


## Translators' Role in the Field: The Case of Anthropological Researches in Iran

Hamideh Nemati Lafmejani<sup>††</sup>  Assistant Professor, English Department, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran

### Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the role and impact of translators in the (anthropological) field during research conducted by foreign anthropologists in Iran. To achieve this, a questionnaire, an apparent open-ended one with six items, was distributed to 30 anthropologists who conducted field research in Iran, aiming to identify invisible interpreters/translators, including local informants, who assisted researchers in overcoming language barriers and communicating with participants during anthropological fieldwork. Given that anthropologists are typically trained to work independently without the aid of translators, certain participants displayed hesitancy in discussing the subject matter. Anthropologists who completed the questionnaire and said they conducted the research without utilizing translators in the field cited their fluency in the local language, perceiving translators as impediments, and their accessibility as the main reasons for their approach. Nevertheless, some of these researchers emphasized the potential benefits of using translators, particularly in terms of enhancing comprehension. Conversely, there were anthropologists who found value in engaging both formal and informal translators, as they served as gateways to communication. As an interdisciplinary study, this article endeavors to shed light on a relatively unexplored aspect of anthropology, namely translation. It is crucial to acknowledge and engage in further discussion regarding the collaboration between professionals from different disciplines, including Translation Studies and anthropology, within various scientific journals and conferences.

Keywords: Cultural Anthropology, Translator, Fieldwork, Interdisciplinary Studies

---

<sup>††</sup>Corresponding author: nemati.ha@gmail.com  
Received: 05.06.2023 | Accepted: 02.08.2023

Cite this article: Nemati Lafmejani, H. (2024). Translators' role in the field: The case of anthropological researches in Iran. *Translation and Interpreting Research*, 1(1), 15-28. DOI: 10.22054/TIR.2023.74180.1007

Publisher: ATU Press

*Translation and Interpreting Research* is the journal of Research Institute for Translation Studies (RITS), affiliated with Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

## Introduction

Language and translation play a crucial role in cross-cultural studies, particularly within the field of anthropology. Anthropologists often find themselves conducting research in unfamiliar and distant territories, although there are instances where research is conducted within their own country. Consequently, grappling with the language spoken in the field has long posed a significant dilemma. While the discipline's literature typically advocates for anthropologists to learn the language of the field, there are circumstances where the use of a translator becomes unavoidable. According to Churchill (2005, p. 13), the ethnographer must possess the capacity to translate oneself into the world of the participants, as well as the ability to "translate their world into an ethnographic report."

Foreign anthropologists lacking proficiency in the language of the field may find themselves compelled to enlist the assistance of a translator. Borchgrevink (2003) asserts that, during brief research periods, working alongside a translator can streamline the data collection process. However, for extended stays, it is advisable for anthropologists to acquire proficiency in the local language rather than relying solely on translators. Consequently, the role of translators holds significance in the overall fieldwork endeavor. In the context of this study, the term "translator" is employed in a comprehensive sense, encompassing both translators and interpreters.

Noteworthy scholars in the field, such as Delisle and Woodsworth (2012) and Magnússon (2006), underscore the significance of uncovering the often overlooked figures in the historical narrative of translators. The role of translators in the fields of anthropology, particularly within the Iranian context, has received relatively scant attention and their presence often appears invisible. There exists a noticeable gap within the field of translation studies concerning the exploration of what these translators have contributed and the specific roles they have played alongside anthropologists in the field. The importance of shedding light on their activities and understanding the intricate dynamics of their involvement has yet to be fully addressed. A comprehensive examination of their contributions is crucial to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the collaborative efforts between translators and anthropologists in the Iranian context. Consequently, this study endeavors to investigate the presence of translators and their consequential contributions throughout previous years when foreign anthropologists conducted research in Iran.

## Translators' Role in the Field

Borchgrevink (2003) identifies four primary areas affected by the involvement of translators: accessing information, the communication process, translation, and the impact on the anthropologists' fieldwork process. When it comes to accessing information, interpreters not only serve as intermediaries but also assume the crucial role of establishing rapport and acting as gatekeepers on behalf of the ethnographer. In cases where translators belong to the community under study, they can even play a dual role as informants, providing valuable insights. However, as Borchgrevink (2003) points out, the reliance on translators can introduce certain challenges. For instance, it may lead to a potential loss of direct contact and interaction between the anthropologist and the informant, as the locus of communication often centers on the informant-translator relationship. Nonetheless, Borchgrevink (2003) also acknowledges that skilled translators who possess a clear understanding of the study's objectives can be of immense assistance. Moreover, translators can play a vital role in checking the accuracy of information provided. They can act as a valuable resource, identifying potential inaccuracies or inconsistencies in the data during the fieldwork process, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Borchgrevink, 2003, p. 110). Regarding translation, Borchgrevink (2003) emphasizes that translators play a pivotal role in facilitating the interpretation and

comprehension of the cultural context. However, certain terms or concepts may lack direct equivalents in English, posing a challenge in the translation process. In such instances, translators often resort to simplification strategies to convey the intended meaning. To overcome this limitation, Borchgrevink (2003) suggests that anthropologists should make a conscious effort to acquire native terms for central and value-laden concepts, gradually developing a deeper understanding of the terminology used in the field. Alternatively, open discussions between translators and anthropologists can help clarify and refine the translation of complex terms.

