)

The end of World War II, however, terminated the alliance between the Americans and the Soviets. As world relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated, “each government became more insistent on a solution to the Korean problem which would prevent the other from bringing the whole territory within its sphere of dominant influence” (Goodrich, 1956, p. 84).

The Joint Commission, which had been set up to aid in the establishment of a unified Korean government, met twice, once in 1946 and 1947, but failed to make progress due to increasing Cold War antagonism (Buzo, 2002, pp. 59-60). The Korean peninsula had become a microcosm of the emerging Cold War order as the difference in policy between the occupying powers led to a polarization of politics (Robinson, 2007, pp. 108-110). After the 1947 meeting of the Joint Commission failed to produce any tangible results, it became apparent that the formation of a unified Korean government would be impossible under the current conditions. The United States handed over the matter to the General Assembly of the United Nations which in turn created the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) to supervise free and open elections, assist in the withdrawal of the two occupying forces, and guide the newly formed state to full independence.

The Soviet Union publicly opposed the creation of UNTCOK and refused to participate in any elections administered by the Commission or support any of its activities. When the members of the Commission arrived in Korea in January 1948, they were denied entrance into North Korea. A report on these circumstances was made to the Interim Committee of the UN General Assembly, which operated when the General Assembly was not sitting, and it was decided on 26 February 1948 that UNTCOK should adhere to the original intention to the extent that this could be accomplished: elections would be supervised in the south but nothing could be done about the north (Luard, 1982, p. 234).

During the following months, elections were held for Korea's National Assembly, in which the North Koreans refused to participate.

In South Korea, Rhee Syngman declared the Republic of Korea (ROK) in Seoul after the May 1948 elections. In Pyongyang, Kim Il-sung followed suit by declaring a new state in September, naming it the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) (Westad, 2017, p. 165). In early 1949, the Russians withdrew their troops from the DPRK and on 29 June of the same year the United States pulled its own forces from the ROK. When the two foreign powers finally withdrew, they left behind two diametrically opposed governments, each claiming sovereignty over the whole of Korea, effectively setting the stage for the ensuing Korean War.

### **3. Interlingual (Mis)communication during the U.S. Military Occupation of South Korea**

Before the occupation, the United States had historically shown very little interest in the Korean peninsula. As historian James Matray explains, “Korean affairs had been the exclusive concern of closer and more powerful neighbors—Russia, China, and Japan” while “the United States had seen no national interests worth defending on the Korean peninsula” (1985, p. 5). America’s attitude towards peninsular affairs remained largely unaffected during World War II and Korea was scarcely considered in post-war planning. As a result, “the Korean policy of the United States in 1945 was very poorly coordinated” (Kim, J., 1975, p. 53) and “a view widely held among historians is that the United States forces coming into the Korean peninsula had practically no preparations to deal with the problems awaiting them” (Lee, 1982, p. 32).

Amongst the various difficulties the U.S. Military Government faced during the occupation, the most salient were the

difficulties imposed by barriers of language—the mechanical linguistic problem, the difficulty of achieving a meeting of minds, and the frequent impossibility of being certain whether there has been a meeting of minds or not. On all levels the occupation forces were constantly confronted with problems of language. (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.)

Two translation-related events that occurred during the early months of the occupation had a notable influence on the growing hostility Koreans felt towards the American military. The first widespread controversy had to do with the translation of the Cairo Declaration. In November 1943, the leaders of the United States, the United

Kingdom, and the Republic of China specified in this declaration that Korea would be granted independence “in due course” following Japan’s defeat. The translation of the Cairo Declaration that circulated in Korea, which had been prepared by official Japanese sources, translated the ambiguous phrase “in due course” into “in a few days” (Stueck and Yi, 2010, p. 186). The Korean public was thus frustrated when Hodge announced that in fact Korea would not be granted immediate independence; instead, Koreans would have to earn their liberation by “demonstrate[ing] to the democratic nations of the world and to me as their representative your capacities and abilities as a people and your readiness to accept an honored place in the family of nations” (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.).

