

Deconstructing the Tower of Babel: Air Force Foreign Language Posture for Global Engagement

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Therefore is the name of it called Ba-bel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth . . .

—*Genesis 11:9*

Once upon a time, so runs the Biblical tale, everybody spoke the same language. Then the boys in Babel, just south of a town now called Baghdad, concocted a scheme to build a huge tower to the heavens. After some early success, their language was confounded, and the project failed...so much for one language throughout the world.

Linguistic scholars calculate that there are approximately 4000 different languages spoken throughout the world, with many more dialects and regional accents beyond that number. With the continued emergence of regional and ethnic identification, - one has only to think of the remnants of Yugoslavia - nations with only one official language a decade ago now form most separate states with a polyglot of languages. This is the world in which the Air Force must operate and succeed.

The United States Air Force is an Air and Space Expeditionary Force (EAF), capable of global power projection whenever and wherever it is needed. Yet the Air Force, with no central language program or overarching language plan, remains essentially unable to communicate in the native tongues of many countries where it must deploy and operate. Further, it has a limited ability to understand the customs, or even the threats and tactics of its adversaries whenever the native language strays very far from the King's English.

Calls for greater emphasis on language skills in the Air Force and subsequent recommendations to achieve them are nearly as old as the service itself and usually come on the heels of language shortfalls experienced during a contingency.

Solutions to recurring language gaps have been proposed in a wide variety of forums over the years, but no substantive change from "business as usual" has occurred. Shortfalls in languages are generally met through contractors, reservists, or just-in-time language training programs. "Linguist" remains an enlisted AFSC, while officers are expected to maintain their primary AFSC while staying current in a foreign language. Monetary incentives are nominal, tightly regulated, and unevenly applied across the Total Force. Calls for a single, comprehensive Air Force language program have gone unheeded and, indeed, there are still several Air Force language programs today.

A new impetus for change has recently emerged via the *Chief's Sight Picture* and the DOD Language Transformation Initiative. These top-down imperatives may succeed where the bottom-up Air Force programs have foundered. Moreover, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom are constant reminders that sometimes America does not choose its place to fight and that the Global War on Terrorism requires us to think and act globally. If we are to succeed, we must have the ability to communicate with our allies and understanding our enemies—these are global tasks that must be mastered for every part of the world. The key to any measurable success in these endeavors is a single, coordinated, well thought-out plan, based on realistic language requirements and managed by a single champion.

The Language Legacy of Pearl Harbor

America's shortage of linguists—particularly linguists in support of national security—has been an issue of debate since World War II. Many pundits compare the failure to translate key documents prior to 11 September 2001 to a similar situation on the eve of 7 December 1941.¹ Whether this is accurate or even fair is subject to debate far beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that language skills, or lack thereof, have played a part in both tragedies. Language skills have had an impact on other US military operations in the intervening years as well.

But not much has changed.

In the ensuing decades, short-fuse contingencies requiring the use of “exotic” or “low flow” languages *e.g.* Haitian Creole, Pashto, and Somali, have confounded the personnel process. “Exotic” and “low flow” are two of several sobriquets used to describe foreign languages not commonly used or taught in the United States. Two other terms, *wild card* and the more politically correct *less-commonly-taught languages* (LCTL) can also be found in a review of the literature. The Air Force language community had deemed many of these exotics too difficult to maintain in sufficient numbers as a career field and opted for a more traditional fare—Russian, German and French. As a result, few of these exotics were either identified or available to meet contingencies. Deploying organizations, other than intelligence, had little access to translators and/or culturally savvy personnel with language skills.² The Air Force had to scramble to meet its language needs.

There have been notable language support shortfalls. A Desert Storm after action report specifically stated that “The USAF had an inadequate number of Arabic speakers throughout the . . . [Area of Operations].”³ During the 1993 US peacekeeping mission to Mogadishu, the press gleefully reported that only one US serviceman spoke Somali—a US Marine who was, in fact, the Somali warlord's son. The 1994 Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti revealed a serious lack of Haitian Creole speakers in all of the services. The arrival of those few who were located occurred just as US forces were withdrawing.⁴ In another example, the Defense Language Institute ceased teaching Serbo-Croatian just as a crisis was breaking out in the Balkans.⁵

The Downing Commission investigated the June 1996 Khobar Towers attack, cited the lack of translators as a contributing factor, and called for an increased number of interpreters to be made available to the security forces. The translator limitation were clearly noted, “At Khobar Towers, the 4404th Wing (Provisional) had only one interpreter, on duty or on-call 24-hours a day. When the Security Police needed to talk to their Saudi civilian police counterparts, they first had to contact the interpreter, brief him on the situation, and request that he contact the Saudi police.”⁶ The report also noted that during regular force protection meetings, Saudi officials provided letters to US personnel that discussed ongoing security issues. However, the Downing Commission found that these letters were never translated, noting that, “This made it difficult, and in some instances impossible, to ascertain what happened and what concerns were raised at these meetings.”⁷

Upon Further Review...

