HUMANITARIAN NEUTRALITY AND LANGUAGE AT THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

Maria Rosa Garrido Sardà[*]

Abstract

This article examines the articulation of the humanitarian principle of neutrality and language as the vehicle of this political stance at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC is a neutral humanitarian actor recognised by the Geneva Conventions and historically linked with Swiss political neutrality and multilingualism. Through interviews, focus groups and institutional documents, I analyse the ICRC delegates' linguistic negotiation of neutrality in humanitarian encounters. Based on the semiotic process of iconisation (Gal & Irvine, 2000) with a focus on the politics of embodiment (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016), the analysis reveals that raciolinguistic ideologies reinforce the dominance of English (Footitt et al., 2020) and the imagined figure of the White, male European humanitarian (Fassin, 2012) who does not speak local and regional languages such as Arabic. *Neutrality* emerges as a contextual and relational concept based on a negotiation in terms of possession of a language repertoire, racialised embodiment and cultural closeness. In the Middle East and Northern Africa, this results in stakeholder perceptions of lesser neutrality attached to Arabic-speaking *Westerners* and *Arabs*, who destabilise the imagined humanitarian figure linked with neutrality.

Keywords: International Committee of the Red Cross; Red Cross; embodiment; humanitarianism; neutrality; raciolinguistics; English; Geneva Conventions; MENA.

NEUTRALITAT HUMANITÀRIA I LLENGUATGE EN EL COMITÈ INTERNACIONAL DE LA CREU ROJA

Resum

Aquest article examina l'articulació del principi humanitari de neutralitat i la llengua com a vehicle d'aquest posicionament polític en el Comitè Internacional de la Creu Roja (CICR). El CICR és un actor humanitari neutral reconegut per les Convencions de Ginebra i històricament vinculat a la neutralitat política i al multilingüisme suïssos. A través d'entrevistes, grups de discussió i documents institucionals, analitzem la negociació lingüística de la neutralitat per part dels delegats del CICR en trobades humanitàries. Basant-se en el procés semiòtic d'iconització (Gal i Irvine, 2000) amb un enfocament en la política de corporització (Bucholtz i Hall, 2016), l'anàlisi revela que les ideologies raciolingüístiques reforcen el domini de l'anglès (Footitt et al., 2020) i la figura imaginada de l'humanitari europeu, home i blanc (Fassin, 2012) que no parla llengües locals ni regionals com ara l'àrab. La neutralitat sorgeix com a concepte contextual i relacional basat en una negociació en termes de possessió d'un repertori lingüístic, corporització racialitzada i proximitat cultural. A l'Orient Mitjà i el nord d'Àfrica, això es tradueix en la percepció per part dels grups d'interès d'una menor neutralitat vinculada als occidentals *i* àrabs *que parlen àrab, els quals desestabilitzen la figura humanitària imaginada i vinculada a la neutralitat.*

Parules clau: Comitè Internacional de la Creu Roja; Creu Roja; corporització; humanitarisme; neutralitat; raciolingüística; anglès; Convencions de Ginebra; Orient Mitjà; nord d'Àfrica.

[*] Maria Rosa Garrido Sardà, Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. mariarosa.garrido@uab.cat. 0000-0001-9391-3885.

Contents

1 Introduction: A sociolinguistic study of humanitarian neutrality

This article will examine the articulation of the humanitarian principle of neutrality and language as the vehicle for this political stance at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC is a "specifically neutral and independent institution and intermediary" (Statutes of the ICRC, 2018, Art. 4) whose principle of neutrality is defined as follows: "In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the [International Red Cross and Red Crescent] Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature" (adopted by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross, Vienna, 1965). From a critical sociolinguistic perspective, this article looks into the linguistic negotiation of neutrality in humanitarian diplomatic encounters between ICRC "delegates" (expatriate humanitarian representatives) and a wide array of stakeholders (including local authorities, military officers, prison directors and ambassadors). The ICRC delegate's neutral stance is indexed by certain language varieties and semiotic repertoires. "Despite its importance as an ideological construct, however, the notion of language neutrality remains relatively under-analysed" (Wee, 2010, p. 422). Complementing Wee's top-down analyses of "language neutrality" (2010), this article will zoom into bottom-up declarative data from humanitarian workers connected with institutional policies guiding their actions and interactions, on the one hand, and the raciolinguistic perceptions of their linguistic performances, on the other. In particular, it will focus on the lived experiences of language policy in a major humanitarian agency, which draws on a discourse of humanitarian neutrality that masks the existing inequalities between a wide array of "delegates" whose embodiments are perceived as more or less neutral in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA).

In addition to institutional and legal documents relating to neutrality (see Section 3), the analysis will mainly draw on interviews with various generations of ICRC "delegates" conducted between 2016 and 2017. In order to understand the 1990s "internationalisation" process during which the ICRC opened delegate positions to non-Swiss nationalities, I interviewed nine Swiss delegates (seven men and two women) who were active in the 1990s and who were contacted through the ICRC Alumni association. Thanks to my collaboration with an ICRC department, I organised three focus groups at two ICRC international meetings and I interviewed twelve "delegates", mostly women, who were fluent in at least Arabic and English and had been recruited in the preceding 10 years, coinciding with the "one global workforce" scheme to decentralise the Geneva-based institution. In this article, I will use excerpts from the second focus group organised with six Arabic-speaking delegates occupying managerial positions in MENA. The qualitative analysis, focused on an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from the participants' viewpoints, was based on thematic analysis of the interview corpus. I set out to identify, review, describe and analyse common themes in a non-linear prolonged process within a broader ethnographic and historiographic project. The importance of a theme does not depend on frequency but relevance to the phenomenon under study. Compelling and illustrative excerpts have been selected to answer the research question in this article.

During ethnographic fieldwork in an event for former ICRC "delegates", I met Paul,[1] a Swiss Francophone who had had a long career as a humanitarian worker in this organisation. Between the late 1970s and late 2010s, he had worked in 13 missions in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia with only one mission in Europe and two short postings at the Geneva headquarters. In his first mission, Paul was sent as a rookie "delegate" to the ongoing war in Beirut (Lebanon). The ICRC delegation received a request to rescue five wounded people from across town. As an institutional representative, he had to speak to different authorities on the phone and at checkpoints to negotiate access to the victims of war. In our interview, he depicts the ICRC as an "intermediary" between victims and belligerents. Paul did not speak Arabic as an official representative, since he was only required to speak English in addition to his native French for employment. In his story, he acknowledges the central role played by the local staff as "often it was the local employees who were, who had already done that for a long time, who told me you [singular] could eventually ask them and then you learn that" (interview, 03-02-2016, own translation from French). However, he did not acknowledge the linguistic work of translation and interpreting that local staff did for him in order to communicate with beneficiaries (see e.g. Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche, 2018) until I explicitly asked him.