The situation was further exacerbated in December 1945 when the decision to establish a trusteeship over Korea was announced. The U.S. military later assessed that the negative reaction to this decision was caused in part by the fact that the word “trusteeship” was translated into the same Korean word that had been used to refer to Japanese colonial control over the country. Hodge made the following statement in a belated attempt to pacify the public:

I fully understand what the word “Trusteeship” means to Koreans. In the meaning that you apply to that word, it is even more abhorrent to me as a responsible representative of my nation than it can be to you. The diplomats of the great Powers do not use the word in the same meaning as do Koreans, because they did not exercise forty years of Japanese domination. If they did understand your thoughts of the term “Trusteeship” they would use another term to express the assistance and advice they are willing to give Korea. I can assure you that I need no demonstration of any kind to make me do all in my power to remove all references to “Trusteeship” from future discussions of Korea. (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.)

The general’s announcement did little to mend the damage already done to public relations with the Korean people, to whom it increasingly appeared that the Americans were replacing rather than removing the Japanese colonists.

### **3.1 *Nisei* Interpreters in South Korea**

Further adding to the distrust directed towards the U.S. military was the fact that the Americans initially sought to establish lines of communication with the Korean people via Japanese interpreters

because the occupational forces did not have Korean interpreters amongst their ranks. When the 24th Corps first landed in Incheon Harbor on 8 September 1945, they were accompanied by a total of approximately thirty *Nisei* interpreters and translators who were assigned to the headquarters, the Military Government, and military divisions in local provinces. *Nisei* interpreters and translators were crucial to the military activities of the United States throughout World War II and during the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) (McNaughton, 2006; Torikai, 2009; Takeda, 2010). Although the circumstances under which interpreters functioned in post-war Japan and South Korea were in many ways similar, as both nations were placed under U.S. occupation, there was a critical difference between the two situations: the U.S. military entered Japan with trained *Nisei* interpreters, whereas the U.S. forces arrived in South Korea without so much as a single Korean-language specialist. The Armed Forces Pacific (AFPAC), the command group above the 24th Corps, made a belated search for Korean interpreters in August 1945 but “it was able to find only six paroled Korean prisoners of war, who were accordingly attached to the 24th Corps” (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.).

The Japanese interpreters and translators deployed to South Korea were essential to the success of Hodge’s initial mission, which was to “take the Japanese surrender, disarm the Japanese armed forces, enforce the terms of the surrender, and remove Japanese imperialism from Korea” (Hodge, 1948, n.p.). The *Nisei* mediated between U.S. and Japanese military units as the Americans disarmed and relocated the approximately six hundred thousand Japanese troops stationed in Korea, who were gradually removed to Jeju island off the southern coast of the Korean peninsula before being repatriated to Japan (McNaughton, 2006, p. 411).

After accepting the Japanese surrender, Hodge’s second mission in Korea was to “maintain order, establish an effective government along democratic lines to replace the Japanese government in Korea, and rebuild a sound economy as a basis for Korean independence,” as well as to “train Koreans in handling their own affairs and prepare Korea to govern itself as a free and independent nation” (Hodge, 1948, n.p.). Although this mission required interpreters to mediate communication in order to facilitate cooperation between the U.S. occupational forces and the Korean populace, the Military Government decided to continue using *Nisei* interpreters. While

*Nisei* interpreters initially stood in for Korean interpreters, their ability to function as efficient mediators was severely limited for the following reasons.

First, the success of this approach hinged on the premise that a large portion of the general Korean public could converse in Japanese. In reality, however, the actual number of Japanese speakers in Korea was not as high as the U.S. military assumed, as only just over twenty-two percent of the population or 5.7 million Koreans were able to understand Japanese in 1943 (Kim-Rivera, 2002, pp. 266-267). It is unclear what categories were used to define “understand” Japanese, in contrast to having a good “command” of the language, the requisite for effective interpretation. Nevertheless, this number could hardly justify the recourse to Japanese interpreters as the primary channel of interlingual communication between the U.S. military and the Korean people.

