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LANGUAGE WORK AT THE UNITED NATIONS

During a stay in New York, Cay Dollerup visited the UN to hear about the language work at this institution. There were interviews with a number of officials and a panel of translators and interpreters.

The Director of the Translation and Editorial Division welcomed me in his office which commands a magnificent view of the central Manhattan skyline.

LI: Could you tell us about your staff?

- Yes, surely, the UN is an open organisation. We have a staff of slightly more than 300 translators here in New York. They take on the scheduled work of the organisation, but the

workload is fluctuating, so we have to take in free-lances on an individual basis from the international market.

LI: ... and the languages you work with?

- You may know that we operate with six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. There is one translation section for each language.

LI: Roughly then, the victor languages of the Second World War, with Arabic added in the 1970s as the outcome of the oil crises, I would believe. What is the relationship in workload between the languages?

- Please remember that English is our central language and that everybody is supposed to speak English. Among other things, this implies that at least 90% of all original documents are in English. People always translate into their mother tongue from at least two other UN languages, except the Arabic and Chinese sections which have to translate not only into, but also out of their mother tongue.

LI: Sorry to interrupt. But do you expect to have more official languages in the foreseeable future?

- Most definitely not. The UN has decided that there can be no more languages. There is a German translation unit with which we co-operate, but this is paid for entirely by Germany. That unit translates only documents which are relevant to Germany, and it should be pointed out that Germany pays for something like 10% of the total costs for running this organisation. - So, if I may return to my point: We are supposed to be non-partisan, and this means that no document is released until it is available in all six languages. It makes for very intensive work periods for some translation sections.

In general translators at the UN cannot specialise - they have to be able to shift from one domain to another: one day they translate documents concerned with trade, the next one with small arms smuggling and so on. On the other hand, it is true that given the nature of the work at the UN, strong legal or engineering backgrounds are great assets.

LI: How do you recruit translators?

- By means of international competitive selections whenever there is a need. To give you an idea, the French competition, for instance, took place in New York, in Bruxelles, in Geneva and in one African country. Entrants had to hold an M.A. degree - not necessarily in languages - and they must have graduated from a mother language university. They must, as mentioned, master two other official UN languages in addition to their mother tongue. Usually they have previous experience with translation. Anyway, at the last French exam, there were, roughly, 3,000 candidates. Of these 600 passed the formal screening. 20 passed the written exam, and there were 15 left after the interviews. Those who are not employed immediately, are put on our roster and some may get employment with other UN agencies. Initially, they work closely supervised by a senior revisor who helps them getting familiar with the specifics of translation at the UN, and, naturally, with UN terminology.

LI: You mentioned French. Do you go in for 'pure' French à la Academie Francaise?

- I wouldn't say that we are rigid. There are translators working into French from Belgium, Algeria, the Ivory Coast, and so on. But there is, perhaps, some regional bias. At least we have few French Canadians, if any.

LI: I assume that this selection procedure is also used with other languages. What about Chinese?

- The UN can do a special intensive course in Beijing as well as an examination geared for work at the UN. There is actually a long roster of Chinese translators.

LI: Is all the translation done here?

- No. There are small UN translation units in Vienna, Geneva, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Santiago de Chile, and Beirut, but there is admittedly relatively little co-operation. Translators may also go on special assignments to other places. All told there are about 500 translators.



A meeting at the Security Council

LI: Would you tell us about your use of new technology in translation work?

- Yes, indeed. But I wish to make the point that we are not going to force anything down the throats of our translators. All of them are entitled to work in the way in which they are most comfortable. Some prefer to type their translations themselves, others to dictate them to secretaries. Such preferences differ according to the translators' age, according to the languages they work into and so on.

But we have, most definitely, responded to the new technologies. Thus we have started a pilot project on the use of voice recognition in translation. But it is more to the point that all translators are connected with network computers and the internet, and commercial dictionaries are available to all on the network. The central terminology base is available on-line in all languages, and all documents since 1992 to the present can be retrieved in a full-text form in all official languages. Similarly all major resolutions in the Security Council and the General Assembly are available as far back as the time when the UN was founded in 1946.