It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that these shortfalls in language support have been ignored. Numerous articles, reports, and audits have been published during the past two decades that reported these same problems exist within the Air Force and have recommended a wide range of solutions.⁸

Of particular note was the Officer Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team (PAT) in 1995. Chartered jointly in December 1994 by the commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC) and the director of personnel at Headquarters United States Air Force (HQ USAF/DP), the PAT used eight separate formal evaluations of the Air Force foreign language program and numerous field reports, dating from 1988 to 1994, as the basis for its review. These evaluations included Department of Defense (DOD) Inspector General (IG) reports, Government Accounting Office (GAO) audits, USAF functional management inspections, and field inputs from Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) and Twelfth Air Force.⁹

Observations from the field were routinely critical of the shortage of language-trained Air Force personnel at Major Air Commands and during operations such as Urgent Fury in Panama and Desert Storm. GAO bluntly stated that the “USAF lacks a command language program.” Similarly, the USAF IG observed, “USAF personnel with regional knowledge and or foreign language proficiency were not being identified or effectively utilized.”¹⁰

Drawing on all of these prior evaluations and its own assessments of the language situation in the Air Force, the PAT produced a number of far-reaching recommendations:

- Establish a single office for language proponentcy in the office of the deputy under secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs (SAF/IA)
- Increase foreign language proficiency pay (FLPP)

- Capture “self reported” language data and enter it into the personnel data system
- Establish a USAF goal that at least 10% of its officers would develop and maintain minimum language skills
- Include language proficiency data on officer career briefs used by promotion boards
- Concentrate on precommissioning programs to find (or train) officers with language skills¹¹

Why were these problems - so thoroughly articulated and subject to so many recommendations - not yet resolved or well on the road to resolution?

Col Gunther A. Mueller, chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages at the United States Air Force Academy, observes, “With English as the primary language of diplomacy, economics, and military operations, it was easy to get by. The USAF reflected national trends of declined interest in foreign languages.”¹² In other words, wherever *we* go, *they* should all learn English.

Another compelling reason for the lack of change lies in the intelligence-centric perception of language in the Air Force. Because so many of the language training dollars go to support intelligence requirements, language appears to be solely an intelligence issue and disappears from the radar of other career fields. Current numbers seem to bear this out. The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DFIFLC) at the Presidio in Monterey, California, is the DOD’s primary source of foreign language education. It is training 870 Air Force personnel (830 Airmen, 40 officers) in academic year 2003–2004. Over 90 per cent of those Air Force assets are slated for intelligence billets.¹³

One final explanation: the Air Force has successfully met each immediate language challenge in the past two decades, but just barely. Implementation of “just in time” language training prior to deployments; the hiring of scores of contract linguists; and most recently, the two-year mobilization of language skilled reservists have all helped meet active force shortfalls with varying degrees of success.

In short, the Air Force has muddled through each of its successive language crises. This begs for a more accurate corollary to the old axiom, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” That corollary would be, “If it ain’t *hard broke*, why worry about a permanent fix?”

If the Air Force can sustain an acceptable level of language support without making hard choices for more money and more active duty language billets, then why not continue as it has? If it can call on reservists and guardsmen to bring their skills on board to meet contingency requirements and also pay for contract support for the rest of the Air Force language needs, why would a consolidated language program be necessary?

The answer is that we cannot afford the luxury of a fragmented, late-to-the dance language program in today's environment of coalition warfare and Expeditionary Air Forces. Not only do we have to understand our enemies and how they think and act, we also must understand, cooperate, and coordinate with our allies as well.

Coalition warfare, as well as nation building, requires a maximum of communication in order to be effective. To assume that each coalition partner will defer to English as the lingua franca for warfighting is to doom an international partnership before it begins. To be effective in the international arena requires that we employ our collective cultural heritage—a nation of immigrants with its native and multicultural speakers—and its brightest people to discourse, think, and act globally.

In August 2002, the Air Force Chief of Staff (CSAF) issued a *Chief's Sight Picture*, in which he emphasized the global nature of America's security and stated, "... our expeditionary force requires airmen with international insight, foreign language capability, and cultural understanding."¹⁴

Despite the CSAF's emphasis, the new initiatives for Air Force language proficiency and foreign area studies are still on the horizon. One reason has been the recent creation of a Defense Language Transformation Initiative under the assistant secretary of defense for personnel and readiness (ASD/P&R). Its direction and roadmap are evolving and will doubtless drive programs and initiatives for all of the uniformed services in the years ahead.

DOD's Letitia Long, in recent testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, pointed out shortfalls in both the numbers and skill levels of the language workforce and outlined a broad range of DOD plans to overcome these problems. She observed that the military currently has some capability in about 70 languages, but that our present worldwide operations brings our forces into contact with about 140 languages.¹⁵ To mitigate these shortfalls, she outlined over a dozen initiatives, including those in the areas of recruiting, outsourcing, distance learning, reserve and contractor surge capabilities, and initiatives to promote advanced language skills.¹⁶

Even Managing Language Requires a Special Language

To comprehend today's Air Force language landscape requires an understanding of the building blocks of language management. Within the personnel framework, there are "language inherent" AFSC positions, filled by personnel whose career specialty is directly tied to a specific language skill (*i.e.*, cryptolinguist). "Language designated positions" (LDP) are other positions within a general Air Force specialty that requires a specific language skill (*e.g.*, a Spanish-speaking pilot). A key difference between the two is that most enlisted positions are language inherent—language as a career—while all officer positions are LDPs, language as an additional/special duty.¹⁷

Today there are about 3700 language-inherent billets and about 900 LDPs in the USAF.¹⁸ Further, most language inherent positions reside in the intelligence career field while LDPs are across the spectrum of officer AFSCs. Thus there are no officers whose primary AFSC is that of a linguist.