---

1 All the proper names in this article are pseudonyms.

In this story, there are two main ideas that are central to this article. First, Paul presents his task as an ICRC delegate in Lebanon as primarily communicative, as he had to engage in complex communication with high stakes. By and large, the ICRC rests on the centrality of communication and language work for its international humanitarian mandate, often by relying on colleagues from the ICRC as translators and interpreters. Second, he needed advice on communication strategies –in addition to linguistic mediation into English– from the local employees in the delegation as a new recruit even though he was institutionally regarded as "a representative of the ICRC but [was] also an impartial negotiator, the 'enemy's advocate', and an information agent" (Delegate's Manual, 1970, cited in Troyon & Palmieri, 2007, p. 102). This points to a historical two-tiered system, which places expatriate "delegates" over national staff for diplomatic negotiations, in this case in order to cross checkpoints to access the wounded across town. In the 1970s, delegates were in charge of visits to places of detention and confidential interviews with detainees, protection activities including search for separated family members and material and food distribution among the beneficiaries, among others (Délégué du CICR, 1975). Most northern humanitarian agencies such as Oxfam (Parker, 2020) still have a commitment to direct institutional representation by expatriate senior managers supervising local (or national) staff (Redfield, 2012) partly on the basis of their supposed neutrality in the armed conflict. This figure is based on the 19th century colonial imagination of the White male adventurer moved by the suffering of others in exotic lands (Fassin, 2012), represented by the Red Cross founder Henri Dunant and the Médecins Sans Frontières pioneers. Although statistically the majority of humanitarian workers are not expats, or White men, Redfield (2012) claims that the "phantom" of this idealised figure lingers on, as does its Eurocentric vision.

Today, ICRC delegates are still in charge of treaty-based tasks, often regarded as "noble" (Troyon & Palmieri, 2007, p. 101), such as interviews without witnesses in places of detention (see Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche, 2018) and negotiations with local interlocutors (including, for instance, checkpoint officers as above, prison directors, belligerents, and national government officials). Owing to security issues, these are not carried out by national staff. In order to do these tasks, many delegates rely on linguistic mediation (translation of documents and notably interpreting by mobile staff) into English and to a lesser extent French as institutional languages that are required for their posts. In the face of these longstanding power relations between different categories of humanitarians, the recent localisation agenda launched a debate on how to strengthen local capacity, improve partnership models, and better integrate local voices into humanitarian responses (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 292). One of the main concerns of localising humanitarian aid is the perceived lesser neutrality and impartiality of local actors (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 288) compared to expatriate humanitarians because the former can be perceived as taking sides or belonging to a given group in the conflict and their security might be compromised if they have access to confidential information. The former ICRC Ethics Advisor Hugo Slim sparked a heated debate on the longstanding association between international aid workers and neutrality, and controversially claimed that "as international humanitarians release more power to local actors, they also need to let go of these false narratives around neutrality" (Slim, 2020, paragraph 22).

Following this introduction, I will briefly present the main theoretical concepts of iconisation and embodiment that emerged from the data during qualitative analysis, based on thematic analysis. The third section will give an overview of humanitarian neutrality and staff recruitment at the ICRC. In line with the Special Issue's guiding questions, this section will set out the socio-political and discursive conditions for the production of humanitarian neutrality in/through language in armed conflicts. Section 4 will present the analysis of the semiotic perceptions and the linguistic work needed to negotiate delegates' positioning as neutral representatives in humanitarian encounters. This section addresses the "how" question in our volume rationale and it will be divided into a first sub-section on raciolinguistic perceptions and a second sub-section on "local languages" in relations of trust and mistrust. The closing section will summarise the main findings, explore the implications for neutral humanitarianism and suggest future research.

2 Theoretical framework: Iconisation and embodiment from a raciolinguistic perspective

How is neutrality constructed in everyday encounters? It is dependent on various semiotic processes (Wee, 2010). In particular, *iconisation* is a process in which some quality of the linguistic feature or variety depicts or displays the inherent essence of a social persona or group (Gal & Irvine, 2000, p. 37). "By picking out qualities supposedly shared by the social image and the linguistic image, the ideological representation – itself

a sign– binds them together in a linkage that appears to be inherent" (Gal & Irvine, 2000, p. 38). At the same time, the semiotic process of *erasure* "renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible" by ignoring, eradicating or explaining away facts that do not fit the language ideology (Gal & Irvine, 2000, p. 38). Mena (2022) illustrates iconisation with the US language ideology that Latinx mix English and Spanish, which links mixed language practices to the fact that Latinx are "mixed race" and "mixed up" cognitively. The use of mixed (vs pure) language practices becomes emblematic of Latinx as a group and it erases monolingual English Latinx people.

More specifically, iconisation is "an ideological process that rationalizes and naturalizes semiotic practice as an inherent essence, often anchoring it within the body" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016, p. 178). *Embodiment* (and bodies) is central to the ideological perception and social interpretation of language (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016). Sociolinguistic research into the politics of embodiment, with a focus on bodily difference as the basis for gender assignment and racial categorisation among others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016, p. 175), has linked social categorisation to bodily hexis that is imagined as the source of socially marked linguistic forms or practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016, p. 178). For instance, a high-pitched voice is emblematic of smallness, femaleness and non-dominance but Podesva (2013) shows that this ideological association of voice with social qualities does not hold when African American women use falsetto voices in powerful, evaluative stances. This shows that any semiotic association is a sociopolitical construct at a given historical moment (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016, p. 179).

In sociolinguistics, it is imperative to understand broader processes of racialisation produced and reproduced in everyday interactions and during the creation of subjectivity. According to Alim, "racialization [i]s a process of socialization in and through language, as a continuous project of becoming as opposed to being" (Alim, 2016, p. 2). Theorising language through the lens of embodiment involves the analysis of metalinguistic data to grasp processes of racialisation by means of ethnographic and discursive methods (Alim, 2016, p. 12). The continued rearticulation of colonial distinctions of Europeanness and non-Europeanness, and by extension Whiteness and non-Whiteness, naturalises "institutionalized hierarchies of racial and linguistic legitimacy […] central to processes of modern subject formation" (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 622). Adopting a *raciolinguistic perspective*, this article will move away from individual interactions and speaking practices of racialised people in order to focus on listening and interpretive practices from hegemonic positions (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Therefore, these institutionalised hierarchies are formed by the hegemonic perceptions of a White "listening subject" (term borrowed from Inoue 2003, cited in Rosa & Flores, 2017), which can be inhabited by both White and non-White individuals and crucially for this article, institutional actors (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 628) through policies and other institutional texts. In MENA, the complexity of racial identity for individuals who do not conform to the White/non-White dichotomy allows us to go beyond persisting European binaries to study the contemporary politics of racialisation linked to structures of power and belonging (Ozcelik, 2021).

