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CONFERENCE INTERPRETATION IN  
THE MILITARY ENVIRONMENT OF  
FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

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## CONFERENCE INTERPRETATION IN THE MILITARY ENVIRONMENT OF FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

### Abstract:

*This paper aims to present an overview of one interpreter's practical experience gained while initially serving as a military and later as a civilian French/English interpreter in various military settings on the African continent. The complex and rewarding nature of this work has prompted the author to embark on an in-depth translation studies research project while continuing to fulfill responsibilities as a French interpreter assigned to United States Africa Command (AFRICOM). The research will support a doctoral dissertation focused on the challenges associated with oral translation in the military environment of Francophone West Africa, the value of establishing a dedicated cadre of professional military conference interpreters trained to succeed in this unique environment, and the feasibility of contemporary translation theories as baselines for the development of an improved training program to support the development of such a cadre. This paper highlights one of these theories, the Interpretive Theory of Translation, or the Theory of Sense, as a potential foundation for the creation of new training methods specifically tailored to the military conference interpreter operating in complex multinational military environments.*

### Keywords:

*Interpreter, translator, military interpreters, interpreter training program, Africa, linguistic capabilities, cultural awareness, communication, meeting, jargon, acronym.*

**\*NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos Marco** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

## Resumen:

Este trabajo tiene por objeto plantear, desde la experiencia acumulada por la práctica, los matices propios de la labor de traducción de un intérprete que ha trabajado en el ámbito militar del continente africano, como militar y como civil. Debido a la fascinante complejidad de esta actividad, la autora se ha embarcado en un proceso de investigación más detallado y de forma simultánea al desempeño de sus responsabilidades como intérprete de idioma francés asignada al Mando de los Estados Unidos para África (AFRICOM). La investigación servirá de base a una tesis doctoral enfocada a los retos derivados de la traducción oral en el ámbito militar del África Occidental francófona, así como al valor de establecer un departamento o cátedra que acometa la labor de entrenar a intérpretes militares que puedan completar una labor exitosa en ese ámbito al tiempo que se desarrollan las bases teóricas del programa de instrucción que lo posibilite. Este trabajo se centra en una de las teorías de la interpretación, teoría interpretativa o del sentido, como un potencial cimiento para la creación de una nueva metodología de entrenamiento propia de la labor del intérprete militar que opere en un ambiente multinacional complejo.

## Palabras clave:

Intérprete, traductor, intérpretes militares, formación intérpretes, África, capacidades lingüísticas, concienciación cultural, comunicación, reunión, jerga, sigla.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past eight years, I have had the opportunity to work in diverse military and security environments in numerous Francophone countries in Africa. As a United States Naval Reserve officer with a civilian career as an interpreter, I have often found myself responsible for various functions for which I was not necessarily trained but that required the capability to communicate effectively in French and English. *Donc voilà!* Sometimes I was deemed the ideal person (read, the only person) to assist a group of technicians with the regular maintenance requirements of a diesel generator or maybe I was the designated instructor to explain – in French, via relay to Hausa and Djarma – the workings of a modern WC to a group of new Army recruits who, up to that point, had never lived or worked in a building with running water. Clearly, as a French interpreter, I am not a plumber, nor am I a diesel generator technician, but exposure to these unique situations has made it abundantly clear to me that people often rely on the interpreter to facilitate communication while assuaging concerns and mediating debates, linguistic or otherwise.

I initially set foot on the continent in 2006 as an exchange officer deployed with the French Navy to the Gulf of Guinea. I stepped aboard the French Navy tender *JULES VERNE* having just completed the first year of a Translation and Interpretation degree at the University of Las Palmas, Gran Canaria (ULPGC). Armed with that piece of information, my French shipmates gleefully determined that I should be designated the ship's French/Spanish/English interpreter for the remainder of the deployment. During the three years following this deployment that would mark my quasi-official debut as a military interpreter, I was called upon to fulfill a wide variety of assignments, returning to the Gulf of Guinea for Maritime Domain Awareness conferences and then ultimately moving on to the Sahel as an interpreter supporting U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) cooperation and training initiatives. During that same three-year period, I completed the final three years of my *licenciatura* at Las Palmas, and have since been regularly employed as an interpreter both in Europe and in Africa.

All of my assignments, whether military or civilian, have involved regular contact with not only African, French and American military personnel but also with diplomats, civilian authorities, and representatives of international organizations such as NATO, the African Union, ECOWAS and the European Union, as well as Non-Governmental Organization personnel. With this unique opportunity to work across civilian and military lines in West Africa, I have come to some initial conclusions upon which I will build my research.

