



# Learning from practice: Interpreting at the 11M terrorist attack trial

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**Abstract:** The March 11, 2004 terrorist attack at Madrid's central railway station in Spain led to one of the largest criminal trials of any European country. The attack, known as 11M, had national and international repercussions. One hundred and ninety-two people died and more than one thousand were injured. The trial was complicated because of the vast number of defendants, lay and expert witnesses, and others who participated in the proceedings. Our aim here is to highlight and analyse certain linguistic, cultural, and other extra-linguistic difficulties experienced by the translators and interpreters involved in the 11M trial proceedings. These difficulties included media influence, the intense emotions evoked by the attack and its consequences, and particular technical difficulties in the courtroom. The solutions that were ultimately implemented in order to overcome these difficulties will also be discussed and their effectiveness evaluated. The paper begins by discussing the legal significance of the 11M trial, it then describes the data and methodology used in our analysis, and finally presents some conclusions on this trial's implications for the role interpreters play in Spain's various administrative settings.

**Keywords:** interpreting; terrorism; training

## 1. Introduction

The scale of the 11M terrorist attack horrified Spaniards and others around the world, primarily because of the staggering number of victims. Later, at the trial, the number of defendants, lawyers, and witnesses that were ultimately involved in the proceedings would prove to have a similar overwhelming effect. Other specific characteristics (and difficulties) of the trial included the linguistic and socio-cultural background of the majority of the defendants involved as well as the politicisation of the trial itself. The national election that took place soon after the attack was decisively influenced by the fallout from the event, bringing about a change of government. It has been more than six years now since the attack and more than two years since the verdict was handed down (June 16, 2008), yet at the end of 2009 there were still ongoing events related to the trial. In November 2009 seven individuals were indicted for their involvement in helping some of the 11M terrorists to escape, as is evidenced in the following citations from press articles

Eloy Velasco, a judge on Spain's National Court, stated on Friday, November 20, 2009, that seven alleged Islamists had been indicted for aiding the terrorists who perpetrated the March 11, 2004, attacks in Madrid (Noticias, 2009).

On Tuesday, December 1, 2009, the Plaza de Castilla Courthouse in Madrid agreed to re-open the case against an ex-police superintendent and a chemical expert from his unit charging them

with perjury [during the 11M trial] that was filed by the 11M Victims Aid Association . (Libertad Digital, 2009)

These are the final throes of the largest trial Europe has seen in the last few decades, one in which the role of translators and interpreters has been more decisive than in any other.

To give some background to the place of interpreting in the Spanish legal context, two important legal principles regarding the rights of detainees in Spain need to be mentioned:

1. The right to an interpreter in criminal proceedings; and
2. The guarantee that every individual is protected by the law.

The Spanish Constitution (Section 14) establishes the right to an interpreter as one of an individual's fundamental rights in criminal proceedings. In section 17.3 it clearly states that anyone who is arrested has the right to be informed of the reasons for that arrest in a manner that he or she can understand.

As for the second point, although it was important for the alleged offenders to be charged and prosecuted for the attack, there had to be some guarantee that those on trial would not lack legal protection and that innocent people would not be convicted. The need to be impartial and neutral when so much emotion was involved called for highly skilled and experienced translators and interpreters (T&I). All of the interpreters were aware that the defendants' sentences depended to a large extent on the quality of the interpreter's work. Furthermore, given the physical and mental states of the defendants and witnesses, receiving their cooperation was not always easy. General public ignorance surrounding the proper legal procedures of a trial and the traditions and cultures of these individuals' country of origin were added difficulties. In the following pages, these difficulties will be explained and analysed as will the solutions that were ultimately offered.

## 2. Data

The information contained in this paper comes from three primary sources:

1. The description of events by four participants in the trial: three interpreters and a defence attorney.
2. Information taken directly from recordings made during the trial.
3. Observations about the work of the interpreters from various people who either reported on the trial in the media or who have a professional or academic interest in T&I.

The participants' accounts were obtained through personal interviews and the participation of three of the 11M interpreters and a defence attorney, all four of whom participated in a round table session entitled *Quality justice requires quality communication*, held during the Third International Congress on Translation and Interpretation in Alcalá de Henares in April 2008 (Valero-Garcés et al. 2009).