Because language policies inevitably favour certain language varieties and their (imagined) speakers, Wee (2010) claims that they appeal to *language neutrality* as an attempt to mask unequal access to the institutionalised language varieties and to avoid discrimination against particular speakers or specific groups bound by a given policy. In other words, the concept of language neutrality is based on the equality of treatment of all linguistic groups and speakers that are subject to the policy. Language plays a role in the negotiation of humanitarian neutrality (see Section 3 below). Nonetheless, the criteria for language neutrality are often left implicit in these policies given the impossibility for language to become "non-social", that is, detached from people's social positioning (Wee, 2010). In some post-colonial contexts such as Zambia and Singapore (see Wee, 2010), English has been constructed in policy as a politically neutral and equidistant language for all ethnic groups as an "external" language belonging to no one (Gal & Woolard, 2001). As a lingua franca, English has to maintain the illusion of equal access through educational opportunity and erase the "have-nots".

In the humanitarian sector, individuals, institutions and their language policies ideologically construct English as a language that iconises the speaker's mobility and foreignness that ensure his (and less commonly, her/ their) neutral political stance towards the ongoing armed conflict (Garrido, 2017). This anonymous lingua franca often stands in ideological opposition to authentic local languages linked with a national imaginary and/ or ethnic affiliation (Gal & Woolard, 2001) that are regarded as politically vested and potentially conflictive. Hassemer and Garrido (2020) concluded that competence in Arabic had an ambivalent value in humanitarian

encounters, both as an advantage for unmediated communication with beneficiaries and as a burden linked to perceptions of lesser neutrality as professionals. In the ensuing section, I will present the legal and institutional definition of neutrality at the ICRC in connection with its historical links with neutral Switzerland as the sociopolitical background for the construction of language neutrality in armed conflicts.

3 Context: The International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross is legally constituted as an association under Swiss law with a status equivalent to that of an international organisation (Statutes of the ICRC, 2017, Art. 2). Its mission encompasses humanitarian protection and assistance to victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence, in addition to promoting respect for International Humanitarian Law by nation-states.[2] The ICRC has always had its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, a country that has positioned itself as an international mediator and outsider as an "exceptional case" in Europe (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015). The international image of a politically neutral and pluralistic/multilingual Switzerland (see Del Percio, 2013) has been capitalised for international cooperation and diplomacy in Geneva (see Garrido, 2022a). In fact, Swiss political neutrality and humanitarian neutrality at the ICRC have legitimised each other for decades (Troyon & Palmieri, 2007, p. 104). The original Red Cross emblem, currently in use by the ICRC, has inverted the colours and retains the cross shape of the Swiss flag.

In the early 20th century ICRC, the concept of neutrality was close to impartiality, understood as not taking positions in favour of either party, and economic, religious and political independence (Troyon & Palmieri, 2007, p. 103). It was in the 1930s that the "formula ICRC=neutral=Swiss" was established (Troyon & Palmieri, 2007, p. 104). Slim (2020) highlights that the neutral humanitarian model is closely linked with Swiss political ideology in general and the Genevan Pictet family in particular. Charles Pictet de Rochemont negotiated the international recognition of Switzerland's permanent neutrality in 1815, while the lawyer Jean Pictet enshrined neutrality as the third fundamental principle of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement in 1965 (Slim, 2020, paragraph 4).

As a paradigmatic example of *neutral humanitarianism* (Slim, 2020) to work across the lines of conflict, Cotter (2022) defines the ICRC's role as a temporary neutral intermediary "when it acts as a third party between two or several parties in dispute, with their agreement and in order to facilitate the resolution of all or some aspects of the dispute and/or the implementation of a settlement agreement" (paragraph 8). Under the auspices of the Geneva Conventions, this international agency engages in *humanitarian diplomacy* through confidential dialogues with policy-makers, belligerents and other stakeholders to persuade them to respect International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The ICRC defines "humanitarian diplomacy" as "using our influence with States and others to effect improvements" (ICRC webpage, 2022).[3] In accordance with the Geneva Conventions, ICRC delegates have the legal prerogative "to be able to interview the prisoners, and in particular the prisoners' representatives, without witnesses, either personally or through an interpreter" (1949, Part VI, Art. 126). As a result, ICRC delegates are both aid workers interacting with civilians in the front line and humanitarian diplomats in confidential negotiations in the corridors of power (Humanitarian Diplomacy, 2021; see Cotter, 2022 for a variety of examples).

In terms of personnel assignment, the principle of neutrality translates into a policy of not assigning "mobile staff" to a country of which they are nationals. Bearing in mind the ideological centrality of neutrality at the service of confidential humanitarian diplomacy, the analysis below will focus on the ICRC delegates' narratives that deal with these questions, voiced by an experienced ICRC delegate as follows: "How are we, as humanitarian workers, to act in a neutral manner? How can we ensure that we are perceived to be neutral? Should we be neutral at all times? How do we deal with accusations of non-neutrality?" (Damary, 2014). As part of its historical relationship with Switzerland, ICRC delegates in high-stakes confidential encounters had to have Swiss nationality until December 1992 in the interest of maintaining neutrality in armed conflicts. The gradual ICRC opening of delegate positions to other nationalities, informally called "internationalisation",

2 The ICRC's mission and mandate.

3 Where does the ICRC work?

has raised continued concerns in the ICRC over perceptions of neutrality linked to different nationalities (see Garrido, 2022b on "easy nationality") and gendered, racialised embodiments (see Troyon & Palmieri, 2007).

This opening was based on a two-tiered system that clearly differentiated between national and expatriate workers, who were initially European in the 1990s and early 2000s due to the perceived need for "neutral nationality", confidentiality and the alleged lack of local workers with the necessary skills and experience (Julier, 2002). In 1993, "delegate" positions were only open to non-Swiss staff with ICRC experience who conformed to its principles (Julier, 2002, p. 43). In 1999, the Assembly fixed a maximum of a third of non-Swiss candidates for delegate openings (Julier, 2002, p. 43). Owing to a lack of staff in 2000, 40% of newly-recruited delegates were not Swiss in 2001 and the Assembly abandoned this measure in 2002, but with an assurance that "internationalisation" was a "controlled process" (Julier, 2002, p. 44). Given the "Western" profile of delegates, Julier (2002) concludes that "when the dossier of a non-Western delegate is proposed to a head of operations or a head of delegation, the officials concerned are not very enthusiastic and dossiers are regularly refused" (p. 71, own translation). A possible explanation is the "powerful colonial matrix that informed the ways in which White Swiss reacted to their non-White counterparts" (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015, p. 4). In 2006, "non-Westerners" numbered only 11% compared with 65% of "non-Swiss Westerners" (Troyon & Palmieri, 2007, p. 110). Twenty years later, in line with localisation debates in the humanitarian sector, the ICRC launched the "one global workforce" scheme that partly decentralises HR (and other) decisions from Geneva and aims to replace mobile positions with resident positions whenever possible by recruiting locally and offering more opportunities to national or resident staff (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2017) but this might be a cost-saving measure. This scheme coincided with the recruitment of Arabic-speaking delegates for MENA conflicts, with many holding dual nationality (Garrido, 2022b).

