

# ■ THE USE OF THE LANGUAGE ASSISTANT IN UN PEACE MISSIONS - BENEFITS AND RISKS

Israel Alves de Souza Júnior<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Whenever we think about peace missions, we are redirected to negotiations in current conflict situations which are embedded in the modern world. These negotiations are carried out in risky conditions and facing great challenges. It is obvious that communication directly interferes in the success of the missions. Thus, this article aims at discussing the risks and benefits as part of the use of language assistants (LAs) in UN peace missions, describing the desired profile of this relevant service provider, and thinking over mistakes and successful actions when making use of LAs on the ground.

**Key words:** Language assistant, UN, peace operations, profile, risks and benefits.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Fontoura (2009), in the current world, which is marked by many conflicts in different regions, Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) established by the United Nations (UN) constitute the most eloquent expression of solidary commitment of the international community with the promotion of peace and security. Their origin dates back to the period between 1919-1939, but peace operations were not included in the UN

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<sup>1</sup> Captain of the Technical Branch (QCO, acronym in Portuguese) of the Brazilian Army, professor, translator, interpreter and coordinator of the Military Translators and Interpreters Course (ETIMIL, acronym in Portuguese) of the Brazilian Peace Operations Joint Training Center (CCOPAB, acronym in Portuguese). In 2012, he was designated Chief of the Interpreters Section of the Brazilian Engineering Company (BRAENGCOY) in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). For any comments or questions, write to: oficialisrael@gmail.com.

Charter written in 1945, gradually evolving in the institution. PKOs represent a response to the transformations and challenges in a globalized world, in which ethnical, religious, social, political and ideological tensions are multiplied and strengthened.

In the immediate post World War II, the collective security system set by the UN Charter could not be applied. Thus, taking difficulties into account, the UN developed peace operations as a valuable instrument to be present in conflicted areas in order to stimulate the parties involved to resolve their disputes by pacific means, preferably, through dialogue and negotiation as its base; this way, creating favorable conditions to overcome the differences without resorting on force. Henceforth, there was a need to establish an effective form of communication between the troops or military observers sent to conflict areas and the local population, either composed of oppressors or oppressed people. It was necessary to listen and understand, and only then to make oneself understood, to negotiate, and finally, to settle the disputes.

As per Edwards (2002), when we think about peace negotiations carried out by the UN, we are automatically redirected to international accords signed between leaders from several nations. These negotiations, as a general rule, are highly visible<sup>2</sup> and use professional negotiators, including professional<sup>3</sup> and highly-trained interpreters. Normally, this kind of negotiation takes place far away from the ground, maybe at a hotel or at a military base, or even at the UN headquarters, for example.

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2 The visibility here identified is due to the fact that this sort of negotiation is widely broadcast by the media - TV channels, websites, newspapers etc., reaching an enormous parcel of the world population.

3 It is important to highlight that not all people who provide the service of interpretation have formally studied for that or have experience which validates the service. In general, in PKOs, this is a service provided by locals who simply learned a little of a foreign language.



Picture 01 - UN Security Council meeting to decide over international peace and security issues.

Negotiations on the ground, however, between military personnel and civilians, within the context of contemporary peace missions, i.e., in risky situations and big challenges, using local language assistants, set another level of negotiation; getting to the extent that without communication, there will not be negotiation. It is obvious that communication directly interferes in the success of the mission.

Civilians working as language intermediaries, i.e., language assistants, within the context of troop deployment, are divided into two groups: one that represents civilians coming from the troop contributing country (TCC); and another represented by local civilians, hired by, the military component or by the Mission itself in the host country. The latter has been working for the mission for a long time, no matter the rotations

of the troops or civilians, or even changes made in the scope of the mission. They belong to the local society (KELLY; BAKER, 2013).

IN MINUSTAH<sup>4</sup>, for example, the language assistants sign a labor contract for a predefined period of time<sup>5</sup>, which might or not be renewed by the Mission. In general, they receive an average wage of US\$1,200 for their services. Their assessment, which might allow them to renew the contract, is usually carried out by the immediate supervisors, that is, people who they directly work with. After the assessments are completed, they are sent to the Personnel Section of the Mission HQ<sup>6</sup> where the person in charge will analyze them.



Picture 02 - Military observer together with a language assistant, negotiating on the ground.

Due to the difficulties related to communications in the theaters of operations, it became important the use of local people who knew how to speak another language, mostly English, so that communication between

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti.