As for the recordings from the trial, these were made available by the head of the Translation and Interpretation (T&I) team, Abkari, co-author of this

paper. The third source of information came from media publications, and from the observations and commentary made by various other T&I experts.

### **3. The team of translators and interpreters and the trial setting**

Taking into consideration the scale and complexity and the novelty of the trial, collaboration among the various institutions was essential. Thus, the Ministry of Justice was primarily responsible for contacting the Foreign Office, and the Home Office was charged with finding translators and interpreters with a certain degree of experience. The Ministry of Justice also established communication with other agencies that were involved at some point in the trial (such as the Bar Association). These Ministries have staff interpreters and a list of freelance interpreters who are hired on a casual basis, as well as contracts with private sector companies, which provide professionals to perform services as needed.

For the 11M trial, the interpreter in charge of the Arabic section in the Foreign Office was charged with the organisation and coordination of the team. In June 2006 the coordinator began identifying the T&I needs and began to put together a team.

Some of the considerations in putting together the team were:

- The defendants' cultural and linguistic profiles.
- The potential interpreters' language combinations as well as their level of linguistic training and expertise.
- The match between the defendants' linguistic and cultural profiles and the linguistic capabilities of the interpreters.
- The safety of the potential interpreters
- The technical needs.

The T&I team was made up of two different groups of interpreters and translators – a group of conference interpreters, and a group of liaison interpreters and translators.

The group of conference interpreters (six conference interpreters), working in the booth, were in charge of simultaneously interpreting the proceedings of the trial, including the defendants' testimonies.

The group of liaison interpreters and translators (seventeen interpreters and translators in total) were employed to interpret when there were pauses in the trial and communication was needed between defendants or other persons speaking other languages with court personnel – lawyers, court staff etc. In addition, the liaison interpreters spent much of their time working outside the court when the defendants were in their respective jail cells and needed to communicate with their lawyers. Translators, whose work we look at below, worked on court documentation including translated transcripts of evidence.

The T&I team was therefore a completely heterogeneous group in terms of language profile, cultural and geographical origin, age, and training. Thus, in order to cater for all potential needs, the interpreting team was staffed with speakers of many different varieties of Arabic: Old Classic, Modern Classic, Maghrebi, Egyptian, Gulf, Syrian-Lebanese, as well as the Berber languages of Tarifit, Souss-Tachelhit, Atlas-Tachelhit, and Kabyle.

#### **3.1. The trial setting**

The trial took place in an unusual location: a pavilion in the Casa de Campo, Madrid's largest public park. This venue was primarily chosen to cater for the large number of people involved, as well as for security reasons. The trial included a total of twenty-nine defendants, about 650 witnesses, ninety-eight

experts, as well as numerous members of the press who gathered to cover the trial.

A closed-circuit video system was installed in the Pavilion to allow the victims to watch the proceedings from a special room that seated 150 people. Psychologists, social workers and medical staff waited in two adjoining rooms, ready to help the victims when needed. An officer from Spain's National Court's Centre for Victims (*Oficina de Atención a las Víctimas de la Audiencia Nacional*) was also available.

The trial used the latest technology, including internet and video-conferencing facilities, and a special ceiling camera that made it possible to view all of the trial documents on television screens. Other technological innovations included seventeen plasma screens that enabled everyone present to watch the proceedings, as well as two booths for simultaneous interpreting.

On the right hand side of the courtroom, a glass booth known as the fishbowl (*la pecera*), was built for the defendants. The booths for the interpreters were positioned about two metres from the victims and their families, and about ten metres from the defendants. Many interpreters acknowledged that at the beginning of the trial the close proximity to victims and defendants was not a comfortable situation for them. They later stated that they either became used to the circumstances or they did not pay as much attention to it as the trial progressed.

#### **4. Complexities of interpreting at the 11M trial**

The specific complexities that transpired during the course of the trial can be classified into two main categories: internal and external.