Today, the ICRC has English and French as "administrative languages", with less widely used "working languages" for operations, including Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Chinese. English is the working language of two thirds of delegations, including those in MENA. The ICRC, unlike other organisations, does not have any implementing partners in the field other than Red Cross/Red Crescent national societies. It plans for linguistic mediation and recruits "interpreters" within the mobile staff category for languages that are needed in intervention contexts, currently including more than 20 languages (among others Tigrinya, Hausa, Russian, Pashto, Kurdish, Arabic, and Farsi). The interpreter's role is primarily conceived as a technical role in support of delegates, as they are described as "the vital communication link" enabling delegates to do their main tasks, namely, interviews without witnesses, family correspondence and humanitarian diplomacy. They officially have a voice when they engage in informative and awareness raising activities that are not confidential. Let us now move to the sociolinguistic analysis of the delegates' negotiation of humanitarian neutrality in situated linguistic encounters.

4 Analysis: ICRC delegates' sociolinguistic negotiation of humanitarian neutrality

The delegates' sociolinguistic construction and negotiation of humanitarian neutrality involves adopting a political stance that allows access to all sides of an armed conflict in order for the agency to protect and assist affected populations. After the "internationalisation" of delegate positions (which accounted for 14% of the overall ICRC workforce in 2016 according to their webpage in 2017), the connection between humanitarian neutrality and Swiss nationality (and indirectly, Helvetic permanent neutrality) was officially abandoned. However, humanitarian neutrality is still a key principle that sets out to ensure acceptance and safety for the mobile humanitarian workers. In the excerpt below, Paul, whom we met in the introductory vignette (Section 1), reflects on the abandonment of Swiss nationality as a proxy for humanitarian neutrality. He believes that claiming neutral status is perhaps more difficult for humanitarians with nationalities linked to more explicit colonial histories than for Swiss nationals, whose "small country" is the hallmark of political neutrality (see Section 3 above). Nonetheless, he thinks that the idea that people can be neutral regardless of their nationality has been gradually accepted at the ICRC, but he acknowledges that there are still limits and this shows that the connection between nationality and neutrality is still subject to ongoing negotiation in actual humanitarian encounters, as we shall see in this section.

Excerpt 1. Limits to individual neutrality. Interview with Paul, 03-02-2016: [Own translation from French]

> peut-être que ce n'est pas aussi facile que pour un Suisse, que pour un petit pays qui n'est pas habitué à être cité comme un pays colonial. Mais là maintenant, la maintenant, dans ce, on a pu faire passer, avec 150 ans d'histoire, on a comme pu faire accepter l'idée que le CICR, les gens étaient capables d'être neutres eux-mêmes, et non pas parce qu'ils étaient d'un pays ou d'un autre. Mais quand même, il y a des limites.

> [maybe it is not as easy as for a Swiss (national), for a small country that is not used to being cited as a colonial country. But now, now, in this, we have been able to put the idea across, with 150 years of history, we have sort of got across the idea that [at] the ICRC, people were capable of being neutral themselves, and not because they were from one country or another. But still, there are limits.]

Interestingly, he claims that there are limits to this universal acceptance of (any) ICRC delegate as a neutral intermediary. For instance, several ICRC managers have commented on the difficulty of deploying French, American and British nationals for security reasons (see Garrido 2022b for some examples). This is mainly due to the perceptions of non-neutrality and imperialism among stakeholders in many intervention contexts, especially former French and British colonies and armed conflicts in which these countries have been involved. The analysis below will reveal that these limits also relate to raciolinguistic perceptions of their bodies and behaviour (see Section 4.1.) and their semiotic and linguistic performance to negotiate a neutral stance (see Section 4.2.). In the analysis, I will tackle the "how" question, namely, what types of linguistic (and more broadly semiotic) work are involved in the hegemonic perception and ongoing negotiation of ICRC delegates as legitimate representatives of a neutral humanitarian organisation.

4.1 Stakeholders' perceptions of delegates' embodiments

Marc, a Swiss national who has been a delegate and head of various delegations for over 35 years, holds that local interlocutors positively perceive "not being native to a country" (interview, 08-01-2016). In fact, this explains why the ICRC specifically avoids sending mobile staff to any country where they have family ties (see Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche, 2018). But how is a delegate perceived as "foreign" and by implication, neutral in the armed conflict? Karl, who worked for the ICRC for 10 years during the early stages of internationalisation, presents the delegate's role as a "neutral mediator" as not "being part of" the armed conflict, and using their influence to have stakeholders respect international humanitarian law. In the excerpt below, he claims that neutrality is actually "impossible" in armed conflicts and it is through semiotic assemblages that a "delegate" gains legitimacy as a neutral intermediary.

Excerpt 2. Defining neutrality from the perspective of a Swiss delegate. Interview with Karl, 13-01-2016: [Original in English]

> Neutrality is is something, in reality, in conflict, it is, impossible to er- (long pause) as we mentioned i- if you are, physically different, you know, you're not an African, you're not a Sri Lankan, you're not a, a, a Colombian, uh even though with Colombia the difference is not so: obvious? But uh (laughter) but um there? It's easy to be neutral, because you- you know you come with your red- w White and red ca:r and you say:, yeah, hello: I'm here, just to bring humanitarian aid? I'm not part of your conflict? You do your conflict you fight if you want? I'm just here, to make sure that you respect the: the rules, of war.

In line with declarative data from other White Swiss delegates, he claims that it is easier to be perceived as neutral in the field if you are "physically different", which is a veiled reference to Whiteness from his own perspective as it is contrasted with non-White personae like "Africans" and "Sri Lankans". In the case of "Colombians", the physical difference with White delegates is not as clear-cut in his opinion, but racialised embodiment is not the only semiotic resource to index neutrality. In fact, humanitarian neutrality is also indexed by institutional symbols, including the Red Cross emblem and institutional cars (shared by national staff). Mobile staff are generally embedded in a security infrastructure that segregates them in fortified aid compounds and limits their interactions with local societies (Duffield, 2010). In Banda's study (2020), humanitarians are perceived to be the upper class of Kenya and the global middle class because "they drive expensive cars, wear expensive clothes and use English" (p. 9). As we will see, English (unlike African

languages in Banda, 2020) is seen as an important semiotic resource in this multimodal and multidimensional assemblage to become an expatriate humanitarian.

According to Banda (2020), development agents are "not neutral brokers" because they represent and carry the ideology of the international agency. I argue that this extends to "mobile workers" in the ICRC that are vested in humanitarian neutrality as a political positioning as a third party in an armed conflict. Above Karl refers to the international mandate, worded as "to make sure that you respect the rules of war" (see Section 3 above), which is not always perceived as neutral by some belligerents that increasingly make humanitarians targets of violence (Duffield, 2010, p. 457). In spite of the official policy that all ICRC delegates must be expatriates (in terms of nationality), this condition is not enough to be perceived as a legitimate neutral representative on the ground. By and large, embodying an Arab identity in an "Arab" country places these humanitarians as neither insiders, by virtue of their language variety and humanitarian status, nor outsiders, by virtue of shared cultural knowledge.