Proficiency in a foreign language is tested using the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT), which measures three categories: reading, listening, and speaking. The results of the DLPT are expressed in numbers from “0” (lowest) to “5” (highest), plus gradations indicated by plus signs (see table 1). Putting these numbers into a frame of reference, the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) graduates most of its students, over 78 percent, with a tested proficiency level of “2/2/1.”¹⁹ Put another way, an individual with “1/1/1” skills in Arabic is said to possess “survival skills,” while one with “4/4/4” could debate US Middle East policy on Al Jazeera television. In actual usage, DLPT scores are usually expressed only for listening and reading, as in “He’s a ‘2/2’ in Persian Farsi.” Speaking is rarely emphasized and is often the most difficult to test because of the need for interaction with a trained speaker. Interestingly, although the DLPT scale runs from “1 to 5,” military members are only rated through “3.”

Table 1. Foreign Language Capabilities at Proficiency Levels

Proficiency level ^a	Language capabilities ^a		
	Listening	Reading	Speaking
0+ ^b	Understands certain memorized utterances in areas of immediate needs with extra-linguistic cues.	Reads alphabet or high-frequency characters; recognizes some numbers and isolated words.	Produces telegraphic utterances for immediate survival needs.
1	Understands basic survival utterances, simple questions and answers on familiar topics, and main ideas.	Reads simple, predictable material in print or type; identifies general topics.	Maintains very simple conversations on familiar topics; cannot produce continuous discourse unless rehearsed.
2	Understands routine conversations and discourse about familiar topics; gleanes all the facts.	Reads simple, authentic, straightforward material on familiar topics; uses contextual cues.	Handles routine, high-frequency, limited interactions and conversations about current events, family, and common topics.
3	Understands essentials of all speech; grasps opinion and inferences.	Reads a variety of prose on unfamiliar subjects that may include opinions, hypothesis, and analysis.	Participates effectively in most formal and informal conversations about practical, social, and professional topics within a shared context.
4	Understands all forms and styles of speech, even some nonstandard dialects; develops and analyzes argumentation.	Reads fluently and accurately all styles and forms; grasps full ramifications of texts within wider context.	Uses the language fluently and accurately for all purposes.
5	Understands extremely difficult and abstract speech and how natives think as they create discourse.	Reads very difficult and abstract prose.	Commands language with complete flexibility and initiation; pronunciation consistent with that of an educated native speaker.

Source: Federal Interagency Language Roundtable.

^aLanguage proficiency levels and capabilities are based on the Interagency Language Roundtable standards. The table does not include a description of the capabilities for writing.

^bThe 0+ exceeds the basic 0 proficiency level. Zero-level proficiency indicates no capabilities in a foreign language.

The Air Force claims to have over 6000 personnel—some five percent of the Total Force—with some skills in 54 languages, based on a recent DLPT data call.²⁰ However, this total includes all members who have taken the DLPT since 2000 and represents only tested language skills, not the sum total of the Air Force’s potential capability. Moreover, those who tested “2” or higher on the DLPT comprise only about three quarters of the aggregate number.

A major problem is the state of the Air Force's linguist database (as opposed to a DLPT database) itself. The database of linguists is not a comprehensive accounting of all Air Force language skills, nor is it mandatory for service members to provide data to populate it.²³ This holds true across the Total Force, where Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve language databases are maintained separately.²⁴

In an attempt to gain a clearer picture of the Air Force's capability, a Foreign Language Skills Assessment (FLSA) was conducted service-wide in 1996, but data for the survey did not require validation via the DLPT. Therefore, someone could claim fluency in a language, say French, without proving it. In current practice, all Air Force members are "encouraged" to "self-assess" via the Virtual MPF and to take the DLPT to validate their language skills on their own.²⁵ However, many have chosen not to do so, because the FLSA is not mandatory.²⁶ A body of anecdotal evidence suggests that some personnel decline to identify their own capabilities in an effort to avoid assignments to contingency areas. In the case of some native speakers, a few decline to take the DLPT to avoid being returned to the homeland from which they had originally fled. Others report that their commanders did not allow them to take the DLPT—a test lasting approximately a four-hours—because the commanders were reluctant to have their people identified with language skills and becoming vulnerable for deployment away from their primary duties.²⁷ Still others indicated that their base education offices were not staffed or equipped to administer the DLPT for certain languages and were unable to administer parts of others, particularly the speaking examination.