First off, contrary to the belief of many, language skills alone do not guarantee interpreter success. My studies at ULPGC immediately corrected my own misperception in this regard. My observations on the ground have convinced me that excellent command of both the native language and the foreign language (for our purposes, French and English)

serves to form the foundation upon which interpreter skills are developed. But this is only the beginning. From there, specific training, an extensive amount of practical experience and continuing education are essential to the development of professional conference interpreters. Secondly, it has become clear to me that Francophone West Africa alone represents a distinctive sociolinguistic and multicultural environment that deserves particular attention, and linguistic complexity is further compounded once a wide variety of military cultures are integrated into the communication equation. Finally, my experience working with talented military interpreters from several countries has led me to the conclusion that interpretation quality in this particular military setting of West Africa could be vastly improved with the development of a dedicated cadre of highly-trained military conference interpreters.

### Research Plan

My primary objective is to examine the unique challenges posed to the interpreter operating in the military and security environments of Francophone West Africa and then ultimately determine a roadmap for increasing the quality of interpretation in order to improve strategic communication between NATO and African partners. Given my particular background, my study will focus on interpretation challenges particular to the American military interpreter operating in this unique Francophone environment. Research will focus on translation theories, techniques and training that specifically aim to improve the quality and fidelity of oral translation with a particular emphasis on improved representation of purely African linguistic intentions, intentions originating from an African service member speaking a variety of French that has shaped by various cultures, oral tradition, regional challenges and history.

With my experience on the ground as a starting point, my research will focus on the study of interpretation techniques utilized in multiple communication situations. First, I will study contemporary translation theories while closely considering their feasibility when applied in this unique Francophone military communication environment. Which methods function well or sufficiently? Are there other methods that prove to be less efficient? Through extensive theoretical examination, backed by empirical research, I intend to demonstrate the value of training talented military linguists as professional conference interpreters. Ultimately, the study will propose an extensive conference interpreter training program specifically designed for military interpreters operating in multinational military settings.

This article focuses on the application of a key translation theory, the Interpretive Theory of Translation, or the Theory of Sense, as a potential foundation for the creation of

new training methods specifically tailored to the military conference interpreter operating in complex multinational military environments.

## THE INTERPRETIVE THEORY OF TRANSLATION

The Interpretive Theory of Translation, also known as the “Theory of Sense” or the “Paris School”, was developed in the 1980s by ESIT<sup>1</sup> researchers and conference interpreters, Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer. Choi Jungwha, a professor at the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation at Hankuk University (an ESIT alumni), outlines the Interpretive Theory as a concept built upon four pillars: 1) command of the native language, 2) command of the source language, 3) command of relevant world and background knowledge, and 4) command of interpreting methodology. The first and second pillars refer to the command of one’s native language in all of its nuances and the second language, the latter requiring a lifelong and open-ended learning process. Relevant world and background knowledge constitutes the third pillar which also involves a similar ongoing learning process. The fourth pillar focuses on the concept that the translation process requires an understanding of the sense of the original message and a formulation of the translation based on the synecdoche principle (Junghwa, 2003: 2). In essence, as previously concluded, the mastery of both the native and the target language is required as a baseline or a prerequisite for the development and training of competent translators and interpreters. Acquisition of relevant background knowledge is a continuous process, and the accurate interpretation of the initial message requires the ability to understand the sense of that message and then reformulate that sense in a manner that is acceptable and understandable to the target audience.

### Command of Native and Target Languages

Returning to my initial conclusions and in accordance with the first two “pillars” of the Theory of Sense, an excellent command of both the native and the target languages is required to form the foundation upon which the interpreter can begin to develop the necessary skills to operate successfully in demanding multinational military settings. For the interpreter, the importance of mastery of both languages is quite clear. However, I have been confronted regularly by the challenge posed by the relatively common belief among military colleagues French native speakers will automatically be able to serve as skilled French/English interpreter. In spite of the interaction of two languages, no credit is ever

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<sup>1</sup> École Supérieure d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs, University of Paris III: Sorbonne Nouvelle

given to the native English speaker! Falling victim to this paradigm on occasion, I offer an example in which my military colleagues determined that I should, as a trained interpreter, should be replaced by an untrained native French speaker.