LI: Do all languages work with the same databases?

- No, each language has its own terminologies which are made by its own agencies. They also exchange material and programmes with other international agencies.

LI: And Machine Translation?

- You mean computer-aided translation. Yes, we introduced it on an experimental basis more than two years ago and we tested out various brands. You will appreciate that we are an international organisation and that we must see to it that all documents are issued in all the languages at exactly the same time. This meant that we have opted - at this experimental stage - for 'Star Transit' because it seemed more flexible and guaranteed Arabic and Chinese characters.

There will, however, be no final decision until the end of 2001. At present we are only at the testing stage where 40 to 50 translators are using it. We need to find out how much UN material can be subjected to it, how much pre-coding and post-editing is needed, how the work-flow is affected. And, notably, how much reorganisation has to be done. But some recent major UN resolutions will indeed be processed for computer-aided translation.

At all events we will have to be selective, for there is simply too much documentation, even in an electronic form, for all of it to be translated. We are talking about translation into up to five languages.

LI: How much is a translator supposed to work?

- We operate with standard pages of 330 words and with budgetary units demanding 5 pages, including revision, 5½ pages without revision, and 12 pages of revision per day.

LI: And what is the role of revision?

- Ideally, 55-60% is revised, much of it self-revision. As I hinted, it is particularly important in training and, naturally, for finding errors.

LI: You mentioned out-housing translation.

- Yes. We have short-term staff who are employed on contracts. These freelancers work at home and are paid by the word. They are usually former staff or highly qualified translators, so their work not revised, but it is, of course, frequently controlled.

The English Translation Service

LI: English seems to play a somewhat different role than the other languages?

- Yes. In the beginning, English and French were the working languages. Chinese, Russian, and Spanish were initially not used much, but now they are used in all major branches of the UN. This also goes for Arabic which, until it was accepted as an official language, had much the same status as the German unit.

I can give you a break-down on the original language of the documents the English translation service staff of 23 full-timers translated in 1999: in declining order it was French 40%, Spanish 27.5%, Arabic 19.5%, Russian 12.3%, and Chinese 0.7%; to this we must add that 5.5% of the output was translated from non-official languages. The most important of these are German, Portuguese and Italian.

Nowadays English is the lingua franca in this organisation. This means that for originals in the other Indo-European languages, Chinese is always and Arabic often based on translations into English. This role as a 'relay' language increases the work burden on the English section, because in in-house work, all documents first have to be available in English, long before they are officially issued. Furthermore there must always be one translator from the English - or French - service who must be on call for the Arabic and Chinese services.

LI: Nevertheless, your workload must be lighter?

- Not for the individual translator. We do translation of parliamentary documentation drafted in the other official languages, and with miscellaneous documentation meant for internal use only, spanning from letters from private individuals to magazine articles. Also, much of our work is taken up with summary records of meetings - records being longer and more detailed than minutes, that is c. 30% of the meeting. These are then translated into the other official languages. Or they have to be translated into English from the other three précis-writing services, namely French, Russian and Spanish. Original summary records alone account for about twenty per cent of the total workload.

LI: You mentioned non-official languages. What are they?

- You mean in terms of documents? We translate, for instance, international agreements. Any important international agreement made between nations, such as say between Malaysia and Thailand, will have to be translated into French and English.. The UN publishes a Treaty Series, of all international treaties in the two original languages and English and French. This work puts a burden on the UN Secretariat because we have to control the quality of the translations. This is also one of the reasons why non-official languages figure in our statistics. But there are, to be sure, problems with finding translators for exotic languages and ensuring that the quality is all right.

LI: What are the 'editorial services'?

- Translators and secretaries deliver the typed manuscripts, but the text processing unit is responsible for setting up documents in the same way in all languages, in numbering sections and the like. Even sentences are largely the same in all the official languages. This is important for instance for references to documents in negotiations and the like.

LI: How would you describe the normal translation procedure with the electronic tools?