Additionally, the system sometimes failed to recognize and use those Airmen who did self-identify and were willing to volunteer for language related duties. When the US sent troops back into Haiti in February 2004, a Lt Colonel on the Air Staff—a native of the island of Dominica and fluent in Haitian Creole—volunteered to deploy to help out. Unfortunately, this former special operator's fluency level in Haitian Creole was not visible to contingency planners because only his French scores, not his Haitian Creole, were entered in the DLPT database. His volunteer request also made no impression on Air Force planners. Only when the commander of SOUTHCOM asked his Air Force Reserve Mobilization Assistant if he knew anyone who spoke Haitian Creole, was this officer—a personal friend of the general—contacted about deploying.²⁸

Foreign Language Proficiency Pay (FLPP) compensates service members for maintaining DLPT scores of "2/2" and above (see table 2). The higher monthly FLPP I pay is awarded to individuals in language AFSCs or in LDPs. The lower FLPP II pay is awarded to individuals who maintain 2/2 DLPT scores but are not in LDPs or linguist AFSCs.²¹ By regulation, Guard and Reserve linguists receive only partial pay (1/30 of active duty FLPP) times the number of days per month they are on duty, yet they must maintain the same DLPT standards as their active duty counterparts.²² Since no DLPT scores above 3 are used in this compensation formula, there is no recognition of higher ability nor compensation for it.

Proficiency Levels	FLPP I	FLPP II
Listening 2 Reading 2	\$100.00	\$50.00
Listening 2 Reading 2+ or Listening 2+ Reading 2	125.00	62.50
Listening 2+/Reading 2+ or Listening 2 Reading 3 or Listening 3 Reading 2	150.00	75.00
Listening 2+ Reading 3 or Listening 3 Reading 2+	175.00	87.50
Listening 3 Reading 3	200.00	100.00
* Additional \$100 (FLPP I) or \$50 (FLPP II) for second language at Listening 2 or better		

Table 2. Pay Amounts for Foreign Language Capabilities at Various Proficiency Levels

Air Force Language Programs: More Than Just One

The associate director for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (USAF/XOIFM) is designated as the service program manager (SPM) for the Air Force Foreign Language Program and for FLPP.²⁹ In actuality, there are several other consumers of language outside of the Air Force intelligence community who are also language stakeholders—each operating with various degrees of autonomy and achieving different levels of success.³⁰

The Foreign Area Officer (FAO) program, under the Secretary of the Air Force's Office of International Affairs (SAF/IA); and the Air Force Medical Service's (AFMS) International Health Specialist (IHS) program, under the USAF Surgeon General (AF/SG); are two of the major language-intensive programs that lie outside of the intelligence community. Both enjoy small program offices, their own language databases, and single points of contact for their members.

The FAO program is comprised of a cadre of officers who have both foreign language competency and regional expertise. It has a secondary United States Air Force specialty code (AFSC) of "16F," which is similar but distinctly separate from the "16P" AFSC designating political-military officers. SAF/IA recruits line officers for FAO positions and requires language proficiency for entry and continuation in the program.

The hallmark of the FAO program is additional language training, accomplished through its Language and Area Studies Immersion (LASI) program. LASI is a one-month intensive in-country language and cultural immersion. Offered for 40 different languages in 39 separate locations, 355 officers participated in LASI in fiscal year (FY) 2002 and a total of over 1139 have been trained since FY 1997. By most language education standards in the military and throughout academia, language immersion is considered essential to teaching cultural skills.³¹ It also is universally considered to be the best method of enhancing newly acquired language capabilities. The LASI program has proven to increase DLPT test scores for 99 per cent of the officers trained.³² While primarily a tool for the FAO program, LASI is available for all Air Force personnel upon request and coordination through the FAO office in SAF/IA.

The FAO office recruits officers from all operational career fields and is not, as commonly perceived, an intelligence program. It is, however, one of only a few programs in the Air Force where officers need language skills for entry and can actually use them in day-to-day events. Unlike career language AFSCs, a FAO's language skills are usually developed through self-study, college courses, or from one's native background. FAOs are not recruited into the program until they are captains, requiring self-motivation and discipline to meet and maintain their language skills on their own.

FAO tours are usually short TDYs for specific purposes, such as advising senior leaders at international military-to-military meetings, or assignments as FAOs in a LDP position to embassy staffs, as Air Attaches, or to foreign military sales program offices. Since the FAO program is a career broadening assignment, individuals usually return to their primary AFSC afterward, but may perform other FAO tours later on in their careers.

The Air Force Medical Service's IHS program, with 233 members representing 34 languages as of April 2004, reflects those military members in any medical AFSC who hold an IHS special experience identifier (SEI).³³ The program combines medical and linguistic skills, as well as cultural expertise in the area of a second language, and is organized into teams at EUCOM, PACOM, SOUTHCOM, and CENTCOM; along with smaller teams at the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda, Maryland, the USAF School of Aerospace Medicine at Brooks City-Base in San Antonio, Texas, and HQ Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field, Florida. IHS teams are aligned with major theaters of operation and are designed to optimize military-military and military-civilian partnerships within the medical community. Like the FAO office, the IHS staff tracks and qualifies its own linguist/medical community and uses the good offices of the FAO program to place team members into the LASI program. Like the FAO program, each team member must maintain proficiency in his or her primary AFSC. Unlike the FAO program, the IHS program enjoys a cadre of approximately 62 fulltime personnel in addition to a small support staff. Additional fulltime IHS positions are anticipated at Joint Forces Command, the Air National Guard, and HQ Air Force Reserve Command.

Language Training – Just in Time?

The DLIFLC, the military's premier language school, is educating 870 Air Force students in academic year 2003–2004, along with 2300 soldiers, sailors, and marines.³⁴ Targeted proficiency for each DLIFLC graduate is "2/2/1."³⁵ Nevertheless, the typical graduate of DLIFLC needs much more training and experience to be effective. In the case of cryptolinguists, another 73 training days are required at the Intelligence School at Goodfellow AFB just to master the technical terms of the business.³⁷ Similarly, interrogators must attend the Army's interrogation course at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona before they report for duty.