Firstly, there were certain internal aspects related to the act of interpreting itself, such as cross linguistic or cross cultural issues, as well as ethical questions about the role of the interpreter and translator. Secondly, external aspects such as the influence of the media, technical issues, and emotional factors also significantly increased the complexities associated with interpreting and translation at the 11M trial. We believe that both the internal and external factors are relevant to understanding the role of T&I professionals and contributing to a wider recognition of the work they do. Translators and interpreters do not work in a vacuum and context – as this trial showed – is critically important.

##### **4.1. Interpreting issues**

As for this first point, the linguistic and terminological difficulties that the T&I team had to confront and overcome were obvious to many. Ninety percent of all of the interpreting at the trial was between Spanish and Arabic, two distant languages and cultures. Furthermore, the variety of Arabic being interpreted was not the Classical variety. In addition to the numerous dialects, linguistic accents, and cultural differences, it was also necessary to factor in the unwillingness of some of the interlocutors to cooperate. On at least one occasion interpreters of a particular language or dialect were not available when needed and two witnesses had to testify in their poor Spanish instead of in Berber, their mother tongue. “No one told us that there would be witnesses who spoke Berber that day”, explained the head of the T&I team. After that day, however, there was always an interpreter of Berber in the building.

Another significant event related to linguistic matters was the transcription of various taped conversations. The Arabic interpreters employed during the trial had doubts about a major piece of evidence incriminating Rabei Osman El Sayed, also known as Mohamed the Egyptian. The evidence consisted of a

number of conversations recorded by the Italian police at Osman's flat in Milan.

The Italian police sent the tapes together with the transcripts as requested by the Spanish Ministry of Justice. According to the Italian transcripts, Osman assumed personal responsibility for the attacks and placed himself in Al Qaeda's circle. According to the 11M trial interpreters, however, the transcript provided by the Italian authorities contained numerous misinterpretations of the discourse and they had almost fabricated the particular utterances that incriminated Rabei Osman.

The 11M trial interpreters stated that the aforementioned transcript was the result of "misinterpretations, a lack of knowledge of Classical Arabic and its cultural references, and also a lack of knowledge of historical references and the Qur'an," as the coordinator of the 11M interpreters and co-author of this paper explained (Valero et al 2009). Moreover, the coordinator of the 11M interpreters felt that the interpreters in Italy had acted rashly and irresponsibly when they translated the conversations, because, as he stated, "it was clear that they had tried to fill in empty spaces with phrases that did not exist" (Personal interview).

To illustrate this comment a fragment of the transcription provided by the Italian police is reproduced below, followed by the transcription of the same material prepared by the 11M translators and interpreters.

In the transcription of the Arabic conversation provided by the Italian police there is the following dialogue (translated into English for the purpose of this paper by the author); underlined passages are the authors' emphasis:

Rabei Osman: Listen carefully, Yahya, I don't hide it from you ... listen carefully ... I have many friends that were martyrs for Allah, some went to Afghanistan for the Jihad and others are in jail. Listen to me, Yahya, be careful and don't talk, the Madrid operation was mine (my idea) ... They were my most beloved friends ... they died as martyrs. Allah blessed them.

Yahya: Ah ...

Rabei Osman: They all were in my team. In fact, I wasn't with them the day of the operation, but on the 4th, I contacted them, and I knew all the details. Be careful and don't talk. They moved all together whereas I move on my own.

Yahya: Did all of them die?

Rabei Osman: No, no. Five died. Allah blessed them. And eight were made prisoners. They are my best friends ... I started to prepare everything on the 4th. It was a high-level program, I was even ready to become a martyr, but some circumstances impeded it. Everything is in Allah's hands. If the operation had succeeded, nobody would have forgotten it, because the material was ready, but the problem was carrying it out. Many lessons and much patience ... were needed for two and a half years.

However, when the 11M trial interpreters listened to the original tapes of the conversation in Arabic they transcribed the same piece of dialogue as:

Rabei Osman: All my friends have gone, they all left, I'm alone. All my friends have left, some of them died for God in Afghanistan. I'm not going to hide it, the operation they have just done in Madrid ...

Yahya: ...

Rabei Osman: That train that exploded in Madrid ...

Yahya: Oh, yes!

Rabei Osman: My people did it ... our people.

Yahya: In Spain?