Second, the Korean people, who had endured thirty-five years under Japanese colonial control, were often unwilling to work with Japanese interpreters. On the one hand, the presence of the *Nisei* suggested that the United States acknowledged Imperial Japan as a legitimate counterpart whose language it was willing to learn in order to be able to communicate, on equal terms, with the defeated nation. The absence of Korean interpreters, on the other hand, indicated to the Korean people that the U.S. military did not see the need to communicate or the necessity to cooperate with them.

Third, though the *Nisei* interpreters were not of Japanese nationality, and were therefore not directly linked to Korea's colonial past, Koreans remained distrustful towards them “because of the Korean conviction that a Japanese remained a Japanese even if born in the United States and wearing an American uniform” (Meade, 1951, pp. 82-83). Such racial antipathy, however, was not one-sided since “many *Nisei* exhibited the traditional Japanese disdain for Koreans and the Korean language” (McNaughton, 2006, p. 143). This mutual distaste created hostility in an environment where tensions were already palpable, thus serving as a hindrance to cooperation, which forced the USAMGIK to seek the services of local Korean interpreters.

## 4. Local Korean Interpreters in the USAMGIK

### 4.1 Recruiting Local Korean Interpreters

Founded by and operated as part of the United States military, by December 1945 almost seventy-five thousand Koreans were working for the USAMGIK. In December 1946, the governance structure of the Military Government was reorganized so that each bureau would be co-headed by an American and a Korean. Despite having to work side-by-side with their American counterparts,

less than ten percent of the [Korean] higher officials in Military Government have any understanding whatever of English. Less than one-half of the number who do understand English are able to speak it effectively. It is absolutely necessary for Americans to be able to talk and to get over ideas to Korean officials. This can be done only through interpreters [...] I think we might add that practically no American can speak Korean. (National Archives and Records Administration, 15 November 1946, p. 11)

This meant that all policy decisions would require consultation between the two sides, which could only be achieved via an interpreter. Thus, the Military Government was reliant on Korean interpreters for carrying out its daily operations.

The task of selecting local Korean interpreters was at first managed by Yasuma Oda, a former official of the Japanese Government General, because no American military personnel possessed the linguistic skills necessary to administer properly the selection process. The first round of recruiting interpreters, carried out shortly following the arrival of the 24th Corps, was judged to have been “fairly successful” insofar as “a considerable number turned up” to work (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.). The military assessed that “[a]lthough not fluent in English, they were for the most part satisfactory” (*ibid.*) and a large portion of this original group eventually ended up working for the Military Government. Soon afterwards, due to a rising need for interpreters among the U.S. military units stationed elsewhere in Korea, a second call was sent out. This search “yielded only a [lean] harvest, but some Koreans were [nevertheless] hired as interpreters, translators, and civil censors” (*ibid.*).

The difficulty in recruiting competent English speakers was in large part caused by the fact that “the forty years of Japanese rule,

especially that last decade when Japan was at war, was a major interruption in English education in Korea” (Kim-Rivera, 2002, p. 279). In 1939, the Japanese imperial government had declared English an enemy language, banned the import of Western books, fired all British and Americans in official positions, forced missionaries to leave its territories, drastically reduced the instructional hours of English, and removed the subject from higher-education entrance exams. As a result, “both the quality and the quantity of English language education suffered a great deal” (*ibid*, p. 272).

The limited number of Koreans capable of communicating in English meant that the supply of interpreters within the linguistic market created by the U.S. military upon its arrival could not meet the demand for this resource. The following account by former USAMGIK interpreter Jeon Suk-hui suggests that, with demand far outweighing supply, the Military Government was forced to go to great lengths to recruit capable English speakers:

When the U.S. soldiers arrived they discovered that all the Americans and Koreans could do was stare at each other’s faces and say “hello” and “okay” because no one spoke good enough English to communicate [...].