While serving as a liaison officer in Mali, I was called to attend a round-table meeting with several senior Malian military officers for whom I had regularly interpreted over a two-month period in preparation for a U.S.-led multinational Special Forces Exercise *Flintlock*. Prior to the meeting, the recently arrived American military delegation explained that they would not need my interpretation assistance because they had a native French speaker among the group. In spite of this French gentleman's lack of training or experience as an interpreter, he performed very well throughout the session. However, at one point, as a Malian officer discussed ongoing progress of the JCETs (Joint Combined Exchange Training)<sup>2</sup>, the interpreter continuously made reference to the success of the G-7 preparations. As I waited for a moment to politely interject, the senior Malian colonel turned to me and in perfect English said, "Please explain to this gentleman that we are discussing tactical SOF exercises and not an international economic forum." Following my brief explanation, the French gentleman eloquently thanked me for the clarification and continued on without incident for the remainder of the meeting. We shared a laugh after the meeting as I expressed to him my relief that I was not the only one who was easily confused by the reversed pronunciation of the letters 'G' and 'J' when interpreting between French and English. He expressed to me his discomfort that his own delegation did not understand the value of my native English skills or my interpreter training and experience. More importantly, as the exercise liaison officer, my knowledge of the conference discussions and technical terminology was much more developed. Fortunately, in this case, the inexperienced interpreter possessed extensive worldly knowledge and excellent communication skills which ultimately contributed to the success of this meeting.

On other occasions, the automatic choice of the "French native" English speaker over the non-native trained interpreter has had more negative consequences, leading to significant misunderstandings and frustration. For example, a very senior African officer was told by an inexperienced interpreter (native French) that his country would receive a multi-million dollar aviation system when in fact the cooperation package in question was valued in thousands of dollars and referred to equipment to be employed by the country's Army on the *ground*. As the conversation continued, it became quite clear by the context of the conversation that the officers were indeed discussing ground-based equipment, but the interpreter continued to refer to an aviation system. Although the interpreter soon

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Combined Exchange Training events constitute the foundation of tactical training provided prior to and during each iteration of Exercise Flintlock. For additional information on the exercise, consult the U.S. Africa Command Exercise Flintlock Fact Sheet at [www.africom.mil/Doc/9843](http://www.africom.mil/Doc/9843).

understood his error, he was unwilling to admit his original mistake. Ultimately, the senior diplomat present clarified the interpreter's error in order to avoid future misunderstandings. The interpreter involved had been hired based on the fact that he was a native French speaker, a person who had lived in a Francophone country until age 12 and then continued his education in the United States. The defense contractor hiring the individual based employment decisions on the individual's résumé but did not have an interpreter accreditation process in place. In such situations, the interpreter's shortcomings are unfortunately identified as the result of misunderstandings provoked by a lack of training or poor mastery of one of the two (or both languages) involved. In this particular instance, the senior diplomat rectified the situation before the miscommunication could lead to more significant misunderstandings. However, there are many examples of more serious episodes that could ultimately provoke grave consequences. In a recent article, Defense Industry Daily cited an example of what could go wrong with an "unskilled" interpreter that does not have sufficient mastery of both languages involved. The example provided is from documentary video produced in Afghanistan by *The Guardian* newspaper's journalist John McHugh:

In the video, a U.S. Army sergeant and an Afghan tribal elder engage in a conversation about Taliban rocket attacks. The U.S. interpreter incorrectly conveys the tribal leader's response to a question about the security in the area. The elder says that there is no security in the village and that is a problem. The interpreter tells the sergeant that the elder says the security is fine. "We have no problems here." The elder then tells the sergeant that he would like to cooperate with the Americans, and points to the direction from where the Taliban attacks are coming. But he says the villagers can't cooperate under the current conditions because the Taliban are like "ants," they are everywhere and impossible to stop.

The interpreter translates the elder's words by saying, "He is giving many examples, the main point is that if you want to get the ACM [anti-coalition militia] they are behind this road, behind this mountain." As they walk away, the interpreter says "I hate these people."

Defense Industry Daily used this video to highlight the value of reliable and loyal interpreters that understand local dialects and can serve as cultural liaisons. In this particular environment, and as the article aptly points out, "the success of the U.S. and allied mission, as well as the lives of soldiers" depend on capable interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Defense Industry Daily article available at: <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/lend-me-your-ears-us-military-turns-to-contractor-linguists-05934/>



### Command of Relevant World and Background Knowledge

The third pillar of the Interpretive Theory emphasizes the persistent requirement for acquisition of knowledge, to include worldly, general knowledge and more precise knowledge that pertains to the specific situation of communication. In the case of multinational military cooperation settings in Francophone West Africa, knowledge acquisition must take into account worldly knowledge as it affects the overall geopolitical situation on the continent and in the region while emphasizing the multifaceted cultural aspects pertaining to this unique environment. In this respect, the interpreter's work is never done. The interpreter must accept that relevant knowledge acquisition is an ongoing process that must be accepted as a constant. Many of the most important lessons will be learned on the ground, but thorough prior preparation and an understanding of the cultural elements involved will serve to enhance the quality of interpretation and improve overall communication.