During a lively focus group, some of the specialist delegates who spoke Arabic and self-identified as Arabs told me, as a non-Arab, about the "foreigner complex" in MENA. As a way of understanding social relations, Whiteness is relational and it enables certain bodies to take up spaces (and speak in humanitarian encounters) while others are "out of place" (Ahmed, 2007). In Excerpt 3, they claim that it is not enough to be a foreigner in terms of nationality, but you also have to be perceived as White to be endowed with this legitimacy by local stakeholders.

Excerpt 3. "Foreigner complex" in MENA. Focus group with Arabic-speaking delegates, 18-05-2018: [Original in English]

1 2	LAY:	this is when you, have a **preference for foreigners** that you would accept something from a foreigner rather than from an Egyptian- uh (lo-) from an Arab
3	AID:	yes, even if you- , if the person opposite you is an Arab […]
4	MRG:	but why:? why would that <be? [>]
5 6 7	SAL:	<uh we-> [<] uh I mean can I explain that very quickly if you allow me, I mean and don't disagree with me please hein , <I mean, imagine- imagine that Maria Rosa is not here> (laughter)
8	SAL:	okay, just
9	AID:	we respect <you (xxx)> [>]
10 11	SAL:	<we:- we> [<] **have, the Arabs I mean we are (xxx) (1) if the person is White (1) so we look at him like this, this is the k- the Khawaja complex** , but <if the per-> [>]
12	LAY:	<Khawaja means> [<] foreigner in <Arab> [>]
13	SAL:	<foreign-> [<] no not foreigner, **European o:r bl- White**
14	AID:	<White> [>]
15	ATR:	<a::h> [<] we have the same word in Spanish *guiri*, <yes got it> [>]
16 17 18	SAL:	<yeah , a:nd-> [<], and , if: this man, or this person is African ((xxx)) or As- Asiatic- uh Asian , then I mean we ha- we never look to him, straight we look to him.

What the focus group participants call the "foreigner complex" (Khawaja complex in Arabic) refers to interlocutors over-valuing "foreign" delegates (line 1), defined in opposition to Egyptians and "Arabs" (line 2), even when they are also Arabs themselves (line 3). Salif later narrows down "foreigner" to "European" or "White" (line 13). In this example, they describe the hegemonic raciolinguistic ideology in which "if the person is White, so we look at him like this" (line 11). This means that they gather greater respect, due to their perceived neutral embodiment, than if they were non-White "delegates" (lines 16–18). The raciolinguistic hierarchies in MENA contexts emerge as an impediment to the ICRC's internationalisation agenda. Put differently, a White delegate *iconises* a neutral humanitarian mandate in the Arab interlocutors' eyes and ears. This is the case even though all ICRC delegates must deliver the same key messages relating to the humanitarian diplomatic mission (e.g. respect for IHL). As theorised by Rosa and Flores (2017), the "White

listening subject" is here embodied by Arab stakeholders and, generally, the institutions that they represent in MENA (e.g. governments, prisons, etc.). Later on in this focus group, the participants relate this to the White saviour syndrome, as the remnants of colonialism, exemplified by the fact that "you'd rather hear the news even the bad news from the White person you know?" The excerpt above exemplifies overlapping colonial vestiges and contemporary regional patterns of racialised associations (El Zein, 2021).

4.2 "Local languages" and mistrust in humanitarian encounters

In addition to hegemonic perceptions of delegates, neutrality as a principle is negotiated in daily practices, especially high-stakes confidential encounters (i.e. humanitarian diplomacy). There is a widespread assumption that a delegate, akin to other expatriate aid workers (Banda, 2020), cannot speak any local languages, and thus, is accompanied by an interpreter into a regional lingua franca or a local language as enshrined in the Geneva Conventions (1949). Hassemer and Garrido (2020) claimed that the European delegate's language investment in Arabic is praised in public communication, as in the media or IHL dissemination sessions. In this sense, we concurred with Footitt et al. (2018) that speaking a local language serves as a bridge of trust with civilian interlocutors (p. 4). It is a different story when we deal with high-stakes confidential encounters with stakeholders like governments or belligerents, which requires social distance. In my interviews, this was corroborated by two mirror narratives about confidential diplomatic encounters in the Middle East told by two retired Swiss Francophone men who had served as ICRC delegates (and later on, heads of delegations) for over 30 years each: Paul and Marc.

As we saw earlier, Paul spoke only French and English throughout his career from the late 1970s to retirement. In his experience, "people were more comfortable knowing that you don't speak their language. There was a sort of breathing space" (interview, own translation). His position as a humanitarian intermediary was mirrored by language mediation into English. For him, humanitarian neutrality is iconically linked to language divergence (and the need for interpreting) in ways that maintained boundaries between insiders and outsiders (see Garrido, 2017 for a full analysis). During his career at the ICRC for over 35 years, Marc has learned three regional lingua francas, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic, in addition to the competences in French and English that the ICRC required when he was hired. He has been head of delegations in Northern Africa, the Middle East, East Africa, and Central and South America. His protracted experience in MENA illustrates the other side of the coin, namely the fact that a "Western" delegate speaking Arabic destabilises the imagined figure of the White expat and creates feelings of mistrust.

In Excerpt 4 below, Marc speaks about confidential encounters with high-ranking people surrounded by their assistants in which they don't know or immediately realise that he can understand Arabic. We learn that speaking Arabic as a delegate in MENA not only allowed direct access to backstage exchanges during confidential encounters (and not afterwards through an interpreter) but also unsettled the strict us/them dichotomies maintained thanks to an international lingua franca, English, belonging to no one.