They thought someone who had been to university would speak at least a little bit of English. That is when the name “Jeon Suk-hui,” a graduate from Ewha Womans University, caught their eye.

Three or four American officers from the Military Government came to our hospital and asked me to become an interpreter. They were not soldiers, they were officers. I showed them my baby and told them that it would be difficult for me to work for them. Of course, I spoke in English. They visited several times afterwards to persuade me to change my mind. (Jeon, 2005, p. 107; my trans.)

Furthermore, according to Peter Hyun, the Military Government sometimes resorted to hastily recruiting interpreters who lacked the training required to fluently mediate between the two languages:

The only job I could come up with in Seoul right after liberation was working as an interpreter for the U.S. occupational forces. The best and favorite subject during middle school in Hamhung was English. To be frank, I never studied conversational English. Of course, my English skills were not very good [...] but so what? I decided to give it a try! I was as courageous as I was young and foolish. I visited the Human Resources office of the 8th Army. I must have looked very young

because the bulky Army Major sitting behind the desk asked me how old I was. I added three years to my actual age [...] I couldn't believe it. I got the job so quickly and easily! There weren't even any detailed questions about my work experience or qualification. (1996, pp. 29-30; my trans.)

Despite measures taken to mitigate the situation, the USAMGIK suffered from a lack of interpreters throughout the occupation, as made evident in the following excerpt from an interview with the former head of the Detective Bureau of Military Government, Choy Mung-chin:

Q. Was it necessary to employ a large number of interpreters in order to carry out the business of the government?

A. Yes sir, absolutely necessary.

[...]

Q. Does Military Government now have all the interpreters it needs?

A. No sir, it does not.

Q. Are additional interpreters obtainable?

A. They are certainly not obtainable in sufficient quantities. Occasionally we get a few in response to our requests, but only a very few. Also, we have dismissed a number of interpreters for various reasons.

Q. Any other comments?

A. No sir, other than I would like to emphasize one statement—that in my opinion this interpreter matter, due to the language difficulty, is of paramount importance. (National Archives and Records Administration, 4 November 1946, p. 2)

The lack of English speakers in Korea, caused by the discontinuation of English-language education during World War II coupled with the rising demand for their services throughout the U.S. military occupation, led to an inflation in the value of interpreting. Normally, this would have justified an increase in the price of interpreting services. The conditions under which the linguistic market operated during the occupation, however, were not typical market circumstances considering the U.S. military maintained a monopsony—a situation where there is only one consumer of a good or service—over the demand for interpreters and translators. The Military Government, which possessed wage-setting power as the largest employer of interpreters, set the price for linguistic services

at an artificially low rate, a fact that the institution was cognizant of: “[interpreters] were paid twenty yen a day; in spite of the low pay many educated English-speaking Koreans volunteered their services in order to improve their knowledge of English” (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.). The Korean political leader Won Se-hoon urged the U.S. military to increase their salary, asserting “there are a number of true patriots who have come into the government and acted as interpreters and in various other positions in order to assist their country. These men have been paid salaries which give them little more than tobacco money” (National Archives and Records Administration, November 4, 1946, p. 3). The Military Government, however, was disinclined towards increasing the wages of interpreters under its employment, based on the argument that they were already being paid more than Japanese interpreters under the colonial government.

Although the value of interpreting services was not reflected in the USAMGIK interpreter’s income, the monopoly this relatively small group maintained over the means of interlingual communication within the Military Government elevated their position during interpreted events, allowing interpreters to compete with dominant social agents who, under less extreme circumstances, might have exercised overwhelming control over the interpreting habitus.

