



Interpreter--or Filter?

Colonel Wolfred K. White, United States Army

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Today, hundreds of thousands of US citizens are scattered around the world aiding in the development of new nations, countering insurgency, training indigenous security forces, and deterring aggression. The material affluence of the United States and her willingness to assist the emerging nations in

achieving political stability and economic self-sufficiency are being demonstrated more convincingly than ever before.

American techniques in engineering, agriculture, industry, and commerce are adaptable to many of the requirements of the new states. Economic assistance

and military aid to be meaningful, however, must be accompanied by scientific and technical training programs. The major portion of this training task falls to the civilian and military advisors assigned to our missions and advisory groups abroad. In large measure, the success or failure of each program depend upon the ability of the US advisor to communicate effectively with his counterpart.

Despite the pluralistic character of American society and the “melting pot” of ethnic groups bringing a multitude of languages to North America in past decades, it is evident that little remains of our rich multilingual inheritance. The reasons for the loss of these languages are generally well known, but the atrophy of these resources is most regrettable. At a time in our history when we have the greatest requirement for citizens capable of speaking a wide variety of foreign languages, we are discovering the difficulty of developing rapidly these required skills.

Thesis Incorrect

The argument frequently has been advanced that citizens of the United States need no language other than their mother tongue. The rationale is that the people of less powerful nations will learn English in order to communicate with the citizens of a great power. Such a thesis may have been valid during periods of isolation before World War II, but, in light of the United States present worldwide military and economic commitments, it can no longer be supported.

Within the past 20 years, there has been renewed interest in foreign language education in this country. It is unfortunate that, even today, the technical and professional skills imparted by our colleges and universities

Colonel Wolfred K. White is with the Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D. C. He received his B.A. in History from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and his Master's in History and Government from Florida State University at Tallahassee. He served in the European theater during World War II and in Korea during the conflict there. Other assignments include duty with the 11th Airborne Division; the 7th US Army in Europe; US Army Training Center, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; and with the 8th US Army in Korea. Colonel White is a 1967 graduate of the US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

are rarely accompanied by a corresponding degree of foreign language ability on the part of the graduate. The training and education provided in the United States by the institutions of higher learning are of high caliber, but only rarely do the courses of instruction require more than a brief exposure to a foreign language. This deficiency has become increasingly apparent as we have undertaken extensive development programs, in a number of foreign countries.

Undoubtedly, the lack of US advisors adequately trained in the language of the host country has frequently caused misunderstanding, impeded progress, and complicated the task of aiding the emerging nations. Certainly, professional or technical competence is the *sine qua non* for any advisory assignment, but a working knowledge of the local language, with appropriate technical vocabulary, is an invaluable asset.

“Familiarization” Courses

The Department of Defense through a number of language programs attempts to fill those positions in advisory groups and missions where knowledge of the local language is deemed essential. In some instances, “familiarization” courses of short duration are afforded personnel being assigned to overseas areas. In these courses, a basic vocabulary in the foreign language is imparted, with the expectation that the individual will use this as a base for future language building when he reaches his new duty station.

Despite these efforts at language training, most advisors arrive at their assignments in advisory groups and missions without a working knowledge of the local language. Unless his counterpart speaks English, the advisor must communicate through an interpreter.

It has been said that dentures are not a replacement for natural teeth—that they are merely a substitute for no teeth at all. The same may be said of interpreters and their employment. Nothing can replace the person-to-person exchange of ideas in a language common to both individuals. At best, the interpreter is a substitute for no communication at all.

Important Qualities

The interpreter's lot is not a happy one. His task is demanding, his responsibilities are great, and too frequently his reward is scant. The interpreter's abilities are determined by a number of factors including:

- ◆ Detailed knowledge of the formal aspects of the languages in which he is working.
- ◆ Command of the idiomatic expressions in each language.
- ◆ Technical vocabularies applicable to the interpretive situation.
- ◆ Ability to convey accurately the tone, spirit, and nuance of each speaker.
- ◆ Native intelligence.

It is infrequent that the military advisor is fortunate enough to acquire an interpreter possessing all of these qualities in adequate measure. In most instances, he is forced to settle for less—much less.

A shortcoming often encountered when using foreign nationals as interpreters is their lack of knowledge of idiomatic English expressions. Textbook knowledge is patently inadequate in coping with the ever-changing usage of a living language. This is especially true if the interpreter is expected to deal in the changing expressions of the US military profession.

Even if the advisor purges his vocabulary of “trade” expressions by substituting more widely used forms, the interpreter is still faced with the formidable array of technical terms for which no suitable English synonyms exist. Even when the interpreter grasps the meaning of the English expression, it is quite possible that he may be faced with the annoying fact that there is no corresponding term in the local language.

Science and Technology

The lack of specialized expressions in the languages of many of the emerging nations is indicative of the primitive state of their scientific and technical development. Scientific and technical vocabularies are developed in a language concomitantly with the growth of science and technology. The introduction of loan words or artificially created expressions is usually necessary to update the more primitive languages. Such action is often indicated in advisory assignments, in the interest of general understanding, and to insure uniformity of usage.

One of the most frequently expressed complaints of the advisor concerning his interpreter is the real or imagined reluctance on the part of the interpreter to convey criticism, bad tidings, or censure. “My interpreter was just too polite” is the often voiced

lament of the US advisor. It is here, perhaps, that we encounter basic differences between two cultures.

Our attitudes and lack of tact and understanding of foreign customs and traditions often create hostility and prevent the development of the necessary advisor-counterpart rapport. When a personality clash develops, the interpreter finds himself squarely in the middle. As a local national, the interpreter is in the dilemma of attempting to serve two masters, one of whom is transitory, the other a fellow citizen who may well be in a position to influence profoundly the interpreter’s future well-being.