Excerpt 4. "Less trust". Interview with Marc, 08-01-2016: [Own translation from Spanish]

1 2 3 4	*MAR:	lo puedes entender, y- y lo que he visto es que cuando e::h el- el que habla del CICR o de otra organización es- es- es un e:h árabo: parlante (1) de rep- los interlocutores van a estar un poco más cerrados porque, se dan cuenta de que:, no hay nada que pueden decir que no- no va a ser e:h e:ntendido comprendido eh? entonces hay menos e::h menos confianza.
	%tra:	you can understand it, and what I have seen is that when u:h who who speaks on behalf of the ICRC or another organisation is is Arabic-speaking (1) of rep- the interlocutors will be a bit more reserved because, they realise that there is:, nothing that they can say that won't won't be eh: understood huh? so there is less e:hh less trust.
5	*MRG:	m:hm::! pero con alguien que no lo es.
	%tra:	mhhm::! but with someone who is not.
6	*MAR:	^+sí
	%tra:	^+yes

7	*MRG:	o que supuestamente no lo es <porque tú sí que lo entendías pero> [>]
	%tra:	who supposedly is not because <you did understand but> [>]
8 9 10 11 12 13 14	*MAR:	<supuestamente, exacto> [<] exacto, y: la verdad lo que he visto también es que q- por- porque tenemos muchos colegas la verdad, expatriado que h- ha- hay todo una serie de- digamos los llamamos *arabisants* (1) que realmente hablan perfectamente eh, eh- eh- no s- no son muchos pero bueno hay- hay- hay una cierta cantidad de (1) occidentales como yo que han hecho estudios e:h , universitarios mejores, que realmente lo manejan perfectamente eh, e::hm (1) pero a veces de repente los interlocutores les tienen un poco de desconfianza.
	%tra:	<supposedly, exactly> [<] exactly, a:nd in fact what I have realised is that- th- be- because we have many colleagues in fact, expatriates who th- there are a group of let's say we call them *arabisant* (1) who perfectly speak eh, eh, th- there aren't many but well there- there- there are some (1) Westerners like me who have completed higher eh: education studies better [than mine], who really master it perfectly eh e:hmm (1) but sometimes maybe interlocutors have a bit of mistrust in them.
15	*MRG:	m::h!
16	*MAR:	porque: no les parece normal que un occidental, maneje tan bien, el idioma de ellos.
	%tra:	because it does not seem normal to them that a Westerner, masters their language so well.
17	*MRG:	ya veo.
	%tra:	I see.
18 19	*MAR:	entonces (pronto) piensan donde es que he esta:do donde he estudia:do para que ha trabaja:do
	%tra:	so they immediately think where have I bee:n where have I studie:d who has he wo:rked with

In the first turn (lines 1–4), he explains that when the ICRC representative is an Arabic speaker this engenders "less trust" (line 4) because the interlocutors' backstage talk can be understood. The colonial categorisation of "Westerners" vs "them" is unsettled when the interlocutors discover an *arabisant* like Marc, defined as a "Westerner" (i.e. non-Arab) who masters Arabic typically through higher education (lines 12–14). This creates "a little bit of mistrust" (line 14) in the supposedly neutral delegate. In Marc's words, "it does not seem normal to them that a Westerner masters their language so well" (lines16). He reveals that they suspect that the ICRC representative might not be neutral owing to local and translocal links (in MENA) indexed by his Arabic competences. As a result, the interlocutors want to know about Marc's past: where he has lived, where he has studied, where he has worked (lines 18–19), to judge if he is "neutral" in the conflict or favours a given side.

Following Ahmed (2007), the interlocutors treat Marc as a "stranger" of dubious origins, whose assumed European origin is questioned because, even though he has the "right" passport and White embodiment, his language competences are incongruent with the idealised Westerner who cannot speak non-European languages (lines 16), which tallies with Fassin's (2012) colonial image of the humanitarian. This illustrates Tayeb's (2021) claim that the formation of Whiteness in North Africa only partially overlaps with the dominant colonial formations as it is not reducible to White-as-Western. Marc's narrated experience also shows that neutrality is a site of ongoing construction, much of it perceptual, and it is therefore highly contextual and relational. The delegate's perceived identity and their social relations indexed by local language competence (here, in an Arabic variety) are more important than institutional status and symbols, bearers of neutral status. All in all, there seems to be a mismatch between institutional and legal definitions of neutrality, which are abstract and disembodied, and how interlocutors with different embodiments and social identities negotiate neutrality in a given context.

The unfolding "one global workforce" at the ICRC is underpinned by the fundamental principle of "universality" in the worldwide interdependent Red Cross and Red Crescent movement (ICRC, 2015). Despite the ICRC's non-religious, international and universal mission, most Arabic-speaking communicators had to navigate perceptions of the ICRC as "Western" in MENA, particularly due to its Red Cross emblem (based on the Swiss Confederation's cross, as we saw earlier) in all delegations to show unity. "As the emblem draws its power from its universal recognition, one may conclude it has never been so strong" (Rolle &

Lafontaine, 2009, p. 761). In addition to instances of misuse, Bugnion (1977) drew attention to the religious connotation associated with the Red Cross when the Red Crescent appeared as an emblem used alongside it by some National Societies (but not ICRC delegations). The latter was created in the late 19th century "to avoid perceived religious connotations of the Red Cross emblem in certain countries".[4] Given the relationship between neutrality and universality (see also Di Stefano, 2023 in this issue), the associations between the Red Cross semiotic sign and situated religious and political stances undermine the emblem's objective to legally protect people providing help to the wounded and to symbolise impartiality, neutrality and independence as key principles.

In Excerpt 5, these delegates' perceived identity as "Arabs" destabilises the imagined humanitarian aid worker as a White European who does not speak local languages. In turn, their embodiment as ICRC delegates creates perceptions of non-neutrality on account of their localised Arabic variety (see Hassemer & Garrido, 2020) and their institutional affiliation with a humanitarian agency whose emblem is a cross. For many interlocutors in MENA, these Arab delegates, hailing from both European and Arabic-speaking countries including a high percentage of Lebanese, are conceived as "traitors" in a conflation of Arabs as Muslim despite the religious diversity among them (see lines 1–2).

Excerpt 5. Ongoing negotiation of neutrality. Focus group 1, 22-03-2017: [Original in English]

1 2	*ADE:	let me ask something if you allow me (1) eu:h , we are Arabs, okay? , you have, part of it Muslims, you have part of it Christian you have even part of it atheist.
3	*ATR **:**	mhm:?
4 5	*ADE:	they don't care, okay? (1) the fact that you come, with the:, cross as an emblem has a bi::g symbolic, impact, okay?
6	*ATR:	okay.
7	*ADE:	either, you're a traitor, cause how come you are a Muslim working for crusaders.
8	*SAL **:**	they- I- I mean many times they say that.
9	*ATR:	<o::h> [>]
10	*ZAA **:**	<yeah yeah> [<]
11	*SAL:	yeah, <many times> [>]
12	*ADE **:**	<of course, of course> [<]
13 14 15 16 17 18	*SAL:	and you need to- to (descend) at- to explain that this is not , this is a humanitarian , this has nothing to do with religions, guys I- it's an ongoing process you don't, I mean for us, I mean it's in the shop , it's in the supermarket it's in the evening in the bar where you go to take your beer, everywhere- here working even and (the) drinking , I mean (xxx) working for the: the red cross I mean why cross and not other thing, so I mean you feel yourself always in a (xxx) an- an, eu:hm open in di- (dissemination) session, yeah yeah <honestly> [>]
19 20 21 22 23	*ADE **:**	<moreover> [<] you- you feel yourself always in contradiction (1) with , yourself with , your work , with the society that you're working with, eu::h even sometimes , with eu::hm, with this so called neutrality, because, how , can you be neutral for example , when you try to work eu::h with people who don't accept you, first because you have a cross and then because you have a nationality, as was mentioned before by Salif, for example.