<sup>5</sup> Generally, labor contracts of the language assistants last for a year.

<sup>6</sup> Mission Headquarters or main base in the host country.

the military personnel/civilians with the oppressors or the oppressed, in a certain region of the world, could be established appropriately. These citizens, who had the skills of speaking the local language and another one of international importance, were defined by the UN as language assistants (LAs), for they assisted military and civilian personnel deployed in peace operations in the process of conflict resolution, towards world peace.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT

Working language choices in un peace missions.

The operational security of a mission is directly affected either by using the local language or not. It is extremely important to understand the culture of a country or region in which there is a conflict in order to reach the final goal. When it comes to culture, we have to talk about languages, for it is part of the axis identity-language-culture - a base for the formation of the characteristics of a certain people.

According to this statement, human rights operations in Haiti, as a matter of principles, made an effort to use the local language as a co-working language of the mission. All missions should do the same if the local language is not one of the UN working languages<sup>7</sup>.



Picture 03 - The six UN official working languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish).

<sup>7</sup> This imperative for human rights operations on the ground.

The working language choice in ONUSAL<sup>8</sup> (El Salvador), for example, were English and Spanish. The same way, the mission in Rwanda incorporated the use of English, French (the language of the elite) and Kinyarwanda (language spoken by the vast majority). In the case of Haiti, Haitian Creole is the language of the majority; yet, there is a small wealthy portion of the population that speaks French as well.

It is clear that military and civilian personnel deployed in conflict areas, integrating several mission sectors, should have a basic knowledge of the local language to show and have the respect of the local population.

All actors on the ground should know how to adequately use interpreters in the mission. The use of the interpreter is necessary when accurate and sensitive information is conveyed or requested. As the level of stress increases, the person's ability to express himself/herself in a foreign language drastically decreases. This way, it is prudent, in special sensitive circumstances, to use the interpreter in order to minimize potential misunderstandings.

An interpreter must be capable of translating into two directions - from his/her language into the foreign language and from the foreign language into his/her own language, without using any dictionaries. Let's consider henceforth only the use of the language assistant in missions.

### **Language assistants: what for? What are the benefits?**

If we analyze several UN peace missions, deployed in different regions of the world, we understand that the role of the language assistants is of a cultural intermediary between the counterparts whose native and foreign languages are not the same. It is important to highlight that

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<sup>8</sup> UN Observer Mission in El Salvador.

whenever possible, a local citizen, belonging to a certain ethnical group or community, should be used to convey sensitive messages, thus helping solve potential communication problems. Normally, the process of interpretation used by the language assistants follow two basic patterns: consecutive and simultaneous (whispered).

Consecutive interpretation is, in general, used in negotiations, where the language assistant needs to wait for the speaker to complete his message to only then retransmit all the information to the counterpart. Professional interpreters would usually take notes of what is said, using a personal set of symbols, to only then reproduce the information. As we are dealing with language assistants, we can foresee potential problems: missing or changing significant parts of the information.

In whispered simultaneous interpretation, the language assistant needs to listen, decode, recode and convey the message in real time, nonstop. There is no room for long delays or time to think about a word, for it would imply missing the uttered content.

It is important to know that language assistants do not have a formal training in the field of translation or interpretation. According to the UN specialized training materials<sup>9</sup>, these are local citizens, professionally untrained in interpretation and that works as the ambassadors of the troops, military observers and civilians, in the country where the conflict broke out.

Why to use them if they are not professionals? Simply because there are not professional interpreters on the ground working with very specific pairs of languages/dialects as those found in mission areas; also, because these individuals know the local culture very well. They act as if they were the spokesperson of the peacekeeper or the civilian deployed

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<sup>9</sup> In UN Specialized Training Materials for Military Experts on Mission (UN STM-MEoM-2.2).

in the mission; they can give suggestions on how to better deal with the local population, from different traditions and culture, identifying, yet, the nuances and subtleties that could be easily overlooked by peacekeepers.



Picture 04 - LA assisting a conversation between a soldier and a local.

Due to the difficulties they already have faced, many peacekeepers have understood that there are many-faceted differences between cultures. They have realized that being accompanied by local representatives who knew the customs and the local language well, they were somehow demonstrating respect for the people, and thus gaining advantage in the process of communication. Welcoming behavior and goodwill are very important characteristics once one does not speak a language well.