While the typical DLIFLC Arab language graduate is still years away from full proficiency – the course of instruction at DLIFLC is 18 months long - the need for Arabic skills continues unabated.³⁸ The majority of Guard and Reserve linguists mobilized after

9/11 were skilled in Arabic (as well as Dari, Pashto, and Persian Farsi) and represent most of the Reserve capability in these languages. The retention of this skill set is critical to ongoing and future Air Force operations. Unfortunately, there appears to be a significant skills gap developing between the short-term (two-year mobilization) of reserve personnel and DLIFLC's recent graduates.

Linguists from the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve have been effective force multipliers in the Global War on Terror but, once they are demobilized, potential retention issues may mirror those of the active Air Force. As these Air Reserve Component linguists return to civilian life, it will be interesting—and critical—to track their retention rates. Additionally, the Guard and Reserve must continue to attract new linguist personnel at the same time to offset attrition and to meet any linguist mission expansion.

A major irritant to retention is the disparity of FLPP between the active and reserve components.³⁹ Instead of an incentive for Guard and Reserve members to remain language proficient by receiving the same FLPP accorded the active force, partial FLPP is often seen by reservists as a disincentive. Put in dollar terms, an active duty member in an LDP position or career language AFSC receives \$100 per month FLPP pay (FLPP I) for maintaining a tested level of “2/2” in one language. Applying the standard 1/30 rule ($\$100.00/30 \times 4$ drill periods per month), a reservist or guardsman maintaining the same proficiency in a similar billet receives only \$13.33 per—not enough to buy a tank of gas to drive to weekend training 100 miles from home.

The May 2002 *Ninth Quadrennial Review (QDR) of Military Compensation (QRMC)* acknowledged this pay disparity and recommended that the service secretaries be authorized to pay “RC members not serving on active duty the same amount of monthly pay as AC members for maintaining proficiency in designated critical languages.” The *QDR* made a clear distinction between FLPP compensation and other applications of the 1/30 rule for other incentive pay categories and it argued for a change only to FLPP. They observed that supply and demand ought to govern retention pay and that the 1/30 rule for linguists in critical languages may not ensure proper language force levels.⁴⁰

Over the next Five Year Defense Plan, the Air National Guard plans to add approximately 500 more linguist billets to augment the active force. In order to recruit effectively, mobilization and compensation issues will have to be addressed by both the Guard and the active Air Force.

Man Versus Machine: Contractors and Machine Translations

Soon after September 11th, it became obvious that active force assets and reservist mobilizations could not produce the desired numbers and quality of language specialists required for the Global War On Terror (GWOT). Contract linguists, many of them native speakers, were quickly hired for stateside as well as deployed work. Today they remain critical to the prosecution of the war effort. In fact, more are needed: only 4000 of the approximately 6000 required contract linguist positions are currently filled.⁴¹

However, use of contract linguists has come under closer scrutiny after highly publicized problems at Guantanamo Bay and a 2002 Department of Justice investigation into billing irregularities within the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) contract linguist programs.⁴²

Contract linguist expenditures for Operations OIF and OEF alone are estimated at about \$2 billion, with another \$1 billion earmarked for Army needs in Southwest Asia in the next year.⁴⁴ This total does not include a bill for another \$97 million for operations in the Balkans over the next 42 months.⁴⁵ In contrast, the total linguist contractor bill for operations from 1990 to 1996 (including Desert Storm/Desert Shield) was only about \$43.2 million.⁴⁶ While the case can be made that the increased level of effort in Afghanistan and Iraq and a longer duration has caused a huge jump in costs for contractors, it is obvious that the forces of supply and demand apply to contract linguists just as they do in the marketplace.

Also, much has been written about machine translations. Headlines such as "IM, Machine Translation on the Front Lines of Iraq" and articles on devices such as "The Phraselator" conjure up images from *Star Trek*, with high tech solutions to the translation backlog.⁴⁷ However, there are miles to go before such devices are part of everyday military use. According to Congressional testimony by DOD's Ms. Letitia Long, "What we now know is that these technologies, in the current state-of-art, cannot replace skilled human translators, interpreters, and interrogators in providing actionable information."⁴⁸ She added that automated translations equate to a "1+" DLPT score. Current machine translation systems are being used for document triage, filtering written materials for further study by human translators. Current cross-language communicators only appear to be useful in carefully scripted scenarios.⁴⁹

SAF: Chairman of The Board

There is a new urgency to solve the language dilemma in the Air Force and, indeed, all of DOD. The Defense Department's "Defense Language Transformation Initiative" was recently briefed to Congress and will drive numerous DOD programs and new initiatives that will impact the Air Force and its sister services.⁵⁰ Additionally, Congress is taking up foreign language legislation, with the introduction of a bill in the House entitled "The National Security Language Act."⁵¹ With both DOD and the Congress turning their attention to this issue, the Air Force will undoubtedly receive much new guidance and oversight—perhaps even additional funding specifically targeted for this problem.