Translators who collaborate with anthropologists can assume various roles, including those of “mediators,” “brokers,” “gate-keeper,” “go-between,” “facilitator,” and “conciliator.” For instance, Pöchhacker (2012, p. 46) references scholars who have described the role of translators as “helper,” “conduit,” “communication facilitator,” “bicultural specialists,” “ghost,” and “kurogo.” Similarly, Bujra (2006) outlines diverse roles that a translator can fulfill when working with an ethnographer. These roles encompass acting as informant, serving as intermediaries who facilitate access and comprehension, and assisting in unraveling the reasons behind people's behaviors, kinship connections, or variations between neighboring communities. Consequently, the role and involvement of a translator can be characterized as that of a neutral messenger with minimal engagement or, conversely, as the most involved participant, assuming the role of a negotiator (Pöchhacker 2008).

A number of esteemed scholars have illuminated the multitude of benefits associated with the utilization of translators in anthropological fieldwork. Bujra (2006) astutely emphasizes that, despite anthropologists' prior linguistic training, they may still grapple with the complexities embedded within the local language, particularly in relation to intricate systems such as naming conventions. Given the delicate nature of using terms that pertain to personal identification, particularly when considerations of race and ethnicity are at play, any inadvertent missteps can yield adverse consequences not only for the researcher but also for the integrity of the entire project. In such instances, the invaluable role of local translators becomes apparent, as they possess a deep understanding of the accepted terminology within the cultural context and can guide anthropologists towards employing appropriate and sensitive language choices.

Notably, Borchgrevink (2003) and Temple and Edwards (2002) assert that field translators are more than mere professional translators; they function as “key informants” or field assistants, actively contributing to the research process. Beyond the mere translation of words, interpreters become vital collaborators, serving as “interlocutors,” “guides,” and “key informants” (Fujii, 2013, p. 149). By drawing upon their cultural expertise, translators illuminate the subtleties and unspoken layers embedded within the interviewees' statements, enabling the researcher to grasp the underlying implications and broader context. Fujii (2013) underscores that translators bring forth not only linguistic proficiency but also invaluable insights, perspectives, and instincts, which are indispensable for the researcher's ability to navigate the field safely, acquire nuanced understanding, and accurately interpret the rich tapestry of meanings conveyed by the interviewees.

In summary, the involvement of translators transcends the traditional role of linguistic intermediaries, as they emerge as essential collaborators and cultural facilitators within anthropological research. Their specialized knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and nuanced understanding contribute to the researcher's ability to navigate linguistic and cultural complexities, establish meaningful connections, and unearth profound insights. The extensive roles they assume as “key informants,” “interlocutors,” and “guides” highlight the transformative impact of their involvement, propelling anthropologists towards more comprehensive and nuanced interpretations of the field data.

## Invisible Translators

According to Edwards (1998) anthropological researchers endeavor to exert control over translators, aiming to train and conceal their presence. This concealment of translators, as referred to by Freed (1988, p. 316) as “interviewing through an interpreter,” or as articulated by Fuller and Toon (1988, p. 38) as “a neutral mouthpiece,” emphasizes the desire to maintain an appearance of direct interaction. Torikai (2009, p. 1) contends that translators, in general, occupy a paradoxical position of being simultaneously “present but not present,” deemed “indispensable but anonymous,” and characterized as inaudible, invisible, nameless, and fearless. Drawing on the Japanese theatrical tradition, Torikai (2009) likens translators to “Kurogo,” individuals dressed in black who aid actors and discreetly maneuver props on stage, remaining ever-present but purposefully disregarded by the audience, fading into the background. The interpreter’s presence, like fleeting bubbles, goes unnoticed, their voices seemingly evaporating in the air. Furthermore, Torikai (2009, p. 3) emphasizes that translators only receive attention “when they are held responsible for their alleged mistranslations.” As Torikai (2009, p. 6) illustrates, translators “try to understand the intention [...], illocutionary force, [...] and implicature [...] of the participant’s utterances and convey the message based on their perception and understanding.” Similar to translators in the field, they inadvertently serve as mediators, bridging the linguistic divide. In her comprehensive study, Torikai (2009) endeavors to shift the focus onto Japanese translators, elucidating their agency and subjectivity, aiming to explore their attitudes and perceptions regarding their role in the interpretive process.