Rabei Osman: Yes ... They are all my friends, five of them died as martyrs, may they rest in peace, and eight are in jail. But God didn't want my martyrdom and he saved me from jail. I wasn't with them those days. But they were my people ... and I knew about it previously, but exactly ... exactly they didn't tell me what was going to happen ...

Significant differences between the transcriptions are immediately evident. If we compare the two transcripts, we can see that the first contains more information about Osman and his friends than the one prepared by the 11M interpreters. Thus the content of the sentence that makes reference to Madrid (underlined in the text) is different. In the Italian transcript, the speaker tells his interlocutor that the idea was his ("the Madrid operation was mine (my idea)"), while in the second text, the speaker does not include himself but rather says "they" in reference to his friends ("I'm not going to hide it, the operation they have just done in Madrid ..."). This reference to the Madrid operation as either 'mine' or 'theirs' was a key element of Osman's attorney's questions to the interpreters during the trial. Osman's lawyer wanted to know if Rabei Osman had definitely told his alleged disciple Yahya Mawed that "the Madrid operation was mine," as the Italian authorities had claimed. The 11M interpreter simply said, "We did not hear that. What we heard was: 'I'm not going to hide it, the operation they have just done in Madrid'" (underlined in the text).

The second time Osman speaks is, again, completely different in the two transcripts. In the Italian transcript a team is mentioned and Osman tells his interlocutor to "keep quiet"; but in the Spanish transcript the mention of a team and the phrase "keep quiet" are absent. In the Spanish transcript Osman specifically mentions the train that exploded in Madrid, however this is absent in the Italian version. Likewise, in his third intervention, Osman begins by alluding to five dead friends and eight who are in jail, and later makes a comment that could be understood as a reference to the attack in Madrid ("I started to prepare everything on the 4th"). Finally, Osman adds another sentence which is possibly a reference to the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001: "Many lessons and much patience were needed for two and a half years".

In the Spanish transcript, however, this single intervention is recorded as two interventions. The first is a single sentence that says "My people did it ... our people", referring to the perpetrators of the attack in Madrid, and this reference is later corroborated by Yahya's question ("In Spain?"). Here the speaker of the sentence has excluded himself from participating in the attack. The same reference is made to five deaths and his eight friends in jail, and in this version he specifically refers to the dead as "martyrs". However, no reference is made to the material needed for the operation or to the two and a half years of work; rather, it again exonerates the speaker from participating in the attack when he says, "I wasn't with them those days," later admitting that he knew something, though nothing specific: "and I knew about it previously, but exactly... exactly they didn't tell me what was going to happen".

Regarding Osman's interlocutor, the text is brief and the only utterance he does make refers to two different events on the two transcripts. The Italian transcript contains a question that in essence refers to those responsible for the attack ("Did all of them die?"), while in the Spanish transcript the question is about where the attack took place ("In Spain?"). The differences, therefore, are evident and serve to illustrate the difficulties that arose from the transcription of these conversations.

There are other passages in the conversations that are of concern; for instance, the paragraph in which, according to the Italian transcript, Osman invites his friend to join Al Qaeda by saying: "You have to knock on Al Qaeda's door." The 11M interpreters, however, again denied that Osman had said this. According to the 11M interpreters, Osman had said something that sounded phonetically similar. "The words Al Qaeda are never heard," they insisted, and they concluded that the Italian transcript was "an incorrect interpretation due to a lack of knowledge of the Qur'an."

This statement calls our attention to the wide gap between the Spanish and Arab cultures beyond the languages themselves, an aspect which the 11M T&I team constantly strived to overcome. The work done by the interpreters was crucial in explaining cultural nuances and in demonstrating that what appeared to be incriminating statements by Rabei Osman were actually attributable to cultural differences. Questions such as: "Why do you have this person's number?", "Why did this person sleep in your house?" and the answers given by the defendants: "I have someone's phone number, but he's not my friend. I wouldn't remember him even if he slept in my house. Lots of people do", forced Zarrouk, one of the 11M interpreters to make a cross-cultural clarification. The interpreter explained: "These are our customs. If someone comes from my village, from Morocco, from Egypt, I see them at the mosque; we swap numbers right away. If they don't have a house, my duty as a Muslim is to put them up in mine (Valero-Garcés et al, 2009).