There are many ways to solve the language problem in the Air Force; many solutions, as noted above, have been suggested before. The common thread that runs through the success and failure of those suggestion's has been their ability, or the lack there of, to change institutional culture. The Air Force cannot project power globally and communicate as if we were at home. Likewise, we cannot acquire language skills on the plane to who-knows-where. Here is a non-exhaustive list of suggestions for change.

The Secretary of the Air Force must anoint a language champion within his or her senior staff who would be the language program manager throughout the service. The creation of this position has already been recommended in other forums and the person occupying that office would become the “chairman of the board for language,” allowing the various disciplines to maintain some control over their own unique needs. This language champion would institutionalize the Air Force language program, provide downward directed policy and funding to various Air Staff offices with language requirements (Intelligence, Security Forces, IHS, Special Operations, OSI, etc.), and represent the Air Force to the DOD level language program manager, a task currently handled by the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) (ASD/P&R). The current designation of deputy chief of staff for air and space operations (HQ USAF/XOI) as the senior language authority (SRA) does not provide this visibility or the apparent authority to affect change without a consensus among all of the Air Force language stakeholders. To be effective within the DOD Language Transformation construct, the Air Force needs a single SAF-level seat at the DOD table.

Who Needs What? Who Knows What?

Exactly who needs what? It’s past time to conduct a comprehensive assessment of language needs throughout the Air Force. However, this must be accomplished on several levels to assure completeness—it cannot be just another survey, lest it suffer from lip service. Moreover, it cannot be limited to a reflection of the current crises, but must include future-focused Air Force and defense thinking. Requirements must be gleaned by discipline (security forces, medical, cryptolinguists, etc); MAJCOM, (ACC, AFSOC, etc.); and areas of responsibility (CENTCOM, SOUTHCOM, etc) to assure its completeness. Although this undertaking will require some effort to eliminate the redundancy caused by the reporting of overlapping requirements, it will also illuminate areas of need that might have escaped a cursory, “square filling” look. The survey’s guidance to participants should state the desired overall effects, both for the Air Force and for its contribution to joint operations.

An *effects based model* might be a useful tool to set overall Air Force assessment goals - an assessment focused on what language capabilities the Air Force wishes to have instead of a simple laundry list a languages. Here is an example of an effects based model for language:

Effect: “Communications are clear and effective at the tactical and operational levels with coalition partners whose native language is not English. (DLPT 2/2/2)”

These requirements must be codified in existing operation plans (OPLAN) to ensure their longevity. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff manual (CJCSM) 3141.01A, *Procedures for the Review of Operation Plans*, includes a checklist item to ensure that requirements for linguist support are identified and/or shortfalls are addressed.⁵² Although this function is levied on the Joint Staff’s Directorate for Intelligence (J-2) Staff/Defense Intelligence Agency, it is a useful tool for the entire Air Force planning community. This process will well serve the deliberate planning process, but what about contingencies?

Creation of a language unit type code (UTC) would facilitate language support to OPLANs and contingencies by providing planners a building block to grab instead of reinventing language requirements for each new crisis. Its size and content can be shaped by the results of the surveys previously discussed, but it should stand alone as a template for contingency planning. The UTC should be self-contained with cryptolinguist, translator, interrogator, and foreign area specialist AFSCs in sufficient quantities, grades, and ranks to support the Combined Force Air Component Commander's (CFACC) mission. The specific languages can be added as required, but the principle of language support will already be in place. Moreover, the language UTC's designed operational capability (DOC) statement should outline its functions in enough detail to allow it to be attached to a combined or joint task force or any other required contingency force. This UTC should be flexible enough to plug into the required language skill set for a specific geographic region and/or be rolled into AEF planning.

It is also time to find out who knows what. The Air Force should conduct a *mandatory* vice voluntary, language survey of all of its personnel - active, reserve, guard, civilian, and everyone in the various accession programs. A volunteer survey program could even be extended to include Air Force retirees through *The Afterburner* retiree newsletter.⁵³ The Foreign Language Self Assessment (FLSA) is a vehicle that already exists via the Air Force's Virtual MPF and could be made available to all of the targeted groups by granting them limited access to the system.⁵⁴ Making the self-assessment mandatory will not prevent individuals from providing less than factual data if they so choose (with the exceptions previously noted in the DLPT discussion), but it will increase the data base beyond what is currently available through voluntary reporting.

Based on all of these results, a comprehensive computer database can be created that lists languages, perceived fluency (FLSA), tested fluency, and method by which obtained (DLIFLC, college, or native speaker). Short of this, the current practice of surveying only accessions to the Air Force would necessitate waiting until roughly 2034 for a complete knowledge base of all Air Force personnel with language skills.

The price tag for contractor linguistic support is enormous and is an unforeseen drain on the Air Force budget that may result in the delay of other Air Force priorities. Focusing on recruiting and retention of skilled language personnel can reduce this cost. To that end, FLPP should be increased. The recent initiative by the director, National Security Agency, to increase his civilian linguist incentive pay to over \$400 (while setting a DLPT goal of 3/3) should be the funding benchmark.⁵⁵ Guard and Reserve members deserve full FLPP pay as outlined in the 9th *QRMC*, since they must meet the same standards as the active force.

A Cultural Change = An Operational Change

A cultural change about foreign language and the use of Air Force language capable personnel can bring about a positive operational change to its global mission. To affect such a cultural change, we must educate senior leadership about the need for language support in coalition warfare, both from allied as well as an adversary perspective.