The subject of translation in anthropological research and the use of translators in the field have not received adequate attention from anthropologists, as Agar (1980) asserts in his book. Another scholar who shares this view is Turner (2010), who argues that there has been insufficient research on the dynamics between researchers and translators. Turner (2010) examines the role of translators in anthropology and human geology studies and explores their positioning in the field, as well as their own concerns, limitations, and coping strategies. According to Turner (2010), translators can be referred to as research assistants, as they can be a cultural consultant and fulfill multiple roles. Borchgrevink (2003), and Gibb and Iglesias (2017) call out anthropologists for discussing the presence of translators, interviewers, and transcribers. Moreover, they emphasize the necessity of discussing translation-related problems and language-related issues in multilingual settings.

## Methodology

### Instrument

To explore the dynamics between researchers and translators in the anthropological field, as well as the roles they fulfill, a questionnaire was deemed necessary. Consequently, relevant articles were extensively searched across various scientific databases. Numerous scholars have examined the involvement of translators in the field, including Borchgrevink (2003), Hsieh (2006), and Jacobsen (2009), among others. The researcher reached out to these authors to inquire about the methodologies employed in investigating the translators’ roles. The authors indicated that their studies were based on their personal experience in the field. However, Sepielak, Wladyka, and Yaworsky (2019, p. 2) conducted a survey in their article with the aim of “investigating how contemporary anthropologists’ decisions to use interpreters during fieldwork have affected their research.” By utilizing open-ended questions, they sought detailed insights into the specific roles translators play during fieldwork, as well as the reasons behind researchers’ decisions to forego translator assistance. Building upon Sepielak, Wladyka, and Yaworsky’s (2019) comprehensive survey, an apparent open-ended questionnaire was employed to investigate the relationship between

researchers and translators. The questionnaire, comprising six items (appendix 1), was distributed to thirty foreign anthropologists conducting research in Iran.

The first question in the questionnaire addresses whether the anthropologist utilized the services of a translator during their field. If the response is negative, the anthropologist is requested to provide an explanation as to why they have never employed a translator in their fieldwork. Moving on to the second question, the anthropologist is presented with options to specify the status of their translator. They may choose from categories such as a non-professional local resident, a hired professional interpreter, or a professional who arrived with the research team. The third question prompts the anthropologist to select a role that best describes the translator's involvement in the field. They may indicate whether the translator serves as an intermediary facilitating the transfer of information btw languages, a gate-opener who assisted in accessing information, or a cultural mediator/advisor providing insights into the local culture. In the fourth question, the anthropologists is asked to specify the language pair with which the translator worked. Moving forward to the fifth question, the questionnaire inquires about potential risks encountered by translators during fieldwork. Lastly, the sixth question asks anthropologists to elaborate on the specific situations in which they relied on a translator's assistance.

### **Participants**

The questionnaire was emailed to 30 foreign anthropologists who had previously visited Iran and conducted field research in various regions of the country. After making two separate attempts at contact during different time periods, 12 researchers returned the completed questionnaire. These anthropologists, aged between 67 and 90, held university degrees in anthropology or related fields such as Middle East Studies and ethnomusicology. Among them, two were native French speakers, seven were fluent in English, two spoke German, and one spoke Dutch. In terms of data collection and note-taking in the field, six anthropologists gathered data using the local dialect or language, while five collected data in Persian. Only one of them, specifically a French native speaker, collected data in their mother tongue.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon receiving the completed questionnaires, the data was extracted into an .xls file. Within this file, the columns were labeled according to six questionnaire items (referred to as themes), while each row corresponded to the accompanying texts. Subsequently, a representational thematic text analysis was employed to identify the occurrence or co-occurrence of these themes. As defined by Popping (2015, p. 30), in the "representational way of coding usually human coders are used who select a text fragment and assign a theme to this fragment." For the current study, manual coding was utilized since the text was manageable for human coders. The text underwent analysis to identify concept categories, as outlined by Popping (2015). He (2015, p. 32) distinguishes three approaches for developing concept categories: the first involves developing a predetermined set of concept categories (a "priori"), the second constructs categories based on "data-driven analysis", specifically words or phrases present in the analyzed texts (a "posteriori"), and the third approach combines both these methods. In the present study, the latter approach was employed to develop the concept categories.