Furthermore, the knowledge language assistants accumulate as the years go by is of great relevance for military and civilian personnel arriving in the mission area. For the military personnel deployed in conflict areas, the link between the local community leader and the newly-arrived soldier will be the language assistant, who will familiarize them with the important points of contact (POC) in a certain mission area. Thus, LAs become very significant during contingent, civilian personnel and MILOBs rotations. They somehow help prepare the area for those arriving, establishing bridges between local POCs and personnel leaving the mission area.

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## **The expected profile of the language assistant in UN Peace Missions**

The communication in another country may be correct<sup>10</sup> or full of mistakes, corroborating to the success or failure of an important peace mission. The work of the language assistants is exactly to build communication bridges between the counterparts, allowing the adequate process of peace accord negotiations. Language assistants who work with UN military observers (UNMO) play a vital role in this process, whose working conditions are mostly dangerous and constantly changing. These same conditions require that language assistants demonstrate skills as courage and persuasion. Together with unarmed military observers on the ground, they are part of a team.

The primary prerequisites for a successful use of a LA are proficiency and linguistic competence and, still, attitudes free of prejudice. Needless to say that the potential language assistant must be bilingual when it comes to the source and target languages.

It is important to have adequate selection process and oral interview with the potential LAs so that their assessments cover general knowledge and aptitude for interpretation.

Likewise, the potential LA must demonstrate competence to work accurately and fast. Another factor would be finding candidates to this position that would not have any sort of cultural or religious hindrance because it would, above all, affect the final quality of the interpretation and the mission as a whole. Maybe, this is one of the most difficult prerequisites to be filled out.



Picture 05 - LAs of BRAENGC0Y 16, MINUSTAH, accompanied by the Chief of the Section of Interpreters.

The LAs employed in UNPROFOR<sup>11</sup> I and II, in the former Yugoslavia, were local citizens classified in categories<sup>12</sup> according to their previous experience. As per the expected, they had a certain degree of education, but had no previous training on interpretation or translation.

As per the document VAnr UNMISS-GS-13-116, of 04 November 2013, issued by UNMISS<sup>13</sup>, it is observed that the mission in South Sudan established, based on the UN directives, the criteria for the candidature of Sudanese to the position of language assistants offered in the mission. It is important to highlight that women, equally qualified, would be prioritized during the selection process, due to other UN documents<sup>14</sup>.

To illustrate this topic, let us see below the descriptions of the

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Protection Force in Yugoslavia.

<sup>12</sup> The positions would vary between GSL-2 and GSL-5, as standardized by the UN and the mission.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Mission in South Sudan.

<sup>14</sup> DPKO Under-Secretary General's Policy Statement on Gender Mainstreaming.

tasks to be accomplished by LAs, supervised by UNPOL<sup>15</sup> and MLO<sup>16</sup> in UNMISS. They are:

1. To provide interpretation service at meetings and conferences between UN representatives and local leaders, using the language pair Arabic < > English or from a local dialect into English, and vice-versa;
2. To provide sight translation and written translation of relevant documents for UNMISS mandate;
3. To coordinate and schedule meetings, preparing minutes, if requested;
4. To prepare and draft correspondences in Arabic and English;
5. To maintain filing and archiving systems of relevant material pertaining to the office work;
6. To provide comprehensive and timely administrative support;
7. To integrate UN long and short range patrols; and
8. To perform any other duties as required.

The execution of the aforementioned activities is reinforced by the analysis of the competencies LA candidates have to show. Let us see below the UN predefined core competencies:

1. Professionalism<sup>17</sup>;
2. Client orientation<sup>18</sup>;
3. Communication<sup>19</sup>;

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations Police.

<sup>16</sup> Military Liaison Officer.

<sup>17</sup> Ability to work independently without supervision, remain calm in stressful situations.

<sup>18</sup> Demonstrated ability to develop and maintain effective work relationships with supervisors and colleagues.

<sup>19</sup> Ability to write in a clear and concise manner and to communicate effectively orally.

4. Teamwork<sup>20</sup>; and
5. Planning and organization<sup>21</sup>.

As an attempt to establish a quality standard for the candidates to the positions of LA, they are required to have qualifications as:

1. Education - High School or University Diplomas. Specialized training institution in translation/interpretation is an asset;
2. At least four (4) years of experience and a high level of demonstrated analytical and problem-solving skills. Experience with UN/NGO or other International bodies is an added asset.
3. Languages skills - Fluency in written and spoken English and Arabic. Knowledge of Dinka<sup>22</sup> is essential; and
4. Other skills - a valid Drivers license is highly desirable.