#### **4.2 “A Government of, for, and by Interpreters”?**

While archival material, such as the historical documents and military records quoted from in the previous sections, provides important information about the interplay between the different agents involved in interpreted events, finding direct evidence of what actually happened during such exchanges is more difficult. As a matter of fact, one of the primary challenges researchers face when studying the history of interpreting is the lack of traditional historical accounts, as interpreters are rarely mentioned even in documents detailing events in which the interpreter would have functioned as a key player. Thus, in addition to archival sources, researchers often consult oral testimonies (Baigorri-Jalón, 2004; Torikai, 2009), memoirs and personal papers (Wang and Xu, 2016), video or photographic material (Fernández-Ocampo and Wolf, 2014), as well as films (Cronin, 2009) and literature (Kaindl and Spitzl, 2014).

The current study draws upon the short story “Rice” by Henry Steiner (1951), in which the Korean interpreter Song accompanies

Captain Frazer and Sergeant Biancoli during a visit to the home of the elderly rice farmer Han. The two Americans have received orders to persuade Han to sell his rice harvest to the USAMGIK at a reduced price as part of the Rice Collection Program, but, if necessary, the American soldiers are authorized to confiscate the Korean farmer's stores by force. This fictional work is used here as supplementary evidence due to the lack of transcriptions or recordings of interpreted events from this period. It should be noted that depictions of interpreters in literature are often influenced by the author's social, political, cultural, and personal history, and the image of the interpreter may be molded to fit the writer's literary or ideological purposes. Nonetheless, "Rice" has been selected based on the fact that the author lived in South Korea from 1946 to 1947 while working as an engineering field supervisor for the Military Government, and on the assumption that the content of the story is based on observations he made while stationed there. Further adding to the credibility of this work is the fact that the circumstances under which the interpreter operates, the dynamics between the players engaged in the interpreted event, and the manner in which the interpreter mediates between the two parties align with descriptions found in archival material from this period.

"Tell him if he doesn't sell, we'll confiscate the rice."

Mr. Song said placatingly in Korean, "The people in the cities are starving. They cannot pay the high price on the open market. That is why the government sets this low price and makes out a quota."

"The government of thieves! Let those in the cities come back to the land if they wish to eat." Mr. Han's eyes, the color of yellow river-water, became bright and wet with emotion. "Let them depend on the rain as I do and starve when it does not come. Let the river sweep away all they have. For years, I have worked the land for the Japanese and saw them take my rice away. Now I have the land and the rice. The government wants to take it away again. It is the same as the Japanese."

"What does he say?" Frazer asked.

"One moment please, Captain Frazer." And then in Korean to the old man, "But this is not for the Japanese. This is for your own people. The Americans are helping us."

"Yes, I know. They will sell the rice to the robbers for five times what they give me. Then the robbers will sell it to the people for ten

times. What do these foreigners know?" The speech came shooting out of the old man's mouth.

"You are right," Mr. Song said, "some of the rice may go to thieves, there to be sold again, but is it no comfort to know that you are behaving justly, that you are helping others who would starve without you? At least you will gain merit in the eyes of God no matter what sins others may commit."

The old man ignored him again.

Mr. Song turned to Frazer and said, "He says no."

"You mean you talked that much and all he said was no? You interpreters are all alike." (pp. 7-8)

Here, rather than mimicking the American captain's menacing tone, or relaying his threatening message, the interpreter instead first attempts to pacify the elderly man by explaining the circumstances that have necessitated the Rice Collection Program. Even when Captain Frazer asks that the farmer's response be communicated to him, rather than informing him of the farmer's thoughts on the matter, the interpreter opts to continue persuading Han. He negotiates on behalf of the Americans, imploring the elderly farmer to recognize the fact that the U.S. Military Government is requiring him to sell his rice for reasons different from those of the Japanese colonists who stole Han's previous harvests. Only when Song determines that he can do no more to convince Han to reconsider his stance does the interpreter relent and offer the American officer the short interpretation, "He says no" (*ibid.*, p. 8). The interpreter decides to omit much of what was said, choosing rather to relay the core message without voicing the criticism expressed by Han. This may very well be an attempt by the interpreter to diffuse the rising tension within the interpreting event.

