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## The Bright and Dark Sides of Sports Interpreting in Iraq: Football Interpreting as an Example

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### ABSTRACT

With the rapid increase in international matches, such as the Olympic Games, World Cup by FIFA, Arab or Gulf Cup events the demand for interpreting becomes very necessary, as through this activity players can connect with viewers around the world, this is on the one hand, and on the other, through which they can instantly obtain their instructions. After the war in 2003, the participation of Iraqi athletes in international competitions and the recruitment of foreign coaches flourish. This new situation urges policy designers to strategically plan to offer qualified interpreters to ensure ideal communication between

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the players and their coaches and between them and the international audience. The status quo, however, is very frustrating: the number of Iraqi qualified interpreters can relatively be visible (for the ordinary observers) as there are no specialized academic or non-academic institutions that offer the requirements. This lack has opened the door for non-professional interpreters to carry the task leading not only to fragmented communication but also to deform the perception of this profession. This study sheds light on this particular area. It solely adopts the participant-oriented method offered by Saldanha and O'brein (2013). The research instrument is a carefully-designed questionnaire which is presented to a sample of thirty professional interpreters. The study findings emphasize that the status quo of sports interpreting in Iraq is discouraging because of some obstacles, such as the absence of specialized interpreting training facilities and monitoring institutions.

**Keywords:** *sports interpreting, national and international interpreters, academic and non-academic training institutions and agencies*

## الجانب المشرق والمظلم للترجمة الرياضية في العراق

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### المستخلص

مع الزيادة السريعة في المنافسات الدولية، مثل دورة الألعاب الأولمبية، أو بطولات كأس العالم للفئات العمرية المختلفة للجنسين، أو تصفيات دورة كأس العرب أو الخليج العربي، أصبح الطلب على الترجمة ضروريًا للغاية، حيث يمكن للاعبين من خلال هذا النشاط التواصل مع المشاهدين في جميع أنحاء العالم، وهذا من ناحية، ومن ناحية أخرى، يمكنهم من خلاله الحصول على تعليماتهم على الفور. و بعد الحرب على العراق عام 2003، ازدهرت مشاركة الرياضيين العراقيين في المسابقات الدولية وتكليف المدربين الأجانب. هذا الوضع الجديد يلزم على مهندسي السياسات على التخطيط الاستراتيجي لتهيئة مترجمين مؤهلين لضمان التواصل المثالي بين اللاعبين ومدريهم وبينهم وبين الجمهور الدولي. ومع ذلك، فإن الوضع الراهن محبط للغاية: بالكاد يمكن تمييز تواجد المترجمين العراقيين المؤهلين حيث لا توجد مؤسسات أكاديمية أو غير أكاديمية متخصصة توفر متطلبات تدريب هذه الفئة. وقد فتح هذا النقص الباب أمام المترجمين غير المحترفين للقيام بهذه المهمة مما يؤدي ليس فقط إلى تجزئة التواصل بل و إلى تشويه التصور العام لدى الجمهور لهذه المهنة. و تسلط الدراسة الحالية الضوء على هذا المجال بالذات. حيث تعد كمحاولة لتقييم الترجمة

الرياضية في العراق، فضلاً عن تقديم نهج لتحسين الواقع المخبئ للآمال للمتريجين الرياضيين المتاحين.

الكلمات الدالة: الترجمة الرياضية، المترجمون المحليون والدوليون، المؤسسات والهيئات التدريبية الأكاديمية وغير الأكاديمية

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Experts in sports interpreting understand that this field is a stand-alone specialty similar to medical, tourism, legal, or other modes of interpreting. It is a specialty that is enjoying increasing demand in media in particular, given the importance of sports in people's lives for health and entertainment reasons. This is confirmed by the large number of sports satellite channels, which do not stop at broadcasting their national championships and sports programs. However, foreign material has become allocated a share of its time space, represented by the put on the air foreign championship matches, biographies of sports heroes, etc. All of this requires a professional specialized training in interpreting to transfer all this knowledge and data, given their connection to diverse and powerful economic industries and to many activities that affect the daily lives of millions of people, thousands of companies and agencies, etc. (Al-Maryani, 2017). Torres-Díaz and Ghignoli (2014, p.4) embark on this and underline that sports interpreting should be confined to professionals as they accept that 'the majority of sports associations and translation agencies that provide interpreters for the sport sector agreed to emphasize that the knowledge of the field of work and terminology are very important for the interpreter'.