The "symbolic impact" of the red cross (lines 4–5) and the ensuing accusations of "working for crusaders" (line 7), another colonial reference, is met with emphatic endorsement from three participants, in addition to the references in individual interviews. Given this erroneous conflation of the cross as Christian/Western and the Arab delegates as Muslim, the Arab delegates have to engage in what Salif describes as an "ongoing" negotiation of their neutral intermediary role to justify the cross emblem in an "open dissemination session" (lines 18) in both formal/work-related and informal interactions (lines 15–16). In terms of linguistic work to construct neutrality, the ongoing "dissemination session" that Arabic-speaking delegates are involved in signals a burden on racialised speakers who are *not* perceived to be the imagined humanitarian figure

---

4 Emblems and logo.

by virtue of their ethnic affiliation and language competences. There seems to be a contradiction between these delegates' perceived personal identity, imagining all Arabs to be Muslim, and their institutional role in what some MENA interlocutors conceive of as a non-neutral Western and Christian humanitarian agency by virtue of its cross emblem (lines 21–23). As a result, it is hard for an Arab ICRC delegate to linguistically perform neutrality in the face of Arab interlocutors' non-acceptance of the agency's legitimacy as a neutral, independent intermediary in armed conflicts, on the one hand, and their personal embodiment of a humanitarian representative, on the other.

5 Conclusion: Raciolinguistic ideologies in humanitarian encounters

Mobile humanitarians in this study perform and embody neutrality through linguistic and semiotic choices that interlocutors interpret as more or less legitimate in humanitarian diplomatic encounters. At the ICRC, the recent localisation strategies have resulted in new generations of mobile humanitarians whose embodiments do not often conform to the White male adventurer stereotype, closely linked with "neutral" Swiss nationals until 1992. Ahmed (2007) warns us against reading the presence of delegates perceived as non-White as a sign of overcoming institutional Whiteness and increasing "diversity". Their semiotic assemblages are not always taken up as legitimate and it is the analysis of "being stopped" by questioning that furthers our understanding of societal and institutional hierarchies (Ahmed, 2007), both in humanitarian aid and MENA. From a sociolinguistic perspective, ICRC delegates do not always need linguistic mediation in MENA thanks to their Arabic competences. This questions the semiotic iconisation of English as the "neutral" lingua franca associated with White or White-passing foreigners acting as ICRC delegates in an armed conflict. In this article, I have argued that recent ICRC delegate generations acting as neutral intermediaries in wars increasingly challenge the colonial articulation of humanitarian neutrality, English as a lingua franca and White bodies in MENA.

This article contributes to the "scant" literature on race in MENA "to expand upon the ways in which the politics of race and processes of racialisation constitute practices of power in the region" (Ozcelik, 2021, p. 2156). The analysis suggests the persistence of hierarchies of racial and linguistic legitimacy among stakeholders in MENA more than within the ICRC. From a hegemonic perspective, language convergence in Arabic, albeit in the form of other regional or L2 varieties, seems to be linked with a non-neutral persona with personal ties in MENA and presumably political stances in the ongoing armed conflict. Speaking Arabic can make the delegate an "insider" of sorts in spite of their lack of *local* ties in the country. Within a continuum, linguistic (and imagined cultural) closeness can be interpreted as a politically vested identity that cannot (fully) act as a neutral, impartial and independent intermediary or observer in humanitarian diplomacy. On the contrary, English as a lingua franca is here linked with a presumed lack of local/regional language competence (see Excerpt 4) and generally iconises a neutral humanitarian persona who is international (as opposed to local) and mobile (Garrido, 2017). In the data analysed, this persona is imagined as a "foreigner", shorthand for European and White in my participants' lived experiences in the MENA region. Hence, the expatriate humanitarian may be considered as a neutral "outsider" as long as he (or she/they) passes as "White" (a social and relative category) and does not have any competences in the regional lingua franca, Arabic. In other words, they should ideally look and sound like a certain racialised speaker (i.e. an idealised White English speaker) to become legitimate bearers of humanitarian neutrality.

The different humanitarian personae analysed in this article, including a White Swiss European who has learned Arabic as an additional language (*arabisant·e*) or an Arab who is not a Muslim, index different degrees of cultural and linguistic proximity that stakeholders draw on to negotiate neutrality on the basis of the raciolinguistic ideologies outlined above. In other words, there seems to be a mismatch between the iconisation of language divergence as an emblem of "White" (Excerpt 3), "Western" (Excerpt 4) delegates and actual embodiments of the delegate persona as an "Arab" (Excerpt 5) or European "*arabisant·e*" (Excerpt 4). Perhaps neutrality as defined by IHL cannot be easily embodied by individual delegates whose intersectional identities and semiotic assemblages will often interfere with the stakeholders' understanding of neutrality in the region. According to the study participants, MENA stakeholders suspect certain semiotic assemblages as incongruent with the imagined humanitarian figure despite their institutional legitimacy and status. In their narratives, both Swiss and Arab delegates reproduce the category "Whiteness" and this shows its continued

relevance, as well as that of the binary White/non-White, in navigating humanitarian encounters. In practice, neutrality seems to be less linked with foreign nationality, a legal categorisation and institutional requirement at the ICRC, than the stakeholders' perception of the delegate in terms of language competence, racialised categorisations and perceived cultural closeness.

This article has engaged with the recent controversy over the feasibility and desirability of *neutral* humanitarianism (Slim, 2020; Humanitarian Diplomacy, 2021) through a sociolinguistic lens. As we saw above, the analysis of semiotic assemblages and emblems points towards neutrality as an axis of differentiation among mobile humanitarian staff with different embodiments. Although MENA stakeholders might suspect their neutrality in the conflict and weaken the ICRC's mandate, their (perceived) semiotic embodiments increasingly undermine the persistent Eurocentric binaries between White/non-White in the region and international/national or mobile/resident in humanitarian aid (see Roepstorff, 2020, p. 289). In sociolinguistic terms, these binaries map onto a simplified dichotomy between language neutrality (Wee, 2010) indexed by English and language divergence mediated by interpreters, and *language partiality*, indexed by language convergence into regional languages, such as Arabic or Kurdish in MENA. Qualitative data show that reality is much messier and neutral stances require ongoing linguistic negotiation in multiple, iterative interactions (Salif's "open dissemination session" in Excerpt 5). Consequently, the humanitarian principle of neutrality (reified in the Geneva conventions and institutional documents) is not absolute but rather emerges as highly contextual and relational in humanitarian diplomatic encounters.

Methodologically, the sensitive and confidential nature of humanitarian diplomatic encounters makes access to the actual interactions in humanitarian diplomacy difficult, if not impossible. For this reason, this article has exclusively drawn on institutional texts and declarative data from ICRC delegates. Given the focus on MENA, future research should investigate whether these initial findings are applicable to other regions (like Central America or the Horn of Africa) and other neutral humanitarian agencies. It would also be important to trace whether the socio-political and institutional conditions for the construction of neutrality at the ICRC have evolved since 2018. In particular, the language and recruitment policies of the ICRC might prove decisive for a renewed perception of humanitarian neutrality.