The Chief of Staff has already articulated his vision for this change. Now is the time to put his vision into being.

It is a sad commentary on the qualifications of the United States as the leader of a coalition of nations to learn that there is not a single interpreter in the Military Mission to Turkey who is an American subject. There are scarcely a half dozen American military personnel who know enough Turkish to have even a remote idea of what their interpreter is in fact saying.

—Col Harry A. Sachaklian, USAF
**Director of Instruction,
Turkish Air Staff College, 1953. 56**

Notes

1. Dennis Wagner, “Linguists are needed for the war on terror,” *The Arizona Republic Online Print Edition* (7 November 2003); and Michael Erard, “Translation Technology in the Age of Terror,” *MIT Technology Review* (February, 2004): <http://msnbc.com/id/4352578>. On 3 December 1941 a message was intercepted, decrypted and translated that gave what some historians believe was a clear war warning. However, it was not reviewed until 8 December because of more pressing intercepts; specifically, the 14 part Japanese diplomatic message that was to be delivered to Secretary of State Cordell Hull on 7 December 1941. Moreover, the 14 part message was encrypted in the so-called “Purple” code, Japan’s highest and most important. The 3 December message was in a simpler code (PA-K2) and thought to be less important at the time. Source: US Congress, “Hearings Before the Joint committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor attack,” 20 July, 1946, Section 620.
2. “USAF Security Forces and Foreign Language Skills in the Global Environment: Are We Prepared?” Major Stephen J. Moree, USAF, Air Command and Staff College Research Paper, Maxwell AFB, April, 1999, p.7, pp. 16-17. Major Moree reports that when intelligence personnel are on loan to Security Forces, they generally performed well. However, on-loan translators from local Intelligence resources made for an unpredictable planning for Security Force deployments.
3. JCS Joint Universal Lessons Learned, quoted in the Executive Summary, Officer Foreign language Skill Process Actions Team Report and Recommendations, USAF Academy, Colorado, December, 1995.
4. Quoted in SAF/IA Point Paper, Subject: “The USAF Foreign Language Strategy,” Washington, DC, 12 February 2004.
5. Ibid.
6. General Wayne A. Downing, USA (Ret), “Report on the Khobar Towers Bombing,” US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, p. 32.

7. Downing Report, p. 15, pp. 49-50.
8. 1991 USAF IG Report, Appendix 2a; 1994 GAO Report, p. 11; 1995 USAF Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team Report and Recommendations, 1 December, 1995. See also Colonel Gunther Mueller and Lt Col Carl Daubach, "Global Skills: Vital Components of Global Engagement," Airpower Journal, Summer, 1998, for a fairly exhaustive list of other reports and recommendations.
9. The PAT was chartered to ". . . examine enhanced language skills as improvements to USAF operations." Executive Summary, USAF Officer Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team, Colorado Springs, Colorado, December 1995.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Gunther A. Mueller, "Beyond the "Linguist" – Global Engagement Skills," Applied Language Learning, 2000, Vol. 11, No1, p.18. Put another way: "America is both the most global and the least global nation in the world. We have a problem that no one else has: we can pretend the rest of the world doesn't exist." "Learning Without Limits: An Agenda for the Office of Postsecondary Education," US Department of Education, November, 2000.p. 47.
13. DLIFLC Overview Briefing, Ft. Haachuca, AZ, 13 Jan 2004. Ann Scott Tyson, "Uzbek or Dari? Military Learns new Tongues," Christian Science Monitor, 2 January 2004.
14. *Chief's Sight Picture*, HQ USAF Chief of Staff, 26 August 2002.
15. Statement of Letitia A. Long, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Requirements and Resources, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Intelligence) Before the Subcommittee on Intelligence Policy and National Security of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives Hearing on Intelligence Community Language Capabilities, Washington, DC, February 26, 2004, p. 3.
16. Ibid, pp. 3 – 12.
17. LtCol Thomas Nolta, SAF/IAPA, Point Paper, Subject: "AF Foreign Language Management Issues," 10 Feb 2003.
18. HQ USAF/XOOIF Briefing, 30 March 2004.
19. DLIFLC Briefing.