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<sup>20</sup> Good interpersonal skills. Ability to work in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic environment with sensitivity and respect for diversity. Still, it covers client orientation as well.

<sup>21</sup> Ability to plan own work, to work effectively under stress and to priorities and juggle multiple tasks with tight deadlines.

<sup>22</sup> Language spoken by an ethnic group of South Sudan, inhabiting the Bahr el Ghazal region of the Nile basin, Jonglei and parts of southern Kordufan and Upper Nile regions.



Picture 06 - Military observers together with a language assistant on a patrol in South Sudan.

If we analyze the profile of a language assistant to be deployed on the ground, specifically in South Sudan, we shall notice that there is a large gap between the ideal and reality. Talking to former peace mission members who had worked with LAs, it is clear that the use of the language assistant is far below the competencies requested in the job offering for LAs in UNMISS. By having a close view of the work and knowing the historical background of local inhabitants, usually playing the role of LAs, we can notice that, many times, the LA only has a high school degree, never worked with translation/interpretation, learned how to speak poor English, which does not mean mastering the language to work as a translator/interpreter. Moreover, they do not have competencies as organizational planning or teamwork. Apart from other problems<sup>23</sup> which happen during the use of the LA in peace missions, it is evident that their use shall bring some risks to the accomplishment of the mission by military and civilian personnel

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<sup>23</sup> Lack of commitment, discretion, reliability, frequent late arrivals and unreasonable absences.

involved in the peacekeeping process in a conflict area.

### **The risks of using language assistants in UN Peace Missions**

Due to the political and social tensions, negotiations in peace missions are much more complex than those in normal circumstances. It is generally characterized by rumors, unreliability, prejudices, negative stereotypes etc. The negotiator will need to communicate with people from another culture, without sharing the same language pattern, facing stressful situations, in which people get upset easily. So, there is a lot of responsibility and reliability embedded in the role of the person in charge of supporting communication: the linguistic intermediary.

When working with non-professional interpreters during peace missions, there is a personal risk of reprisals and the added stress of working in dangerous areas. Besides, risks of blurring the images of the personnel working with conflict resolution, of the military, civilian personnel and troop contributing country (TCC), and finally the image of the mission as a whole are equally present. Without mentioning those side effects coming from the non-observance of principles as neutrality and impartiality. We can also mention other risks as religious convictions, ideological and political beliefs, ethnicity, motivation, involvement, confidentiality and poor communication skills.

In missions, for example, there might be an episode in which the LA takes notes during an interview with the local community leader and the military observer. If this piece of information relates to a sensitive issue, it is possible that those notes might be confiscated when the LA and the military observer go through a checkpoint, on their way back to the base<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> In the issue involving Bosnians and Serbs, in the former Yugoslavia, there are reports on many episodes like the aforementioned. To illustrate that there is one case in which a UN negotiator notes on several ongoing field negotiations were confiscated at a road block/checkpoint.



Picture 07 - Military observer interviewing a local citizen supported by the LA.

It is, then, extremely important to know that notes taken by LAs must be handed to the military or civilian personnel in charge, and, if possible, immediately destroyed in order to avoid further complications for the individuals involved and for the mission itself.

Another relevant aspect is to observe the reliability and discretion of the language assistant. It is important to bear in mind that the language assistant is a local that provides translation/interpretation services for the mission. As the LA is a local, it is then necessary that the information cell of the mission have previous knowledge about the LA's life, as well as a close control of his/her actions when providing the service. Any gap in communication here shall cause the mission to have a major or minor problem, which might not always be corrected. Classified information shall not be discussed as LAs are present, ensuring the security of the mission and of the language assistant himself/herself.



Picture 08 - Language assistant wearing a helmet and a jacket, as the military personnel, for safety reasons.