When going down the interpreting path in the sports field, there are some important factors to take into consideration. One of the biggest mistakes that the public makes in the interpreting of sport events is the tendency toward literal translation. This is actually easy to implement with the help of an electronic tool. However, one will never be able to get the desired results. This is because sport terminology is not something that can be literally interpreted; moreover, this terminology is subject to change on a regular basis. In other words, the interpreter must have a complete and up-to-date understanding of the intended terminology. In this respect, Xu (2019, p. 94) calls for the use of fuzzy language in sports occasions because 'it can express implicature and euphemism with succinct words, and make the explanation and report of sports events vivid without losing humour. At the same time, the use of fuzzy language must pay attention to the control of quantity, because the overflowing use of fuzzy language will only be counterproductive'.

In light of this, sport utterances require adopting a different methodology than that used when interpreting any other general utterance as the general ones convey a common message and usually address non-specific readers, but sport utterances always target a specific audience and uses vocabulary specific to the sports field. Another essential factor in the quality of sports interpreting is the delivery style and context. Sports utterances are often interesting, especially when highlighting the winning of a medal, the profile of a star athlete, or the organization of a complex sporting event. There is no doubt that sports interpreting is a real combination of the two activities, interpreting and sport. Interpreting is an intellectual sport that focuses on sharpening the mind to

move the utterances in the direction of the accessible language, targeting a recipient, just as most sports themselves interpret into refining and preparing the body to transfer it towards a specific goal to entertain an audience. Wilson (2015) emphasizes that the Portuguese football coach Jose Mourinho, who has trained prestigious European teams such as Chelsea of England, Real Madrid of Spain, Inter Milan of Italy, and Porto of Portugal is an ideal embodiment of the strong relationship between interpreting and sport. He began his sporting career as an interpreter. He joined FC Barcelona with English coach Bobby Robson in 1996, coming from Sporting Club, where the latter club took advantage of Mourinho's good knowledge of English, in addition to his sporting experience, to be an assistant to the Englishman. Therefore, the Barcelona fans mocked him at the airport, in March 2006, when he arrived there as coach of the Chelsea team, and a group of the Catalan fans called him, "Interpreter! Interpreter."!

Bulut (2016, p.1) draws a comparison between sport and politics with special reference to Turkey to the degree that 'when interpreting is involved, the situation gets more complex and ideological and it is nearly always the interpreter who gets to be blamed when a conflict occurs'. Hence, sport interpreters always strive to provide accurate and consistent renderings in terms of terminology. That is why before undertaking the task; the interpreter must be well acquainted with the terminology. In addition, the interpreter can use other methods when dealing with challenges, whenever possible, and this may include transliteration of vocabulary, transliteration of vocabulary, use of a common local expression, adoption of a neologism, loan translation, etc. Moreover, Uyanik (2018, p.112) summarizes the characteristics of sports interpreting, among which is that the interpreter 'should have problem solving skills, for they could easily find themselves in unforeseeable situations'.

## **2. SPORTS INTERPRETING IN IRAQ**

Unlike other Arab and foreign countries, interpreting in Iraq, including in sports arena has reluctantly developed only after the American Invasion in 2003. There have been just several academic and non-academic interpreting training institutions in which the sports sector was rarely approached or even neglected. To communicate with the audience, there are two available kinds of interpreters: bilingual national athletes and international professional interpreters. On the one hand, bilingual athletes do not have interpreting certificates. They do not undergo planned training. They may not abide themselves by the interpreting code of ethics. There are no monitoring institutions or personnel to assess the interpreters' efficiency. The only merit they seem to have is that they are familiar with the local players' colloquial terminology and their instant availability. One example is the man in charge of interpreting the Arabic statements delivered by Ali Talib, the coach of the Iraqi Youth National Futsal Team participating in the Asian Football Championship in 2018. He was one of the team's training staff, but was attached to the task of interpreting in press conferences (see the complete meeting on <https://youtube.com/shorts/bZVZjQOI1pE?si=eYGS0lp-FDGGtIMq> ). Below is the transcript of the coach's utterances delivered after winning the match with the Chinese team played on February 2, 2018 as well as their rendering into English by the so-called interpreter. To help the reader comprehend the mistranslations, a literal translation is also provided. A close examination can reveal that the interpreter's version is neither complete nor grammatical; it is full of mistakes. This indicates his inefficiency.