These nuances are also highlighted in a conversation in which Osman, allegedly, talked about some "women ready to be martyrs", in several countries, who "only need to be called". The interpreters explained that this was a well-known historical reference in the Arab world and not an open invitation to martyrdom.

In fact, this is a popular story in Arab-Muslim epic literature dating back to the beginning of the 9th century. The speaker on the recording, who was believed to be Osman, alluded to a cry for help made by a Muslim woman from the city of Zafetra which had been invaded and destroyed by the Byzantine army in the year 837. As legend has it, the Caliph al-Mu'tasim, eager to avenge the offence suffered by this woman, assembled a large army. One of the divisions of this army defeated the Byzantine emperor Theophilus as he personally led his forces in Dazimon, while the other division advanced to Amorium, the birthplace of the Phrygia dynasty. That woman's plea for protection from the Caliph, which later became the icon of the legend, was "Ô al-Mu'tasim ...". In Arabic, this is "wa Mu'tasimah ..." which is the equivalent of "Help O al-Mu'tasim". In much of the literature, this Caliph is associated with this deed and it is often invoked to illustrate the broad protection that Arab and Muslim rulers used to confer in times past to their subjects, in contrast to what some see today as the indifference and negligence of contemporary leaders towards their citizens, as Zarrouk explained (Valero et al 2009).

According to the 11M interpreters, the first interpreters (from Italy) may not have been aware of the abovementioned historical and legendary reference, as they seemed to have inserted information that was inconsistent with this cultural reality, thus creating a new story that was extremely prejudicial to this particular defendant. It was at times difficult to gain access

to these transcriptions and ask questions about them; this is partly for security reasons, as some authorities pointed out when asked about the different renditions of this important evidence.

Another challenge for the 11M interpreters, was the inadequate understanding of the complexities of the interpreting process by other courtroom participants. The interpreters often complained about the lack of awareness and recognition of their role by the other participants in the trial. They asked to work in teams that included the bailiff, judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and themselves. Nevertheless, this was not always the case. In the Spanish judicial system, contrary to other countries like Morocco for instance, interpreters are not considered team members but independent contractors. This situation led to the lack of access to the texts or indictments which they later had to interpret. Such written texts were often read by a secretary very quickly and without pauses, making the interpreters' task extremely difficult.

In the case of the judges, their unfamiliarity with the work of the interpreters led them, on the one hand, to ask them to perform tasks that were not necessarily part of their job (e.g. services outside of their set schedule) and, on the other, to not distinguish between the different types of interpretation modes (simultaneous, consecutive, chuchotage) that the interpreters used according to the situation. It also led them to make comments or value judgements that were detrimental to the interpreters' reputation. An example of this occurred in the 11M trial when the interpreters experienced technical problems while listening to the testimony of Arab defendants held in the fishbowl. We will briefly describe this incident in the section below, dedicated to certain aspects that are external to the act of interpreting.

#### **4.2. External aspects affecting interpreting at the 11M trial**

This section will focus on three elements which created difficulties during the 11M trial, as they so often do in cases involving interpreting, even if they are not always given the attention they deserve. The elements are the technical equipment; the emotional aspects and the issue of interpreters' security in high-profile cases.

At a certain point in the trial, the judge insisted on using the PA system to hear the Spanish interpretation. However, when the interpreters had to interpret into Arabic, the defendants used headphones. The judge insisted that the interpreters use the PA system and interpret simultaneously, not consecutively, but the sound system caused feedback through the other microphones and interfered with the interpreters' ability to hear and interpret accurately. This event caused a very serious communication problem at the beginning of the trial. The first reaction was to point out the interpreters' incompetence. The media showed the judge stating angrily: "It seems that the interpreters are not very competent. We will take a ten minute recess, and I'd like to see the interpreters in my office" (*El Pais*, July 19, 2008).

Once the problem was explained to the judge, the trial continued, but for many spectators the image of the authorities questioning the competence of the interpreters persisted in their minds.

The technical problem was caused in part by the fact that the interpreters had not been asked which equipment was to be used, nor about where the fishbowl should be located. All of this produced a series of inconveniences that possibly could have been avoided if there had been more cooperation between the various courtroom agents and the team of interpreters.

