

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# The Leaning Tower of Babel

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Arabic speakers in the U.S. diplomatic corps capable of appearing on Al Jazeera tomorrow and discuss current events in Arabic can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It's no secret that America has never made it a priority to attract, groom, train and use its linguists as valuable resources.

In an evermore interconnected global village, human interaction is language-dependent, yet we're not surmounting language and cultural barriers fast enough to keep pace with events and technology: this was the principal message at NYU's excellent second international translation conference, "*Global Security: Implications for Translation and Interpretation*," June 3-5, 2004, planned to coincide with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NYU Translation Studies Program in the School of Continuing and Professional Studies. Taking place less than 50 yards from ground zero, with over 100 language professionals from 15 countries — academia, international organizations, the public and private sectors were well represented — the conference gave rise to debate, analysis and hand wringing. In the words of one speaker, too often language service "comes right after the soft drinks" in importance.

If business as usual won't cut the mustard, it was agreed that at every level of our security efforts, we neglect linguistic skills at our own peril. According to plenary speaker former ambassador Edward Djerejian (fluent in four languages), public diplomacy is "absurdly and dangerously underfunded in financial and human resources." Head of a commission that produced an 80-page report submitted to Congress last October, he made specific recommendations for how the U.S. can beef up its ability to interact intelligently with the Arab and Muslim world. The only solution, he believes, is a deep and broad transformation, a new strategic direction mandated from the top. So far his report, "Changing Minds, Winning the Peace" has received a "tepid" response.

The world requires translation and interpretation in every sphere, but still has not agreed on a definition of the word "terrorism" – although another plenary speaker, Tony Cooper, claimed to have attempted the most definitions in a thirty-year career in law enforcement. Cooper asserted that linguistic problems go to the heart of managing security in the international community, citing as just one example the frequent media confusion between hostage-taking (a direct confrontation with authorities) and kidnapping (where there is room for private initiatives). One high-ranking international meeting he attended was so confidential, the only language assistance permitted was by a trusted judge—who had no idea of how to interpret. Cooper also pointed out that many people have a limited vocabulary: a group of hijackers panicked when they heard the word "expedite," believing it meant an imminent assault on the plane.

Interpreters have four functions, according to U.N. interpreter James Nolan: to convey messages, to be a buffer zone between parties enabling more freedom in communication, to enable the most qualified people in a given field to communicate with one another, and to put parties on an equal footing. Good interpretation, in his view, is always possible to obtain, the only factors being trouble and expense. He warned against permitting others to dictate working conditions, especially in the legal setting; interpreters themselves can best set conditions, since they are the most impartial.

Another plenary speaker, Frank Gómez, underscored the fact that despite worldwide use of English as a lingua franca, pride and ethnic group identification lead to a greater expectation for communication in other languages. With changing world alliances, the rise in multilateralism has led to the proliferation of tens of thousands of NGOs or public interest groups, each with its own jargon, which has resulted in an abundance of language activity. Yet sometimes resources are surprisingly limited, even for diplomats: no published references exist for embassy titles, forms of address and protocol (which vary greatly from country to country).

Other plenary speakers discussed the limits and possibilities of machine translation: real-time translation of instant messages for intelligence officers, and the need for flexible term bases for private and public use, especially for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. In the world of terminology management, it was agreed that often the most effective organizer may be a third party uninvolved in inter-agency conflicts.

Individual sessions focused on the nuts and bolts of the language business: U.N. committees and available term resources; interpreter training issues at the State Department (which suffers, as all language service bureaus do, from spikes and sporadic demand); interpreting at a mental health program for survivors of torture, war and refugee trauma at Bellevue (NYC has 75,000 such survivors, the most of any city in the U.S.); business interpreting in Bulgaria; translating English-language metaphors for Norwegian news broadcasts; the problem of the translator as accomplice (see article in this issue); varieties of Arabic (to be published in our next issue); interpreting for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia; Bengali and religious identity issues; terrorism in Peru and the tentacles of corruption; money laundering and the court interpreter (to appear soon); censored works in translation coming under the axe of the European Union; how sensitive document translation is handled in Poland, and many more topics.

What does the future hold for the language business? Will automation put human translators out of a job? *Au contraire*, according to Robert Levin, CEO of Transclick, at the cutting edge of a new industry, customized linguistic data. With machine translation capacity at 5,000-10,000 words a minute, Levin sees a growing need for the integration of human translation skills with machine translation, and predicted that we are thirty years away from achieving automatic speech-to-speech translation. While machine translation may fill gaps in unusual language combinations and provide high-quality translation in a well-defined subject field (pre-editing and controlled language being keys to quality), the huge knowledge management problem we have can only be tackled by

linguists working in conjunction with computer analysts and information specialists. Working with gisting tools, language editing tools, artificial intelligence, language analysis, dictionary creation: these are the new job areas for linguists. The good news is that Unicode is coming on October 1, making multilingual fonts easier to manage in various formats.

The bad news is that if immediate steps are not taken at the highest levels to fill this country's language gap, the cost will be incalculable for years to come.

Luckily, 2005 has been declared the year of languages. Local, national and international organizations of translators and interpreters should be coordinating their outreach now.

*[The author, editor of Proteus and chief interpreter in the Southern District of New York, thanks Sara Garcia Rangel for contributing her conference notes in preparation for this article.]*

**Websites mentioned at the conference:**

[www.yearoflanguages.com](http://www.yearoflanguages.com)

[www1.oecd.org/fatf](http://www1.oecd.org/fatf) (money laundering terms)

[www.osce.org/atu](http://www.osce.org/atu) (U.N. anti-terrorism unit)

[www.autodafe.org](http://www.autodafe.org) (international literary journal of censored works)

[www.transclick.com](http://www.transclick.com) (new frontier of machine translation)

[www.survivorsoftorture.org](http://www.survivorsoftorture.org) (volunteer interpreters in NYC needed in many languages)