### **Results and Discussion**

The primary objective of the questionnaire was to assess whether anthropologists employed translators during their fieldwork or while writing their texts, and if so, what roles these interpreters played. The survey was distributed to 30 foreign anthropologists who had conducted fieldwork in Iran. Twelve foreign anthropologies out of 30 ones completed the questionnaire.

The pie chart below provides a visual representation of the responses from 12 anthropologists regarding their use of translators in the field. Out of the total of 12 anthropologists surveyed, seven of them stated that they did not utilize translators during their fieldwork. On the other hand, five anthropologies reported that they did employ translators to aid them in their field studies. The chart clearly illustrates the proportion of each group, showcasing the majority opting not to rely on translators while conducting their anthropological research, while a smaller yet significant portion acknowledged the use of translators as part of their fieldwork process.

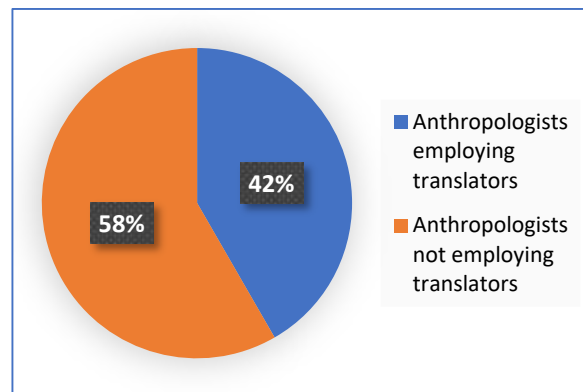


Figure 1. Percentage of anthropologists using translators

The subsequent sections present the findings based on twelve fully completed questionnaires. In the first part, data from completed questionnaires reveal the responses of anthropologists who stated they did not use translators in the field. Additionally, the section includes an exploration of the reasons they provided for this choice. Moving to the second part, the section delves into the completed questionnaires from anthropologists who reported using translators during their fieldwork. This segment highlights the insights and responses provided by this group. The section further presents the results obtained from other question items (Item 2-item 6) within the questionnaires. These sections encompass a detailed analysis of the responses provided by anthropologists on specific aspects of their research and fieldwork practices.

### **Conducting the Fieldwork Research without Translators**

The first question in the questionnaire focused on the potential collaboration between translators and anthropologists during fieldwork. Among the respondents who completed the survey, seven anthropologists explicitly stated that they did not engage the services of translators while conducting their research. These individuals offered diverse rationales for their decision, which were subsequently analyzed using representational thematic text analysis. Several participants acknowledged the advantages of utilizing translators, particularly in facilitating initial interactions and fostering understanding with the local community. However, despite recognizing these benefits, they chose not to employ a translator for their research endeavors. Moreover, some anthropologists expressed reservations about having translators present in the field, each citing their own distinct reasons.

Subsequently, next sections delve into the three primary reasons articulated by anthropologists who opted against utilizing translators during their fieldwork.

### **Fluency in the Local Language and Employing Participant Observation**

In the realm of anthropological studies, it is commonly advised that anthropologists acquire a solid command of the local language prior to embarking on fieldwork (Murchison 2010; Metcalf 2005). This recommendation stems from the recognition that language proficiency plays a crucial role in establishing rapport, gaining access to information, and comprehending the nuances of the culture under study. By speaking the local language, anthropologists can foster trust and build meaningful



relationships with the community members they seek to understand. The emphasis on learning the language of the field is particularly prevalent in certain academic institutions. These universities prioritize the immersive approach, encouraging students to avoid relying on translators altogether. By immersing themselves in the linguistic and cultural context, anthropologists can gain deeper insights into the daily lives, belief systems, and social dynamics of the people they study. For instance, one participant who embarked on a research trip to Iran in 1963 vehemently disagreed with the use of translators in the field, stating, "I was trained to avoid interpreters." This anthropologist believed that language proficiency was not only an intellectual asset but also a means of demonstrating respect and genuine interest in the local community. By investing time and effort into learning Persian prior to their arrival, these anthropologists were able to bridge the communication gap and navigate the intricacies of the cultural landscape more effectively.

It is worth noting that the participants of the study expressed a sense of pride in their linguistic achievements. Many claimed to be fluent enough in Persian, having devoted considerable time and effort to mastering the language before setting foot in Iran. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the invaluable support provided by friends and neighbors. These individuals served as valuable resources, helping the anthropologists unravel complex terminology, cultural concepts, and customs that eluded their grasp. Through conversations and interactions with these local guides, the anthropologists were able to deepen their understanding of the community's way of life. Furthermore, one participant opted for a method known as participant observation. By actively engaging in the collective activities and events of the community, this anthropologist immersed himself/herself in the daily routines and rituals of the local people. By doing so, s/he developed a holistic perspective that would have been difficult to attain solely through language study. The participant emphasized that their direct involvement allowed them to experience the culture firsthand and perceive subtle nuances that might otherwise remain obscured.