The intense media attention that the trial attracted placed considerable extra pressure on the 11M translating and interpreting team. On the first day of the trial, there were about 400 media crews from all over the world,



making the interpreters' already complicated task even harder. Some members of the press were aggressive towards the T&I team and questioned their role in the trial, publishing inaccurate or incomplete information. For example, they used comments from Arabs who lived and worked in Spain as authoritative expert advice on the performance of the interpreters. Comments like the following from *El Mundo*, a major Spanish daily newspaper, were published: "Some of them [the interpreters] tend to work in standard common Arabic but in turn do not know certain dialects. Just in Morocco, for example, three dialects of Arabic are spoken" (*El Mundo*, June 2, 2008). In response to this criticism, Abkari, coordinator of the 11M interpreters' team, and co-author of this paper stated as a participant in the Round Table already mentioned: "Well, I'd like to know the other two Arabic dialects spoken in Morocco, because there is only one. There are three types of Berber but only one common or dialectal Arabic, which is everyday Arabic" (Valero-Garcés et al 2009).

Abkari also commented that in the Round Table that:

Throughout the trial, and this is very important, the technical problems we encountered had to do with the PA system. That is, with the Spanish to Arabic interpreting. And you must remember that 95% of the interpreting was done from Spanish to Arabic. There were a lot of sessions and very little discourse in Arabic. This must also be pointed out in order to counteract the criticism of some members of the press. (Valero-Garcés et al, 2009).

Other T&I professionals not involved in the trial also helped to put pressure on the courtroom interpreters with their criticisms in the media. This was the case, for example, with the accusations made by the Professional Association of Legal Translators and Interpreters (APTIJ) about the work conditions of the 11M interpreters which were quite different to those of interpreters in more ordinary work situations while acting for the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Interior as published in *El País* (July 19, 2008).

Another fundamental element in a trial such as this one that cannot be forgotten is the role of heightened emotions. Not just the interpreters, but the participants and the general public as well had to face the emotions surrounding the trial and control their feelings.

As Benhadou, one of the conference interpreters, pointed out in the Round Table, (Valero-Garcés et al. 2009), the emotional aspects of interpreting are usually overlooked in interpreter training. It is somehow assumed that professional interpreters can and must hide their emotions in order to project the image of an impartial, professional interpreter who is capable of working in any situation. In fact, this is not always easy. The comment by Benhadou is significant: "I have seen how, unfortunately, many students crumble during their first experiences, specifically due to emotional reasons. I have even seen professional interpreters have these problems" (Valero-Garcés et al. 2009). The entire 11M team agreed with Benhadou that more importance must be given to these aspects when training interpreters.

Emotions are part of the interpreter's life, and in a trial like the 11M trial it was difficult to avoid them. As the coordinator of the 11M T&I team, Abkari, commented in the Round Table session mentioned earlier, being an interpreter in a legal case like this was seen as a risk by many of them because it involved a whole list of difficult issues: different countries, different legal systems, different Arabic dialects, different cultures, a large number of defendants, a live event, media pressure, advising, translating, and interpreting. It was perceived as a thankless job.

Much more so than in other T&I contexts, the 11M interpreters were putting their reputation on the line, “their capital in the free market” as one of the interpreters said. The interpreter went on to exemplify his comment by pointing out that on one occasion a fellow interpreter had spent a night in a jail cell in the Plaza de Castilla Courthouse because he had refused to interpret Berber into Spanish when he had only been called to act as an interpreter of Arabic.

There is also the case of one of the liaison interpreters who asked to have a bodyguard like the judges on the National Court had. A request like this seemed disproportionate, especially when considering the general perception of the interpreters’ role as simple assistants in trials of this nature. However, the emotions and the fear of participating in a trial such as this one and the fear of possible acts of revenge later on became intertwined. It is not surprising then that some of the interpreters later recalled that the main difficulties of this trial were not directly related to content, but to emotional factors.