The interpreter often is in the military service of the host nation and is usually inferior in status to the advisor’s counterpart, if not to the advisor himself. This condition complicates further an already complex relationship and contributes to the interpreter’s reticence to speak with complete candor. Should the interpreter not attempt to tone down heated exchanges, if only in the interest of self-preservation, his courage would certainly outweigh his wit. The intelligent interpreter will attempt to encourage amicable relations between the advisor and counterpart, as well as to create a *modus vivendi* between himself and them.

In addition to the factors of military status, local customs, and nationality, the factors of social position, age, and religious beliefs may have substantial bearing on the performance of individual interpreters. In the Orient, where marked differences in social classes exist, the position of the interpreter in the class structure may profoundly influence his behavior and attitudes toward his countrymen.

In a society where reverence is shown to the aged, a youthful interpreter is often overly subservient, in the Western view, when translating exchanges between the advisor and elderly local nationals. On occasion, advisors have observed that religious beliefs will sometimes cause the interpreter to refuse to translate ideas or expressions he considers to be contrary to his religion. This has been specifically noted in the case of Muslim interpreters.

Psychological Impact

Many advisors who have required interpreters believe that they would have been materially assisted in their work if they had been able to speak the local language, even to a limited extent. The advantages of

linguistic ability on the part of the advisor are self-evident as a tool of his trade. Of collateral importance, however, is the psychological impact on the local nationals of the advisor's effort to speak their language. In many of the new nations, language is one of the few tangible assets, and the natives deem the foreigner's effort to speak it as a mark of respect and as recognition of their attainment of nationhood.

An obvious disadvantage in conversing through an interpreter is the great amount of time required to consummate even brief exchanges. In formal instruc-

that the non-English speaking Koreans would have gained far more from these courses if the US instructors had been able to address them directly in their native tongue.

Although there are many disadvantages in the use of foreign language interpreters, it is highly likely that our advisors will have to continue to rely heavily on their services. Each advisor, therefore, must seek to employ the interpreter to maximum advantage. It is not possible to establish a *modus operandi* with universal applicability to the use of interpreters. However, cer-



US Army

tional situations where interpreters must be employed, it is necessary to allow twice as much time as is necessary when instructor and students have a common language. If written materials such as lesson outlines, advance sheets, and practical exercises are used, the services of qualified translators are necessary.

During the Korean War, when large numbers of South Korean military students attended service schools in the United States, the instructional departments of those institutions were relatively successful in coping with the language barrier. It is highly probable

tain measures can be adopted to increase the likelihood of achieving accurate translations and to minimize the more frequently encountered difficulties. A close working relationship between the advisor and his interpreter, including mutual understanding and a community of purpose, is essential to success.

Informal Conversations

The advisor initially must determine the degree to which his interpreter is proficient in spoken English. This can be ascertained by informal

conversation embracing a variety of subjects. The advisor by adroit questioning should insure that the interpreter understands the underlying meaning of the English expressions and not merely the gist of the words comprising them.

It is known that some foreign interpreters are extremely reluctant to admit that their knowledge of the advisor's language is considerably less than profound. By insisting that the interpreter restate given expressions in different words, the advisor can gain some insight into the depth of his interpreter's knowledge of English. It is most important that the advisor be aware of his interpreter's limitations so that he can work to improve the interpreter's English, or, failing that, to avoid expression his interpreter is unable to handle.

Advisors comment that it is difficult to determine the accuracy with which words are being translated to the foreign language if the advisor has little or no knowledge of the local tongue. In a recent survey conducted at the US Army War College, a number of former military advisors asserted that knowledge of the local language would have enabled them to check on the performance of their interpreter. It was interesting to note in this survey that officers who were assigned to headquarters above the regimental level expressed greater confidence in their interpreter's abilities than did the advisors who had worked at the lower echelons.

In order to check the effectiveness of the interpreter's translations, the advisor, where possible, should have an American who is fluent in the local language, and whose fluency is unknown to the interpreter, monitor the interpreter's performance. If this is not possible, a native fluent in English and unknown to the interpreter can be substituted. Tests of this nature are, of course, no guarantee of a specific level of sustained

performance, but they do give the advisor an insight into how the interpreter is conveying the message to the foreign listener.

If the interpreter's vocabulary is deficient in the essential technical terms and expressions, the advisor must strive to remedy this by explaining them in simplified terms. No doubt, in some instances, the advisor's patience will be taxed and his ingenuity hard pressed in insuring that his interpreter fully understands the English terms. Not infrequently, he may be forced to resort to pictures and sketches to convey his meaning.

It is a great temptation for the advisor, when he becomes aware of the frequently limited vocabulary of his interpreter, to decrease his own vocabulary accordingly. In time, the advisor should be able to enrich the interpreter's knowledge of English to the extent that a near-normal English conversation can be carried on between them. If the advisor lapses into pidgin English, his utterances lose expressiveness, spontaneity, and even essential meaning.

Although there is no substitute for the advisor being proficient in the local language, thousands of Americans abroad have used their interpreters to good advantage in the past, as still others will have to do in the future. The degree to which the interpreter will prove to be an effective bridge to understanding, rather than acting as a filter and preventing meaningful communication, will depend in considerable measure on the advisor's awareness of the capabilities and limitations of his own interpreter, and the effort he is willing to expend in molding the interpreter to suit his purposes. The success of the professionally competent advisor, who works with foreign nationals who do not understand his language, rests primarily on his own language capability, or that of his interpreter. ■