Frazer's terse response to Song's interpretation can be understood as an indication of how uneasy the U.S. military officer felt about the empowerment of the interpreter. Nonetheless, Frazer was unable to reorient the interpreting habitus to align with what he viewed as legitimate communicative practice. The following passage shows that Frazer's experience was not unique to this fictional character but common practice in Korea throughout the occupation:

It can readily be understood how an interpreter could in time come to know his principal's job almost as well as the principal and, if granted

enterprise, act on his own in answering questions and reaching decisions while interpreting, or even independently while his principal was absent. It was a common enough experience to hear one's interpreter and a Korean conversing at a greater length than demanded by the translation at hand. This led in some cases to suspicion of interpreters, but always there remained the answer that the rendition of an American thought into Korean terms was more than a mere exchange of words. (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.)

Local Korean interpreters working for the USAMGIK were not restricted to functioning as "conduits." They actively intervened in interlingual communicative exchanges, at times overstepping the limits of what is often considered the role of the linguistic mediator and functioning as decision-makers, advocates, and negotiators.

The active role interpreters adopted during interpreted events led some Koreans to believe that it was the interpreters who oversaw the administrative duties of the Military Government rather than its American officials, thus they were the ones to blame for its many policy failures. This idea became so widespread that an unidentified Korean political organization went so far as to claim that the idea of trusteeship itself originated not from U.S. policymakers but "[f]rom the interpreters of the U.S. Army and Military Government who are of the opinion that in Korea we have no leader who is capable of leading us and therefore our independence should be delayed" (Historical Office of the U.S. Command in Korea, 1948, n.p.). This is, of course, far from the truth as the idea of trusteeship over Korea was first discussed between Roosevelt and Stalin while World War II was still underway, and detailed plans for the length and form of the trusteeship were decided on during the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in December of 1945. Regardless of the truth, however, this incident demonstrates how influential interpreters were seen to be in the eyes of the public.

The perception that interpreters were running the Military Government led to criticism that the latter was in fact a "government of, for, and by interpreters" (Taylor 1948, p. 372). While claims that local Korean interpreters were behind decisions regarding Korea's trusteeship might have been hyperbolic, the U.S. military did perceive the empowerment of interpreters during the occupation to be a major problem. In a report on the language issues encountered during the Korean War, historians Wesley R. Fishel and Alfred H. Hausrath suggest that their empowerment was problematic because:

- 1) it put civil affairs at the mercy of their Korean interpreters;
- 2) it made the Korean interpreter, unprepared by training and experience, the key man in civil affairs field operations;
- 3) it posed a serious security problem because of the difficulty of adequately screening interpreters under Korean conditions; and,
- 4) it exalted the influence of Koreans who spoke English and therefore were able to obtain direct access to civil affairs personnel. (1958, pp. 8-9)

As both Korean politicians and USAMGIK officials saw local Korean interpreters as a threat to their operations, the two sides soon united to find ways to counter the interpreters' growing influence within the Military Government.

### **5. Formulating Measures to Constrain Local Korean Interpreters**

The first attempt to jointly seek out measures to disempower USAMGIK interpreters was made in 1946, when the influence interpreters had over the Military Government was identified as one of the fourteen major causes of social disturbances in South Korea and chosen as one of the topics to be discussed during the Joint Korean-American Conference. This was a meeting held between representatives of the U.S. military and a group of influential Korean politicians to discuss a list of problems including "the presence of former Japanese collaborators in Military Government," "corruption of some Korean officials," "the rice distribution program," "wages, prices, and inflation," and "refugee housing and living problems" (National Archives and Records Administration, 24 October 1946, p. 4). The fact that interpreting was deemed a topic consequential enough to be included in a list of such important sociopolitical issues speaks to its overarching importance within the context of the occupation.