6 References

Ahmed, Sara. (2007). A phenomenology of whiteness. *Feminist Theory*, *8*(2), 149-168. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139

Alim, H. Samy. (2016). Who's afraid of the transracial subject? Raciolinguistics and the political project of transracialization. In H. Samy Alim, John R. Rickford and Arentha F. Ball (Eds.), *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race* (pp. 33-50). Oxford University Press.

Banda, Felix. (2020). Sociolinguistics and modes of social class signaling: African perspectives. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *24*(3), 3-15. https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12409

Bucholtz, Mary, & Hall, Kira. (2016). Embodied sociolinguistics. In Nikolas Coupland (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical debates* (pp. 173-197). Cambridge University Press.

Bugnion, François. (1977). The emblem of the Red Cross: A brief history (III). *International Review of the Red Cross*, *17*(195), 283-298.

Codó, Eva. (2008). *Immigration and bureaucratic control: Language practices in public administration*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Cohen, Andy. (2020, 24 June). The shame of John Calvin: Will "Black Lives Matter" force Switzerland to finally acknowledge its own history of human rights abusers? *Global Geneva*.

Cotter, Cédric. (2022, 24 March). The ICRC as a neutral intermediary: Historical and contemporary perspectives. *CROSS-Files*.

Damary, Martin. (2014, 28 April). On being neutral: Reflections on neutrality in humanitarian action. Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection. *International association of professionals in humanitarian assistance and protection.*

Delgado Luchner, Carmen, & Kherbiche, Leïla. (2018). Without fear or favor? The positionality of ICRC and UNHCR interpreters in the humanitarian field. *Target*, *30*(3), 408-429. https://doi.org/10.1075/target.17108.del

Del Percio, Alfonso. (2013). Capitalizing on national diversity: Modern ideologies of multilingual Switzerland and the regimentation of the nation's promotion under late capitalism. [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. University of St Gallen.

Duffield, Mark. (2010). Risk-Management and the fortified aid compound: Everyday life in post-interventionary society. *Journal of Intervention and State Building*, *4*(4), 453-474. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502971003700993

El Zein, Rayya. (2021). Introduction: Cultural constructions of race and racism in the Middle East and North Africa / Southwest Asia and North Africa. *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, *10*(1).

Fassin, Didier. (2012). *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present*. University of California Press.

Footitt, Hillary, Crack, Angela M., & Tesseur, Wine. (2020). *Development NGOs and Languages: Listening, Power and Inclusion*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Gal, Susan, & Woolard, Kathryn A. (2001). Constructing languages and publics: Authority and representation. In Susan Gal & Kathryn A. Woolard (2001), *Languages and publics: The making of authority* (pp. 1-12). St Jerome Publishing.

Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2017). Multilingualism and cosmopolitanism in the construction of a humanitarian elite. In Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow (Eds.), *Elite discourse: The rhetorics of status and privilege, Special Issue of Social Semiotics*, *27*(3), 359-369. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2017.1301800

Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2022a). The evolution of language ideological debates about English and French in a multilingual humanitarian organisation. *Language Policy*, *21*, 47-73. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-021-09586-0

Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2022b). Multilingualism, nationality and flexibility: Mobile communicators' careers in a humanitarian agency. *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, *41*(2), 131-152. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2020-0156

Hassemer, Jonas, & Garrido, Maria Rosa. (2020). Language as a resource with fluctuating values: Arabic speakers in humanitarian and social work. In Kamilla Kraft and Mi-Cha Flubacher (Eds.), *The promise of language: Betwixt empowerment and the reproduction of inequality, Special Issue of International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *264*, 131-161. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-2097

International Committee of the Red Cross. (2015). *The fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement*.

International Review of the Red Cross. (1975). *Délégué du CICR: Un métier astreignant et fascinant*, *681*(57), 513-522. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035336100082496

Irvine, Judith T., & Gal, Susan. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In Paul V. Kroskrity, (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, polities, and identities* (pp. 35-84). School of American Research Press.

Julier, Bernhard. (2002). L'internationalisation au CICR: Point de situation dix ans après sa mise en oeuvre. [Unpublished MA thesis]. Université de Genève.

Mena, Mike. (2022, September 29). *LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY: A Masterclass*. [Video]. Youtube

Ozcelik, Burcu. (2021). Introduction: Confronting the legacy and contemporary iterations of racial politics in the Middle East. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *44*(12), 2155-2166. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1919312

Parker, Ben (2020, June 24). Médecins Sans Frontières needs 'radical change' on racism : MSF president.

Podesva, Robert J. (2007). Phonation type as a stylistic variable: The use of falsetto in constructing a persona. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *11*(4), 478-504. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2007.00334.x

Purtschert, Patricia, & Fischer-Tiné, Harald. (2015). Introduction: The end of innocence: Debating colonialism in Switzerland. In P. Purtschert and H. Fischer-Tiné (Eds.), *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking colonialism from the margins* (pp.1-26). Palgrave Macmillan.

Redfield, Peter. (2012). The unbearable lightness of ex-pats: Double binds on humanitarian mobility. *Cultural Anthropology*, *27*(2), 358-382.

Roepstorff, Kristina. (2020). A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action. *Third World Quarterly*, *41*(2), 284-301. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160

Rolle, Baptiste, & Lafontaine, Edith. (2009). The emblem that cried wolf: ICRC study on the use of the emblems. *International Review of the Red Cross*, *876*(91), 759-778.

Rosa, Jonathan, & Flores, Nelson. (2017). Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective. *Language in Society*, *5*(46), 621-647. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000562

Slim, Hugo. (2020, 27 August). You don't have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian. *The New Humanitarian*.

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. (2017). *Independent evaluation of the Swiss contribution to the ICRC Headquarters*.

Tayeb, Leila. (2021). What is whiteness in North Africa? *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Associations*, *10*(1).

Troyon, Brigitte, & Palmieri, Daniel. (2007). The ICRC delegate: an exceptional humanitarian player? *International Review of the Red Cross*, *865*(89), 97-111. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383107000975

Turunen, Salla (Host). (2021, 12 May). The case of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (No. 4) [Audio podcast episode]. *In Humanitarian Diplomacy podcast*.

Wee, Lionel. (2010). Neutrality in language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *31*(4), 421-434. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2010.489951

Transcription conventions

The spoken data have been transcribed following a slightly adapted version of LIDES (Language Interaction Data Exchange System), which was proposed by Codó (2008, XI–XIII).

xxx	unintelligible material
:	lengthened vowel
[>]	overlap follows
[<]	overlap precedes
<>	scope symbols
^+	latching
(1)	pause in seconds

Acknowledgements