The trial was filled with moments of special emotional intensity. For example, one emotional issue that was unavoidable was the piece by piece reconstruction of the events of March 11, which contained a great deal of suffering. Everybody knew what had happened, but it needed to be said again and this had an obvious effect on the interpreters since they had to analyse and process the content before reconstructing the discourse. As one of the 11M interpreters who worked at the trial said: “I discovered something. When we talked about the victims, I always thought about the fatalities, but as the case unfolded, I found out about the other victims of March 11, above all, the wounded.” Some of those who had been wounded or their relatives were in the room, face to face with the defendants.

In short, for the interpreters and translators involved, the 11M trial was an unprecedented experience, but it was also an enriching experience. All of the interpreters involved were under considerable pressure; they experienced stress because it was not easy to work with so much responsibility, not only in terms of the defendants’ future, but also for justice to be served and for the victims to feel, in some way, as if they had been given some kind of answer.

Finally, we will call attention again to the subject of cooperation between judges and interpreters, and to one case in particular: the intervention of Endika Zulueta, the defence attorney for one of the defendants, Rabei Osman, and the controversy surrounding the transcription of the tapes mentioned earlier. Rabei Osman was eventually released thanks to the work of the interpreters and the help of this lawyer.

The case of Rabei Osman is an example of the hard work done by his lawyer and the interpreters. In Osman’s case, a number of the accusations against him were based not only on implied facts but also on aspects of his personal lifestyle that led police to create a profile of Osman which labelled him as having a criminal character, although there was no evidence to back this up. This attitude towards Osman can be seen in the personal remarks reported by Zulueta in the Round Table already mentioned. Zulueta said all the comments made by witnesses or prosecutors about Osman were of this kind: “This person goes to the mosque a lot,” “He prays. He’s extremely religious,” “He talks about the Qur’an a lot,” “He has a terrorist interpretation of religion.” This did not constitute hard evidence (Valero-Garcés et al 2009).

It is worth mentioning here the topic of religious devotion and fanaticism. As the 11M T&I team tried to make clear, a person’s degree of religious devotion is quite difficult to calculate and, therefore, its assessment can be collectively subjective. Obviously, the person or people who make the judgements mentioned in the previous paragraph do so within the parameters

of their own community or group. In fact, certain behaviours, signs, or words can go unnoticed if they are perceived as normal in a determined society/ community, while they would be scandalous in another.

In particular, the mistake is often made of wanting to decipher the meaning of things that happen in Islamic socio-cultural environments within the parameters of the Catholic Christianity of the host society or the jurisdiction of the court, in this case. In Catholic-Christian societies, religion fills a more intimate, private space that is, above all, separate and limited (instilled this way since Roman times). However, in Islamic circles, there are few divisions between the religious, social, cultural, or political aspects of life. This is why incorrect or imprecise readings can occur when trying to define behaviour or answers to certain questions.

In a trial such as the one under discussion here, the work done by the interpreters to clarify these aspects was critically important. This fact was even recognized by the defendants and their lawyers. It is worth highlighting the words of Zulueta.

For this lawyer (see Valero-Garcés et al. 2009), there are three professions which can be chosen as a career only if one has a calling for them: a doctor, a criminal lawyer, and a translator or interpreter. In the case of doctors this is because they assist people whose physical integrity and even their lives, are at stake. And, for Zulueta, the same is true of a criminal lawyer because: "I do not understand a criminal lawyer who then says: 'These detainees disgust me,' as some of them do say, since most of those who are arrested in this and in all countries are 90-95% poor people in distress and sick."

As Zulueta explains, when the client a lawyer must defend does not understand the language used in court, things become even more complicated. Lawyer and defendant may be sitting together but without the possibility of verbally communicating with each other. Zulueta describes the situation as follows: Firstly, the person who has been detained has the right to know why they have been arrested, and they also have the right to make a statement or not. If they do not know the language, then that is when the interpreter comes in. The interpreter, in this situation, joins forces with the lawyer in the defence of his client's right, which is practically equivalent to the right to a defence. Zulueta adds: "I have worked with many interpreters and it is the interpreter who sits behind the detainee feeling superior to the person that he is interpreting for, because he is educated and the individual who has been arrested is not, and the interpreter can even look down the detainee" (authors' translation from Spanish). He also said that the rapport between the interpreter and the client is even more important than the rapport between lawyer and client. This is because interpreter and detainee share a linguistic and sometimes also a cultural and religious identity. Zulueta added:

The detainee is trembling, scared, and often cold. The cells are also pretty deplorable in Europe as well. I always offer him my hand, and the interpreter should too, from my point of view. (...) I always tell the interpreter to ask them how they are, if they have argued with the police, if they have seen a doctor, if they have called someone they trust.