In summary, while the importance of learning the local language before conducting anthropological fieldwork is emphasized, it is also recognized that linguistic proficiency alone is not sufficient. Anthropologists benefit greatly from the support of local individuals who can provide insights and clarification on various aspects of the culture. The combination of language skills, participant observation, and collaborative relationships contributes to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the communities under study.

### **Translators as Hindrances in Fieldwork Research**

Among the participants of the study who did not work with a translator, one individual expressed a preference for "engaging in unmediated communication with interlocutors." They believed that direct interaction would allow for a deeper understanding and more authentic exchange of data. Similarly, another anthropologist shared their perspective, stating, "I wanted to hear and understand what was being said in the original language and to establish a relationship without the barrier of another person or translation." Their intention was to immerse themselves fully in the linguistic and cultural nuances of the participants, promoting a richer experience of their fieldwork. In another case, again the presence of translators was frowned upon because the participant believed that "As an anthropologist I was trained to distrust interpreters, who tend to 'know' the answers and to impede close contact between fieldworker and subjects."

These viewpoints illustrate the nuanced considerations and personal motivations that influenced the participants' decisions regarding the use of translators. Ultimately, their choices were driven by a commitment to authentic communication, cultural immersion, and the pursuit of unbiased understanding within the field of anthropology.

### **Availability and Trust**

The last factors, which were mentioned by the participants of the study, were availability and confidentiality. For example, one of the anthropologists asserts that “Most of the time it was neither available nor appropriate due to confidentiality and trust issues.”

Another anthropologist emphasized the fact that although it could have had some advantages, using a translator was difficult in his field of study: “I don’t think I really ever considered working with a (separate) translator or interpreter. I think the logistics of visiting with one would have been difficult.”

### **Conducting the Fieldwork Research with a Translator**

Contrary to the prevailing belief held by many anthropologists, which posits that a comprehensive comprehension of the lives of others can only be attained through a thorough mastery of the local language, there exists a differing perspective. Certain scholars contend that this assertion is not universally applicable. For instance, Borchgrevink (2003, p. 96) asserts that despite his proficiency in the language spoken in the field, “[he] was a long way from understanding [his] informants’ innermost thoughts and feelings, and that problems with language and communication were among the factors which had prevented [him] from reaching such an understanding” at the culmination of his fieldwork in Nicaragua. He attributes this deficiency in understanding to a range of factors, including language barriers and challenges in communication. During his subsequent research endeavor in the Philippines, Borchgrevink (2003) pursued his investigations in collaboration with a translator, yielding surprisingly positive outcomes. To his astonishment, he managed to amass an extensive and unambiguous corpus of information from his time spent in the field. In the present study, five participants who completed the questionnaire affirmed their utilization of a translator during their fieldwork.

### **The Translator in the Field**

In the second question of the questionnaire, participants were asked to choose among the options who the translator was. Among those who acknowledged employing the services of a translator, one individual initially engaged a student during the early stages of their research, subsequently transitioning to a professional interpreter. Furthermore, three participants relied upon the assistance of local residents who possessed an understanding of the language or local dialect and were enlisted on-site. Finally, one participant opted for a professional translator who possessed fluency in the relevant language or local dialect and was included as part of the research team.

It is noteworthy to mention that while certain respondents asserted that they did not utilize translators during their fieldwork, it appears that they derived assistance from friends, neighbors, local residents, and schoolteachers. However, they preferred not to designate them as field assistants or informal interpreters. For instance, one participant commented that “the friends whose help contributed much to my work were [...] relatively educated young local men for whom it was interesting to communicate with me.” Another participant asserted, “In Gilan, the guide from the Rasht Fine Arts group acted more as a guide and introducer to the people I was interacting with. He was from that region so that was a great help.” In these instances where researchers claimed to have refrained from using translators, it becomes evident that they derived benefits from individuals who indirectly fulfilled the role of translators, albeit not under a designated title. These indirect translation facilitators played a significant role in bridging the language gap and enabling effective communication between researchers and their subjects. It is noteworthy that researchers often benefited from the insights, guidance, and cultural knowledge provided by these individuals, even if they were not officially designated as field assistants or translators.