- Computers were made available about seven years ago, and in the typical translation procedure the translator will search for a document by category and get the full-text on screen if necessary. This is a great advantage – mostly so for those who work on the night-shift. As you will notice computer-aided translation relies heavily on translation memory. Voice recognition seems to be good, and there is little post-editing. So provided the tests are successful, they will be made available to all who want them.

In general I am in no doubt that the new technologies will lead to increased quality rather than quantity. The only drawback is that users are normally not in a position to understand quality at all. They take grammatical errors as poor translation. When they meet with a fluent text, there is no comment on the translation.

LI: You mentioned categories of documents?

- Yes, documents concerned with different fields. Previously, UN bodies were specialised, so that, for instance, the office in Geneva would do industrial subjects and so on. There is more co-ordination now. Thus I am going to send two members of staff to the offices in Vienna and Geneva for two weeks in off-peak periods. We shall see what comes of that.

LI: Would there be any problem you can foresee in the next few years?

- Yes, the language services are subject to cuts and it is hard to keep up with the workload. This means that more work is contracted out. This typically goes for publications which are long, whereas parliamentary documentation must be made in-house. It is also necessary for staff to monitor outside translation. Although many of these outside translators are retired and reliable staff they have a ceiling which is soon used up.

On the way out, I peep briefly into a typical translators' office. There are two or three translators in the same room. There are computers, phones and dictaphones. The furniture is new – only two years old. The view over the Hudson River is fine, but somewhat bleak in the sunshine of March.

The Spanish Section

LI: How large is the staff?

- There are a little less than fifty staff and in addition we can use up to 60-65 free-lances. We do have a shortage of translators, because it is difficult to retain people here in New York. Spaniards, for instance, tend to spend a few years here and then leave for Europe where they are then hired by our offices in Geneva or the European Union institutions. The

majority of our staff at present are South Americans. One outcome is that we have many young and many staff who will soon retire. We are short in the middle group.

LI: How about recruitment?

- We had a recruitment call in 1999. There were 800 entrants, after the tests involving specialised texts and summaries there were 50 left. After the general test 46, and after the interviews 21. And then they have to work for two years in a probationary period before they are employed. We have vacancies. The French also have a problem with recruitment, but it is not nearly as bad as ours.

LI: What kind of work do you do?

- The section is concerned mostly with translation. Précis-writing takes up about 10% of the time. Most translations are from English, I believe that it is 90%. Arabic and Chinese are taken in relay from English. In terms of procedures, things have changed. 25 years ago, there would always be translation and then revision, so that ten revisors checked the work of 20 translators, but twenty years ago we introduced self-revision, and now more than 50% of our translations are self-revised.

LI: How about the language norms you follow?

- I would say that we follow developments in Spain closer than in Latin America.

LI: What problems do you see in the immediate future?

- It is a problem with the vacancies. We have cuts and they are done by way of retirement. When you reduce staff you use more temporary staff as the workload is increasing. It is a problem that free-lances earn more than permanent staff, so those who are cut for that kind of work, naturally leave the organisation.

LI: What are, in your view, likely changes in the next few years?

- It is a pained question. There is no doubt that there will be more computer-aided translation and more technological innovations. But it is hard to force this on to staff. There is no doubt that repetitive material can be copied from previous translations and should be so, for translators who do repetitive translations will not advance professionally. On the other hand, if the member states demand it and make the appropriate investments, it may be inevitable.

LI: What about voice recognition?

- It seems to work well in Spanish. But personally, I feel that my secretary and I work with more accuracy when I dictate. There is, after all, a question of post-editing in voice recognition.

Then the interviewee gave me a test of the impressive speed with which she dictated.



The General Assembly in session

Interpreting

The interpreting services has a permanent staff is of c. 120 people, supplemented with free-lances. They only serve UN bodies at headquarters and elsewhere as required

LI: I assume then that interpreters have to master at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue?

- That's correct. With the exception of the Arabic and Chinese booths, where they will also have to do the 'retour', that is to interpret out of their language.

LI: This means that you often have to use relay?

- With Arabic and Chinese speeches it is inevitable. But with the other languages rarely and then only by accident.