During this conference, the head of the Korean delegation, Kim Kiu-sic, suggested that the USAMGIK interpreters could be kept in check if the U.S. military were to implement the three following measures:

- 1) Language qualifications to be tested by both Koreans and Americans before employment
- 2) Duties and activities should be outlined and [the interpreter] should be told how far his responsibilities go. The trouble is that

these interpreters are used sometimes as informers, advisors, liaison officers, etc.

3) Classification:

- a. Interpreters or translators attached to the higher officials of [Main Base]
- b. Those attached to bureau chiefs and governors of provinces
- c. Those attached to sub-officials such as section chiefs. (National Archives and Records Administration, 4 November 1946, p. 2)

Indeed, had the Military Government been able to enact these three measures, namely improving the recruitment process, clearly defining the interpreter's duties, and establishing a system for personnel management, it would have been better able to dictate the terms under which interpreters operated. Kim Kiu-sic, however, overlooked the fact that it was precisely the USAMGIK's inability to select, train, and manage its language staff, as opposed to a disinclination to do so, that created the conditions for local Korean interpreters to monopolize the channels of interlingual and intercultural communication in the first place.

After discussions were completed, the members of the Joint Conference sent a letter to General Hodge which contained the following suggestions for tackling the problems associated with interpreting:

Interpreters are essential in any governmental organization such as Military Government where the language barrier is so great. However, dishonest and venal interpreters have unique opportunities not only for personal gain but for the furtherance of the political power of the particular group with which they may happen to be associated. The utilization of interpreters should be carefully limited to tasks where the officials concerned cannot perform their missions satisfactorily because of language difficulties. Such officials should carefully check the work of interpreters in important matters. (National Archives and Records Administration, 4 February 1947, p. 4)

The contents of this letter do little in the way of providing the head of U.S. military forces in Korea with practical guidelines for managing interpreters. The recommendation that officials limit the use of interpreters to tasks for which their services are indispensable was hardly a viable option given that there were no American military personnel able to speak Korean, and less than five percent of Korean officials in the USAMGIK were capable of conversing in English.

Such a move would have required that American staff restrict dialogue to the handful of Koreans who could converse in their language, and the Military Government was already under fire from the Korean public for its preferential treatment of English speakers. Under such circumstances, the suggestion that U.S. staff somehow monitor interpreters rings hollow as well. Thus, rather than provide effective countermeasures, the content of this letter reveals that the Military Government was unable—rather than unwilling—to assert dominance over the interpreting habitus.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that, although the USAMGIK was the dominant institution of power throughout the U.S. military occupation of South Korea, local Korean interpreters were able to challenge the institution's view of what constitutes legitimate behavior during interpreted events and even dominate interpreted interactions because of the inflated value of the linguistic capital they possessed. Two factors contributed to the exponential increase in the value of the interpreters' linguistic capital. First, the demand for interpreters was driven upwards as the USAMGIK transitioned to a bilingual organization. While the viability of daily administrative operations hinged on the assumption that the American and Korean staff could cooperate and coordinate, none of the American staff and only a very limited number of the Korean staff could communicate with their counterparts, thus necessitating the services of interpreters throughout the Military Government. Second, the supply of interpreters in the linguistic market created by the USAMGIK could not meet the expanding demand for their services because the study of English had been discouraged by the Japanese colonial government during the decade preceding the arrival of the United States. This allowed a small number of interpreters to maintain a monopoly over the channels of interlingual communication in a military and political field where the exchange of information across the language barrier was vital for the success of the occupational government. Nonetheless, the discussions held during the Joint Korean-American Conference reveal that while an interpreting habitus might be momentarily (re)oriented towards the interpreter, powerful players, such as the USAMGIK, will continuously seek ways to reassert their dominance over this social/interactional space. Although the conditions seen during the U.S. occupation of South Korea could be considered unique, it is hoped

that some of the findings of this paper may be extended to research on interpreting in other conflict situations, thereby adding to the collective knowledge of interpreting phenomena.

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