### **Roles of the Translators**

In the third question of the questionnaire, participants were requested to specify the roles fulfilled by the translators they hired during their fieldwork. They were given the opportunity to select multiple



options from the provided choices. Out of the five anthropologists who utilized a translator, a significant majority of four described the translator's role as that of an intermediary, facilitating the smooth transfer of information between different languages. This function was pivotal in ensuring effective communication between the researchers and the subjects. Furthermore, three participants emphasized an additional role performed by the translator – that of a gate-opener, enabling access to valuable information that may have otherwise been difficult to obtain. The translator's assistance in breaking down language barriers proved instrumental in establishing connections and gaining insights from the local community. Moreover, all five participants acknowledged the translator's role as a cultural mediator and advisor. The translators not only aided in language translation but also provided invaluable guidance regarding cultural nuances, norms, and customs. Their expertise allowed the researchers to navigate sensitive cultural contexts and develop a deeper understanding of the communities under study.

These multifaceted roles played by the translators highlight their indispensable contribution to the research process. Acting as intermediaries, gate-openers, and cultural mediators, they facilitated effective communication, opened doors to critical information, and provided essential guidance for cultural immersion. The participants recognized the translators' expertise as vital in ensuring accurate and culturally sensitive data collection.

Overall, the involvement of translators in the fieldwork proved to be a crucial element in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, ultimately enhancing the researchers' ability to navigate complex research settings and gain a comprehensive understanding of the studied communities.

### **Translators and Risks**

In the fifth question of the questionnaire, the participating anthropologists were requested to identify any risks encountered by their translators during the course of their research. Their responses shed light on the diverse perspectives regarding the potential risks involved. One participant highlighted the presence of a translator as a means of reducing risks for the researcher. This individual believed that “if the person was from a reputable organization there were no or minimal risks. In fact, with a guide it also served as a protection as well as a facilitation of ease of trust between myself and local residents.” Conversely, another anthropologist who did not employ a translator shared their perspective on the risks they might have faced if they had utilized translation services. They attributed potential risks to their own ambivalent status and recounted instances of being interrogated by the police and SAVAK. Moreover, on a couple of occasions, individuals with whom they had engaged in extensive conversations were explicitly instructed to avoid any further contact with the researcher. In contrast to these experiences, three other participants maintained that they did not encounter any risks throughout the research process. While they did not elaborate on the specifics, their responses indicated a lack of perceived risks associated with their fieldwork. These varying viewpoints highlight the complex nature of the risks faced by translators in research settings. Factors such as the translator's affiliations, the researcher's own status, and the political and social context of the fieldwork can significantly influence the potential risks involved. Understanding and assessing these risks are crucial for researchers and can inform decisions regarding the use of translators and the implementation of appropriate measures to mitigate potential challenges.

### **Translators in Different Situations**

In the sixth question of the questionnaire, the anthropologists were prompted to outline the specific situations in which they employed the services of a translator. Their responses shed light on the various contexts where translators proved to be advantageous. One anthropologist emphasized that “It was very useful for written documents, less for interviews which are very formal with an interpreter. The subtle meaning of words is often forgotten with an interpreter.” Another situation in which anthropologists found translators to be beneficial is in facilitating introductions to individuals and

serving as guides. Additionally, translators were deemed invaluable in regions where local dialects or languages posed challenges for the researchers who were only proficient in the official language, such as Persian in the case of Iran. For example, an anthropologist highlighted the assistance provided by interpreters when respondents spoke Baluchi, a language with which the researcher had limited proficiency. The anthropologist asserted that "Interpreters helped when the respondent only knew Baluchi, or when my Baluchi was insufficient to communicate effectively."

Lastly, anthropologists frequently relied on translators during the initial stages of their research, particularly when they had not yet attained complete mastery of the local dialect or language. These translators played a vital role in bridging the communication gap, offering insights, and aiding the understanding and interpretation of the researchers' observations and experiences. As one anthropologist shared, "Obviously, I had some difficulties in the early stages, when my command of Turkish was less than fluent [...] insightful local people [...] who appreciate your difficulties, become close friends, and are helpful in 'translating' and explaining what you are observing and experiencing." These individuals became close friends, providing assistance in translating and elucidating the researcher's observations and experiences.

These situations illustrate the diverse contexts in which translators are employed by anthropologists. From written documents to introductions, navigating local dialects, and bridging language barriers during the early stages of research, the assistance of translators proves instrumental in facilitating effective communication and enhancing the researchers' understanding of the cultures and communities they study.