LI: Do you have problems with recruitment?

- By and large the answer is 'No', but some language combinations are more problematic than others. For Chinese and Russian we have people on roster.

LI: How do interpreters work?

- They are to work for 7 meetings a week, each of them set at 3 hours and including preparation for the meetings. We try to have the same teams of interpreters for sessions on the same topic – this is done in order to ensure continuity, to make the best of the research that interpreters have to do, for instance, in terms of terminology, and in order to ensure that all booths make progress at the same pace. But of course, it follows that if there are 10

meetings on the same topic in a week, it cannot be covered by the same interpreters all through, and in such cases, interpreters are rotated.

LI: Do you make use of the new technology?

- We do. There is, first and foremost the research which, at present, has to take place before meetings to ensure that the terminology is right. This is done by glossaries and the internet. We have, on an experimental basis, issued a few laptops for each booth to facilitate terminology, editorial work and verbatim reporting.

We have also tested out video-conferencing between Vienna and Geneva. There were problems with sound, but these may be solved.

LI: People work here in New York only?

- No, they may also be on 3 or 4 missions a year, provided they are willing to.

LI: What do you do with people, say politicians, who do not speak any of the official languages?

- If they are to address an audience, they are to bring in an interpreter of their own, or an official translation, which is then displayed and where a 'pointer' whom they also have to supply, points out exactly where in the manuscript the speaker is, so that the interpreters can follow it closely. In case people are listening to the proceedings, we may, as a matter of courtesy, set up a special booth – quite often in the hallways – for either staff or freelancers brought in, to interpret into their language. It has happened with Korean, Romanian and Czech. It occurs most often at the General Assembly.

LI: What about delegates with manuscripts?

- Most do not appreciate that the interpreters would like to have the manuscripts. But we do get some good ones, especially the Canadian ones.

LI: What do you see as the major problems for your service right now?

- It is a perennial problem for interpreters to keep up with world events and general information, not only in their mother tongue but in their B and C languages: Maintaining quality, above all. It is a problem for us that we work in a political organisation where events are not always predictable, and there may be both cancellations as well as unexpected meetings.

LI: What changes would you expect in the foreseeable future?

- There will be an increase of the range of topics taken up. This will lead to a higher number of meetings requesting interpreting services.

The interpreter and translator panel

LI also met a panel of representatives from all language services. The panelists supplied some additional information.

The **translators** informed us that English was the dominant language, and that the last decade had seen an increase in Spanish originals, and reduction in French, Russian, and Arabic. In translation, there were several problems, such as documents written by non-native speakers and, in addition, a specific problem in some documents with maintaining what was termed "diplomatic ambiguity" which is deliberate vagueness, for instance in order to leave points open to later negotiation.

Conference translation has changed with fax and e-mail, which means that translations (most often in French-English) can be made partly in situ, partly in New York. There are differences between document types where many diplomatic ones serve in English and French versions only, whereas documents pertaining to trade will have to be translated into all six languages. In addition to terminology tools there are also support nets within the organisation, consisting of experts in the various fields.

The **interpreters** reported that English is dominant, Spanish the second language spoken, Arabic the third, French the fourth and Chinese and Russian the fifth and sixth languages.

They also sometimes have to tackle speeches delivered with heavy accents and very rapidly, notably so during the General Assembly where many speakers try to squeeze too much into their speeches. There might occasionally be problems with manuscript translations that are so poor that interpreters are forced to make editorial changes in the rendition. Sometimes speakers deviate from manuscripts given to interpreters. Some of these have a warning, such as, "Unofficial translation. Please check against delivery".

In sum

Overall the atmosphere was friendly and polite. At an international organisation such as the UN, there are inevitably - even at the linguistic level - different ways of expressing views, which must be accommodated to further international co-operation. It will be clear from the above that the UN services are being cut - the language staff makes out c. 1,000 people of the total of c. 5,000. Although the technological tools are being increasingly used, the cuts hurt. On the other hand, several language professionals openly expressed satisfaction with working at the UN.



Flag of the United Nations