20. Major Cara Aghajanian, SAF/IA, e-mail, 30 March, 2004, Subject "Crunching the Numbers." Ms Letita Long's testimony (see above) indicated that there are 25,000 service personnel with some language capability. Both sets of numbers are estimates.
21. AFI 36-2605, *Air Force Military Personnel Testing Procedures*, 14 March 2003, Attachment 11, "Foreign Language Proficiency Pay," para. A11.7.2. However, DPLT scores are not recorded above 3 nor is there any compensation above 3/3/3 proficiency.
22. AFI 36-2605, Attachment 11, para. A11.2.2.2.
23. For a frank assessment of the Air Force's methods for assessing and tracking language skills, see James E. Kinser and Marybeth Peterson Ulrich, "Political-Military Affairs Officers and the Air Force: Continued Turbulence in a Vital Career Specialty," *INSS Occasional Paper*, 13, April, 1977, USAF Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), US Air Force Academy, Colorado, pp. 9-12.
24. Air National Guard linguist databases are apparently maintained at the state level, with no consolidated list available at the Air National Guard Support Center at Andrews AFB, Md.
25. HQ USAF/DP e-mail, 9 March, 2004, Subject: "Virtual Military Personnel Flight Applications."
26. Except for Air Force accessions, *e.g.* OTS, BMTS, AFROTC and USAFA.
27. Colonel Donna Fore, Policy and Requirements, Under Secretary of Defense, Intelligence (OSD-USDI) E-mail, 11 February 2004.
28. Interview with Lt. Colonel Stewart LeBlanc, USAF, March 2, 2004.
29. AFI 36-2605, para. A11.2.3.
30. Others include OSI and the HUMINT program; the latter subsumed as part of the Defense HUMINT Service (DHS) under the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA).
31. DLIFLC Briefing *op cit*. See also Nancy L. Ruther, "The International and Foreign Language Human Capital Challenge of the U.S. Federal Government," presented at Duke University, January 23, 2003. p. 9.
32. Lt Col Mike Nolta SAF/IAPA, "Current State of the Air Force Foreign Area officer (FAO) Program", undated talking paper, p. 2, DLIFLC agrees that immersion training is valuable to upgrade a linguist's abilities (see DLIFLC briefing annotated above).
33. E-mail 1 June 2004 from Lt Col Lisa Smith, USAFSAM/IES, Brooks City-Base, Texas. For a detailed account of the IHS program, see Colonel Jane Ward, USAF (Ret); Colonel Kerrie G. Lindberg, USAF, NC; Major Daniel S. McNulty, USAF, MSC; Major

Mona P. Ternus, USFAR, NC, "A Global Engagement Enhancer: the International Health Specialist," PIREP, *Aerospace Power Journal*, Fall 2002, pp. 94 – 99.

34. DLIFLC Briefing, *op cit.*

35. DLIFLC Briefing, *op cit.*

36. Interview with SMSGT Jeffery S. Martin, USAF, Cryptolinguist Career Field Manager, HQ USAF/XOIFM, The Pentagon, Washington DC, 2 March 2004.

37. DLI Briefing, *op cit.*. Also, Lt Col L.M. Lundstrom, HQ USAF/XOIF-M, Point Paper, Subject: "Air Force Strategy to Meet L3/R3 Requirement," 11 July 2003.

38. IC 2003-1 to AFI 36-2605, Attachment 11.

39. *Ninth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation*, Chapter III, "Special and Incentive Pay for the Reserve Component," May 2002, pp. 144-145. Interestingly, previous *QRMCs* have rejected any change in the 1/30 rule and their pronouncements have been used as justification *not* to change FLPP compensation.

40. Long Testimony, p. 6. According to Ms Long, most of these 6000 positions are for "non-intelligence" purposes.

41. "GITMO Suspect Denied Bail," Gus Taylor, *The Washington Times*, January 23, 2004, p. 11. Problems at DEA included timesheet irregularities, pay for work not performed, and unauthorized charges for overtime pay. "The Administration of Contracts and Agreements for Linguistic Services by the Drug Enforcement Administration," Executive Summary, Redacted version, US Department of Justice IG report 02-33, August, 2002, available on-line at <http://www.usdoj.gov/oig/audit/DEA/0233/exec.htm>.

42. Author's interview with Colonel Donna Fore, Office of Policy, Plans and Requirements, Undersecretary of Defense, Intelligence (USD-I), *inter alia*, The Pentagon, 2 March, 2004.

43. Northrup Grumman News Release, 26 March, 2004.

44. "Defense Reserve Language Working Group Data Findings," BDM Corporation, October 28, 1996, reported in "Defense Reserve Language Plan Proposal," Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Intelligence and Surveillance (DSAD-I&S), Washington, DC, April 23, 1997, p. 8.

47. "Chatting in Iraq," Office of Naval Research, available on-line at <http://www.scienceblog.com/community/article2408.html>. Patrick Chisholm "Technology that Speaks Tongues," Military Information Technology Online Edition, available online at http://www.mit-kmi.com/print_article.cfm?docID=424.

48. Long Testimony, p.10.

49. Long Testimony, p. 10.

50. Long Testimony, p. 1. DOD is also convening a National Language Conference in June 2004 to propose a national language agenda. p.12.

51. "Introduction of National Security Act", HR 3676, December 8, 2003. Found in Congressional Record, December 9, 2003, page E2493. (Sponsor: Rep. Rush D. Holt (D, NJ)).

52. CJCSM 3141.01A, *Procedures for the Review of Operation Plans*, 15 September, 1998, Enclosure A., "CJCS Plan Review Guide," Paragraph 1.b.(10).

53. This would track with a DOD test program to establish a Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps. Long Testimony, p. 6. For an extensive treatment of this subject, see "United States Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps Feasibility Study," National Defense University, Ft. McNair, DC.

54. HQ USAF/DP e-mail, Tuesday March 09, 2004, 12:22.

55. Long Testimony, p. 9. Also, Lt Col L.M. Lundstrom, HQ USAF/XOIIF-M, Point Paper, Subject: "Air Force Strategy to Meet L3/R3 Requirement," 11 July, 2003

56. "The Turkish Air Staff College," Colonel Harry A. Sachaklian, USAF, Director of Instruction, Turkish Air Staff College, Istanbul, Turkey, 1954. p. 32.

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