## Conclusion

Anthropologists, in their pursuit of conducting fieldwork in unfamiliar territories, have long grappled with the challenges of communication with local communities. While anthropological literature often emphasizes the need for researchers to learn the language prior to venturing abroad, there are instances where employing a translator proves advantageous in the data collection process. Curiously, many anthropologists hesitate to openly acknowledge their reliance on translators in the field. In an effort to bring to light the often overlooked role of these invisible translators working alongside anthropologists, a comprehensive questionnaire was administered to 30 foreign anthropologists who had conducted fieldwork across diverse regions of Iran. Out of the 30 researchers surveyed, 12 diligently completed and returned the questionnaire. Only five of them openly admitted to using translators during their fieldwork. However, it is worth noting that some respondents who claimed not to have used a translator expressed the belief that having one would have facilitated their research process. This reluctance to acknowledge translator utilization aligns with Borchgrevinch's (2003, p. 95) assertion that "the silence regarding interpreter use is linked to the anthropologist's need for establishing authority and to the position that fieldwork has within the discipline." The participants who refrained from employing translators cited various reasons for their choice. Some considered translators more of a hindrance than a help, while others felt confident in their fluency in the language spoken in the field. Issues of trust and availability of reliable translators were also mentioned. Consequently, in order to avoid relying on formal translators and potentially compromising their perceived authority, these anthropologists sought assistance from local individuals, such as teachers and neighbors. Conversely, among those who did use translators, the primary role attributed to them was that of intermediaries, facilitating the smooth transition of information from one language to another.

Furthermore, it is important to justify the results obtained from the questionnaire and delve deeper into the reasons behind the participants' choices regarding translator usage. The anthropologists who

considered translators as hindrances might have faced challenges in maintaining direct rapport with the local community or felt that the translator's presence disrupted the natural flow of interactions. Their language fluency and prior experience in the field may have provided them with a sense of confidence and autonomy in their communication efforts. Additionally, concerns about the trustworthiness and availability of reliable translators may have led some researchers to rely on alternative sources within the local community. On the other hand, the anthropologists who openly admitted to utilizing translators recognized the pivotal role these language mediators played in bridging the linguistic and cultural gaps during fieldwork. By relying on translators, they were able to access nuanced insights and subtle cultural nuances that might have otherwise been inaccessible. The translators' presence may have facilitated deeper connections with the local population and allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the researched communities. These findings underscore the complexity and multi-faceted nature of translator usage in anthropological fieldwork. It highlights the need for further exploration and discussion on the impact of translators on research outcomes, as well as the power dynamics and ethical considerations surrounding their involvement. As a result, this study calls for greater recognition and collaboration between scholars in Translation Studies and anthropology to jointly investigate the intricate relationship between language, translation, and cultural understanding. Such collaboration can foster a more nuanced approach to fieldwork methodology and contribute to the advancement of both disciplines. The outcomes of this study warrant future research and interdisciplinary dialogue to enhance the effectiveness and ethical implications of translator usage in anthropological research.

The findings of this study also hold implications for the field of Translation Studies. Firstly, the study highlights the vital role of translators as cultural mediators in anthropological research. It underscores the need for translators to possess not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and context in which they work. This emphasizes the importance of training and education in Translation Studies to equip translators with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively collaborate with anthropologists and bridge the language and cultural gaps in fieldwork.

Secondly, the study calls for increased recognition and validation of translation as a legitimate research topic within Translation Studies. By shedding light on the often overlooked role of translators in anthropological research, this study emphasizes the significance of studying translation practices in diverse fields and interdisciplinary contexts. This can lead to a broader understanding of the complexities, challenges, and ethical considerations associated with translation in specialized areas, such as anthropological fieldwork. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations in translator usage. It raises questions about power dynamics, potential biases, and the responsibilities of translators in representing the voices and perspectives of the communities they work with. These ethical implications can serve as a basis for further research and discussions within Translation Studies, leading to the development of ethical guidelines and frameworks for translators involved in fieldwork contexts.

Furthermore, the study encourages collaboration and knowledge exchange between Translation Studies and anthropology. Engaging in interdisciplinary dialogues and collaborations can foster a deeper understanding of the needs and expectations of anthropologists and the role that translation plays in their research. This can facilitate the development of collaborative approaches, methodologies, and best practices that effectively address the unique challenges and requirements of translation in anthropological fieldwork.

In summary, the implications of this study in the field of Translation Studies underscore the importance of recognizing translators as essential cultural mediators and promoting their training and education. It highlights the need for further research and discussions on ethical considerations, power dynamics, and interdisciplinary collaboration. By exploring these implications, Translation Studies can further

contribute to the understanding and advancement of translation practices in specialized fields like anthropology.