**The coach's statement:**

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم، في بداية الامر نهدي هذا الفوز للشعب العراقي وشهداء العراق والحشد الشعبي والقوات المسلحة. السؤال يقول ماذا تعني مباراتنا مع ايران: خضنا مبارتين وديتين مع ايران و تعادلنا في المبارتين نعرف قوة ضعفهم... نعرف قوتهم والضعف... نفطة القوة والضعف نعرفها وراح نحضر بشكل جيد للمباراة . خالصنا اول مهمة وهي التاهل للارجنتين وانشاء الله عينا احنا العراقيين على الكأس . شكرا

**Literal translation:**

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, First of all, we dedicate this victory to the Iraqi people, the martyrs of Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces, and the armed forces. The question is what does our match with Iran mean? We played two friendly matches with Iran and tied in both matches. We know their strength and weakness... We know their strength and weakness... We know the point of strength and weakness and we will prepare well for the match. We have completed the first mission, which is qualifying for Argentina, and God willing, our eyes, the Iraqis, are on the cup. Thank you.

**Interpreter's version:**

*First come I give it to this a win to all the people from Iraq and anyone from Iraqi this. I'm play with Iran a friendly match. Every team you equal. I know what strong what...I prepare this team is very very.... First come you prefer to Argentina. I come here to get you the cup.*

International interpreters, on the other hand, are carefully chosen by the decision-makers in the Ministry of Youth and Sports. This means that they hold authentic interpreting certificates, undergo regular training, know the legal and moral consequences of breaking codes of ethics, and are probably monitored by their homeland interpreting institutions or interested customers. One of the demerits of employing international interpreters includes the high wages they receive, which urges the Iraqi official decision-makers to limit the employment of such interpreters to the situation where there are international coaches, which is very rare and confined to football. Another one is the unfamiliarity with colloquial terminology. A very interesting example here is the Egyptian Mohammed Abdul-Hafidh who is the interpreter of the Iraqi football team's coach, Jesús Casas. He narrates a very embarrassing situation (see the complete video on <https://youtu.be/2YWSb0cevhQ?si=0b3aKWvwqTR7b34r> ). After winning the Gulf Cup Championship in 2023, the Iraqi team, including the interpreter and the coach, were invited to visit Masysan Governorate in southern Iraq. They were received by their host, a local businessman. The host continues to mention the word 'Amara' which literally means a multi-floor building but is the name the city centre of the governorate. The interpreter kept interpreting the word literally which was unacceptable. Only by the end of that day, he was anxious to ask why the host was repeatedly referring this word, and perceived the significant mistake he has committed.

The examples above show that sports interpreting in Iraq needs a thorough investigation to evaluate the status quo, identify the merits and demerits of resorting to either national or international interpreters, and recommend a compromise that can ensure the transparent transmission of messages.

**3. METHODOLOGY**

Although we have focussed on translation as a product, i.e. the renderings themselves, in the previous two examples, the present study solely adopts the participant-oriented method offered by Saldanha and O'brein (2013). The research instrument is a carefully-

designed questionnaire. It consists of ten closed- questions (listed below) to help quantitatively analyse the results obtained from the provided five Linkert scale responses (firstly developed in 1932 which are : strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). The sample consists of thirty professional (male and female) interpreters (with at least five-year experience) from different Iraqi regions. They are invited to join a Telegram group. After they have been informed of all the relevant information and are asked to sign a consent letter, the participants are asked to send their responses within no more than twenty-four hours. The maximum duration each participant has to finish responding is twenty minutes. When all the responses have been received within the determined time limit (see Table 1), they have been quantitatively analysed. The research questions (or rather statements) involve:

1. Sports interpreting is a popular profession in Iraq.
2. There are interpreting institutions and agencies offering programmed sports interpreting training.
3. There are monitoring institutions and agencies that evaluate the national interpreters' performance.
4. There are legislations in the Iraqi law that determine the rights and obligations of sports interpreters.
5. Sports interpreting are performed by professional national interpreters.
6. National interpreters champion their international counterparts in their efficiency.
7. International interpreters are bicultural.
8. The Iraqi authorities prefer to hire international sport interpreters.
9. The Iraqi authorities have a strategic plan to improve sports interpreting.
10. To the best of your knowledge as a professional interpreter, do you think that the Iraqi audience would rather listen to national interpreters in international championships?