In this lawyer's opinion the interpreter has to say all of this, but the interpreter can say it as if he or she were a robot, or they can say it as a human being: "Well, we do this so you feel at ease" (Personal interview). While this is the lawyer's view of how interpreters need to conduct themselves, interpreters need to be mindful of the necessity for impartiality in such a potentially emotionally challenging situation.

Zulueta however also recognises the importance of professionalism in interpreting when he adds that people cannot dedicate themselves to being a translator or an interpreter if they are not sure of what they are doing, because – as translators and interpreters often remark – translating just one word incorrectly can mean the difference between prison and freedom.

This fact, together with the judge's concluding remarks as the proceedings drew to an end, indicates that at least in this trial the work of interpreters was recognised. The judge thanked the interpreters after the last hearing by saying: "Without you, this would have been almost impossible". The lawyer Endika Zulueta emphasised this point when he rephrased this man's sentence to say: "Without the work of the interpreters, it would have been completely impossible to complete the trial with any guarantees for the defendants" (Valero-Garcés et al. 2009).

Zulueta also added at the Round Table session:

Without a doubt they did a great job, and I may be repetitive, but I think that we should all feel proud of the work that your colleagues did during this trial: Firstly, for the interpreters or translators in general for their work, as it was recognised worldwide, this trial being a model; and secondly, and especially for all citizens, as they safeguarded the fundamental rights which apply to everyone.

The 11M attack was the biggest terrorist attack in Europe since the Second World War, and all of the work involved, consequently, had to be done very delicately. The interpreters' job was essential. For two years the investigative work prior to the trial was carried out with little public communication. Lawyers had to go to the prisons and speak to their defendants and explain to them that they were being held but that they did not really know why. And all of this could only be done with the mediation of an interpreter. Once the charges and other aspects of the forthcoming trial were made public, the interpreters' work in Arabic was revealed to have been especially important as the Arabic-speaking defendants also came from a culture that is in many respects very different to Spanish or European culture. Without the work of the interpreters in the context of this case, these cultural differences could have led to misunderstandings that would have been potentially prejudicial to the defendants.

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout this paper, we have tried to demonstrate the difficult role of interpreters in a trial as singular as the trial for the largest terrorist attack in Europe and which was attributed to the same Islamist group that perpetrated the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001. The terrorist attack in Madrid on March 11, 2004 was an attack without precedent as was its trial, in which the role of the interpreters was fundamental. There were two primary cultures and several languages and dialects in the balance for which it was necessary to create a team of translators and interpreters that was able to understand them. In this paper, we have shown the characteristics of the 11M T&I team and some of the difficulties they had to face, whether they were linguistic, cultural, emotional, or due to external factors such as the influence of the media, technical problems, or the lack of recognition of their work by the judges (and those following the trial).

In short, the 11M trial was an unprecedented experience on many levels, but also an enriching experience. All of the interpreters involved were under considerable pressure; they experienced stress because it was not easy to

work with so much responsibility, not only in terms of the future of the defendants, but also in order for justice to be served and for the victims of the attack to feel that the interpreters had played a significant part in giving them an answer.

The 11M trial was a special opportunity to make the work done by translators and interpreters more visible in the most demanded languages in Spain. In contrast with their habitual discretion, the high-profile trial gave T&I professionals a certain prominence not just in strictly judicial fields but also in general society. Other spheres began to consider the complexity and importance of the work of translators and interpreters (healthcare centres, social services). This new focus had an impact not only on the functional image of translators and interpreters; it also affected human resources executives and directors. Thus, after the 11M trial, there has been a significant increase in competitive examinations and hiring processes to supply public organisations with qualified translators and interpreters. As a consequence, their status and working conditions have also slightly improved. The road to achieving their aspirations is still long, but the first steps have already been taken.

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