## References

- Agar, M. (1980). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography*. Academic Press. [The professional stranger : an informal introduction to ethnography : Agar, Michael : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)
- Borchgrevink, A. (2003). Silencing language: Of anthropologists and interpreters. *Ethnography's Kitchen*, 4(1), 95–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138103004001005>
- Bujra, J. (2006). Lost in translation? The use of interpreters in fieldwork. In V. Desai, & R. B. Potter (Eds.), *Doing Development Research* (pp. 172–180). Sage.
- Churchill, C. J. (2005). Ethnography as translation. *Qualitative Sociology*, 28(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-005-2628-9>
- Delisle, J., & Woodsworth, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Translators through History* (Revised edition ed.). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.13>
- Edwards, R. (1998). A critical examination of the use of interpreters in the qualitative research process. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 24(1), 197–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.1998.9976626>
- Freed, A. (1988). Interviewing through an interpreter. *Social Work*, July/August, 315–319. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/33.4.315>
- Fujii, L. A. (2013). Working with interpreters. In L. Mosley (Ed.), *Interview research in political science* (pp. 144–159). Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801467974>
- Fuller, J., & Toon, P. (1988). *Medical practice in a multicultural society*. Heinemann Medical.
- Gibb, R., & Iglesias, J. D. (2017). breaking the silence (again): On language learning and levels of fluency in ethnographic research. *The Sociological Review*, 65(1), 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12389>
- Hsieh, E. (2006). Conflicts in how interpreters manage their roles in provider-patient interactions. *Social Science and Medicine*, 62, 721–730. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.06.029>
- Jacobsen, B. (2009). The community interpreter: A question of role. *Journal of Language and Communication Studies*, 42, 155–166. <https://doi.org/10.7146/hjlc.v22i42.96850>
- Magnússon, S. (2006). Social history – cultural history – alltagsgeschichte – microhistory: In between methodologies and conceptual frameworks. *Journal of Microhistory*, 6, 1–36.
- Matcalf, P. (2005). *Anthropology: The basics*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203392539>
- Murchison, J. M. (2010). *Ethnography essentials: Designing, conducting, and presenting your research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Pöchhacker, F. (2008). Interpreting as mediation. In C. Valero-Garcés, & A. Martin (Eds.), *Crossing borders on community interpreting: Definitions and delimitations* (pp. 9–27). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.76.02poc>

- Pöchhacker, F. (2012). Interpreting participation: Conceptual analysis and illustration of the interpreter's role in interaction. In C. Baraldi, & L. Gavioli (Eds.), *Coordinating participation in dialogue interpreting* (pp. 45–71). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.102.03poch>
- Popping, R. (2015). Analyzing open-ended questions by means of text analysis procedures. *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 128, 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0759106315597389>
- Sepielak, K., Wladyka, D., & Yaworsky, W. (2019). Unsung interpreters: The jumbled practice of language translation in contemporary field research - a study of anthropological field sites in the Arab League countries. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 6, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2019.1585443>
- Temple, B., & Edwards, R. (2002). Interpreters/translators and cross-language research: Reflexivity and border crossings. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690200100201>
- Torikai, K. (2009). *Voices of the invisible presence: Diplomatic interpreters in post-World War II Japan*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.83>
- Turner, S. (2010). Research note: The silenced assistant. Reflections of invisible interpreters and research assistants. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 51(2), 206–219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2010.01425.x>

## Appendix

### Questionnaire about the invisible interpreters/translators in the field

The aim of the present study is to find any traces of those who helped anthropologists/ethnographers to communicate with the local people or translate interviews. Moreover, local informants who accompanied you in the field and helped you to tackle language difficulties, can also be labeled as interpreters. Please mention any point that is related to language barriers, difficulties that you faced to communicate with the participants, those who helped you to learn the language, and those who formally or informally played the role of an interpreter/translator.

-----  
Gender:

Age:

Major:

Degree:

Years of experience when you conducted your research in Iran:

Location of your study in Iran:

Mother tongue:

Language(s) you know:

Language(s) spoken in the field that you conducted your research in Iran:

Language(s) you collected data in:  
-----

Please elaborate on the following questions:

1. While conducting your fieldwork in Iran, have you ever used an interpreter / translator?  
If not, please explain why you have never used an interpreter / translator in your fieldwork conducted in Iran?
2. The interpreter(s) / translator(s) you used was/were: \* [you can choose more than one option.]
  - (a) a nonprofessional local resident who knew the language or local dialect hired on site;
  - (b) a professional who knew the language or local dialect and arrived with the research team;
  - (c) a professional interpreter hired on site;
  - (d) a professional interpreter who arrived with the research team;
  - (e) Other (please specify).
3. How would you describe interpreter's / translator's role in your research? \*[you can choose more than one option.]
  - (a) intermediary who enabled transition of information from one language to another;
  - (b) gate-opener to access information;
  - (c) cultural mediator/advisor.
  - (d) Other (please specify)
4. What was the language pair your interpreter(s) / translator(s) worked with?
5. Were there any risks an interpreter / translator faced by working with the researchers?
6. Could you please briefly describe in which situations you used an interpreter/translator and how you would rate your experience with interpreters/translators?