**Table (1): The Participants' Responses to the Designed Questionnaire**

Question No.	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	No.	Percent.	No.	Percent.	No.	Percent.	No.	Percent.	No.	Percent.
1							4	13.33	26	86.66
2					5	16.66	10	33.33	15	50
3							7	23.33	23	76.66
4							2	6.66	28	93.33
5					4	13.33	4	13.33	22	73.33

<b>6</b>					3	10			27	90
<b>7</b>			10	33.33			7	23.33	13	43.33
<b>8</b>	17	56.66	5	16.66	8	26.66				
<b>9</b>	27	90			3	10				
<b>10</b>					5	16.66	2	6.66	23	76.66

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Within the following discussion, the focus is on the variables the questions designed to measure. There is, however, another significant perspective, which is to address each participant's response, but it is excluded from the present study and could be approached by future research. As can be inferred, the first question tries to measure the participants' awareness of the status quo of sports interpreting in Iraq. As they are themselves professional interpreters, they can reflect a clear picture of this profession. Their response, reflected in the above table, may seem frustrating to external observers: they reject the popularity of this profession as 86.66 % of them strongly disagree and 13.33 % disagree. This pinpoints that this particular area needs intensive care.

The second question attempts to assess the available training resources that can help national interpreters to achieve their tasks efficiently. The majority of the participants appear to be dissatisfied with the quality and the quantity of the training national interpreters can receive from academic and non-academic institutions and agencies. Although 16.66 % hesitate to support or otherwise stand against the question's proposition, half of the whole participants strongly disagree and the remaining 33.33 % disagree to accept the availability of competent training institutions and agencies.

As in other professions, interpreting services must be carefully watched and evaluated by governmental and non-governmental agencies. The third question addresses this aspect. All the responses show a stand opposite to the one confirmed by the question, as all of the participants either strongly disagree (76.66 %) or just disagree (23.33%) which implies their dissatisfaction, because of the lack of the monitoring authorities.

It is believed that if monitoring institutions are unavailable or inactive, legislations can guarantee the interpreter's commitment to his/her clients and preserve his/her rights. The samples' stand, represented by their responses to the fourth question is discouraging: they seem to believe that the legal status of interpreters or, more specifically, sports interpreters is unclear or undetermined. This reveals that the Iraqi legislator has to be informed of the necessity to dictate rules that can clearly define the rights and obligations of sports interpreters which will contribute to the improvement of this profession.

The fifth question aims to clarify whether sports interpreting in official championships are performed by national or international interpreters or not, i.e., it is designed to determine the significance and contribution of interpreters. The participants, however, are very reluctant to admit that as 73.33 % of them strongly disagree and 13.33



% disagree. Moreover, their response to the following question emphasize that national interpreters are not in a position to compete with international ones, as they may believe that the nationals are not fully qualified as the international ones do not only receive interpreting training, but also hold certificates in relevant sport areas.

The seventh question endeavours to evaluate the sample's overall dissatisfaction with international interpreters' cultural awareness. Although the sample acknowledges the professionalism of international interpreters, their responses show that they seem to reject those interpreters' comprehensive bi-culturalism. This may be resulted from the complex nature of the Iraqi society as it consists of different ethnic and sectarian groups, i.e., it seems very difficult for international interpreters to perceive all the relevant cultural aspects.

In questions eight and nine, the attention is directed to Iraqi authorities, as they are the key player in this domain, either through offering the relevant training and providing the necessary resources or sparing employment opportunities to these trained interpreters. Throughout the responses, we can infer that national sports interpreting are of a secondary interest as the decision makers prefer internationals to nationals and, moreover, they do not have future plans to improve this particular sector.

The final question is designed to measure the Iraqi audiences' preference. As educated and bilingual individuals, the participants may be aware of the audiences' tendency: their responses show that they do not prefer to listen to nationals in international arenas. This may be linked to that international ones have better qualifications and can seemingly perform more competently.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Out of the aforementioned reflection, it can be noticed that the status quo of sports interpreting in Iraq is discouraging because of the following:

1. Sports interpreting is a very marginal profession.
2. There are no special sports interpreting training facilities. Therefore, national sports interpreters rely on the competence they have acquired through their academic enrolment in Departments of English or Translation. Some of them may even be from bilingual athletes. This of course will have a negative impact on the quality of the renderings provided.
3. International sports interpreters perform better than national ones. This can be attached to the type and intensity of training international interpreters receive.
4. The employment of international sports interpreters is very limited because either of the high wages they receive compared to their national counterparts or the very rare situations of having foreign coaches that necessitates their presence.
5. The absence of monitoring institutions and relevant legislations weaken the national interpreters' commitments. When they perceive they are unwatched, interpreters may not improve their performance and can repeatedly violate not only the codes of ethics, but also the client's legal rights.

Therefore, sports interpreting in Iraq is in urgent need of immediate and serious steps to be improved throughout the recommendations presented in the following subsection.



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