Here is a real incident that occurred in MONUSCO a few years ago to a UN team, and that could be useful to display here as a “Lessons learned” when it comes to working with Language assistant (LA). A Team composed of civil affairs and MILOBS officers was to trying to make an inquiry about an ambush where some people had been robbed and some of them killed. The UN Team was tasked to find out any relevant information about this drama and decided to meet with the toughest rebel group stationed in the area. UN-Team leader was speaking in English, the 1st LA was translating in Arabic, the 2nd LA was retranslating in a local dialect and the 3rd one was translating in the local language spoken by the rebel group. The UN Team started progressively, with greetings and small talks. After one hour of socialization, the Team leader put the question on the table for which they came. “You are the strongest group in the area. For sure, you can help us by telling us who perpetrated the crime”. After the



three LAs finished their translation, the atmosphere suddenly changed, no more smiles, closed expressions on their faces. To top it all, the Team leader felt the cold barrel cold of a gun behind his head. After one long minute of frozen situation, the chief of the rebels started to laugh and to talk with the others. As he knew a little bit of Arabic, he pointed out that the 1st LA mistranslated the UN sayings; instead of the original meaning, he translated: “I know you did perpetrate the crime”. (UN CIMIC – STM, 2014).



Picture 09 - Military observers and LA on a patrol in Sudan.

Based on the previous paragraph, it is possible to have two hypotheses: either the language assistant failed during the process of translation/interpretation for not mastering both working languages or the LA refrained from impartiality, which is a must, and then decided to value-judge the situation by blaming the rebels for the crime. It is equally important that users of the service of interpretation, provided by the

language assistants in peace missions, always talk to the LAs, establishing criteria and *modus operandi* to be followed during the events in order to avoid potential collateral damage, which might result in an unexpectedly dangerous situation.

Episodes like this one in MONUSCO could be extended in concept and possibilities, making us think over the probable causes of events as the genocide in Rwanda or the massacre in Wali Kali, in the borderline of Congo and Rwanda. Both atrocities may have as probable causes the inability of the troops, military personnel or civilians deployed in conflict areas to speak the local language/dialect, and, consequently, to inappropriately use the language assistant as bridges of communication between different languages and cultures. Were the locals employed as LAs in that particular situation impartial? Did they have good knowledge of the working languages? Were they basically trained to work in the field of translation/interpretation? These are questions whose answers could even help avoid or prevent those failures from happening in the history of mankind and peace missions.

Many of the LAs used in peace missions all over the world went through traumatic experiences, either in direct or indirect situations. Persecution, torture, physical or psychological terrorism, and exile are some of the psychological scars which might be visible as family difficulties or as an increase in the level of stress. Due to these problems, many LAs would not be a safe choice to support the well accomplishment of the mission or the mandate, since they would be biased by their basic needs and their natural instinct of survival.

It is vital that the actors on the ground, including the language assistants, be free from any sort of prejudice, preconceived ideas. To illustrate that we can cite the case in which MILOBs on the ground refused

the service of a certain LA, given the fact that he belonged to a family which was claiming a piece of land - cause of the conflict between the counterparts. That was a right and crucial decision to help them with the conflict resolution.

### **3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It is evident that the language assistant assigned to carry out the tasks of a translator and interpreter in peace missions, or in any other mission, needs to have a specific preparation on this unique field of Applied Linguistics.<sup>25</sup> In the world history, when it comes to providing the service of translation and interpretation, it is observed that many peace accords were signed due to the provision of good linguistic services; yet, conflicts broke out and situations worsened because of bad translation and interpretation services. An interpretation mistake during a peace process negotiation may severely create a big unease among the parties involved, either solving or keeping the problem. Losses may be irreversible and damages irreparable, either in the human, material or institutional aspect.

Thus, it is easy to fully agree with Tassini (2012) and Guillet (2012) that translators and interpreters can never be prepared overnight. Inexperience allied to good will cannot account for all the necessary technical aspects for the provision of an adequate linguistic support. The experience with working language pairs, different culture as well as knowledge of the world has a great influence on the formation of this type of professional, and it takes time to do so.

Translating is not simply the elementary operation of searching for lexical correspondents. Much more of a complex and subtle art, it shall harmonize those of others, which are so delicate - those of reading and

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25 In DUBOIS, J. Dicionário de linguística. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1978.

writing (SILVEIRA, 2004). For many, it seems that the translator's job is very easy or does not demand much attention because it's secondary; however, it proved to be essential for conflict resolutions. It is present, almost always, in the phases of negotiation/mediation, as well as in surveys, interviews, situation monitoring etc.

To Kelly and Zetsche (2012), there is no greater intellectual challenge than building meaning bridges between several different languages, yet, preserving their linguistic and cultural identities.

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