In the aforementioned example involving interpretation related to a WC, I was called in to resolve a situation for which I had little initial background information. I was contacted by a frustrated military contractor that requested my assistance as he completed his assignment at a newly constructed military barracks in Niger. His company had completed construction of the bathroom and shower facilities to find that many of the toilets had been damaged within the first few weeks. The individual was angry at what he perceived to be ingratitude on the part of the new army recruits using the facilities, and he asked that I express his displeasure to the group in an effort to stop the "vandalism". Understanding that the contractor did not speak French (or Djarma or Hausa), my initial task was to analyze the situation to ensure that the damaged toilets were indeed the product of a hostile action. The new recruits in block A, from which part of the country did they arrive? The sparsely populated northern border region? Is it safe to assume that they had never operated a modern toilet? These were my first questions to the platoon sergeant. To the latter question, he answered affirmatively, explaining that the recruits had not stuffed sticks down the toilet to damage the system, but rather to clean the bowl. With this information in hand, the defense contractor (still exasperated due to his own lack of understanding) promptly departed to purchase toilet brushes. This, of course, led to another recruit training session on toilet brushes and products. The bottom line here is that the language barrier and the attitude on an individual limited by linguistic capacity and a lack of background knowledge had led many people to initially believe that the recruits were incompetent ingrates, when, in fact their seemingly belligerent acts happened to be the application of a well-intentioned housekeeping skill. In such cases, the interpreter does have a certain obligation to promote improved communication by providing feedback to the supported organization. In this



particular case, the interpreter was obligated to communicate the good will of the recruits and convince the supported organization (via the contractor) that the training effort had potential and was progressing, in spite of outward appearances.

### *Socio-Cultural Aspects of West African Military Cooperation Environments*

The previous example represents a multitude of social settings characterized by cultures (both military and non-military) that, depending on the quality and fidelity of interpretation, may potentially collide or coalesce. At a minimum, the interpreter must strive to reformulate the message in a manner that respects the originator's intention, with the associated cultural nuances, thereby fostering mutual understanding. In the military cooperation environment of West Africa, successful communication must be based on the premise of cultural understanding and respect among peoples, among military organizations and even within a single country's own military. According to Marianne Lederer, translation difficulties are most often triggered by problems confronted at the intercultural level. Often, one finds that the particular notions of one culture do not have corresponding lexical equivalents in another (the target culture). And even if one does manage to adequately express these notions, there is no guarantee that the reader (or listener) will understand these notions. In essence, finding the right word in the target language will not suffice. The interpreter must know how to express the implicit messages contained in the original text (Lederer, 2006 : 102).

In the military cooperation environment of Francophone West Africa, the potential for translation difficulties increases exponentially due to the variety of cultures represented. It is impossible to express the multitude of cultural variations found across this region of Africa. The military interpreter is confronted not only with the challenges presented by the obvious cultural differences (linguistic, social and ethnic). The distinct inter and intra-military cultures present in this environment also increase the complexity of their task. The military interpreter will be collaborating with African military officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers (or sailors or airmen) whose linguistic upbringing and military training reflect formal French schooling and institutions, but whose professional training increasingly reflects training and interaction with new international partners.

### *Military Culture and Protocol*

Throughout West Africa, one finds traditional, centralized organizational structures consistent with traditional French influence, but several nations are now pursuing modernized, professional militaries in collaboration with not only France, but also the United States, China, Japan and several other international partners. To cite an example, recent

conversations with Malian paratroopers reflected the training of certain officers in China and the United States. The concepts, the vocabulary and the acronyms were slightly different than that of their counterparts whose training was limited to French and local programs.

Stepping outside of the Western region for a moment, another such example was presented to interpreters facilitating training provided to the Djiboutian Coast Guard by the U.S. Coast Guard. The Djiboutian Coast Guard was created in 2010, in large part due to the generous contributions of time, money and training offered by the Japanese Defense Forces. The interpreter facilitating this training was obligated to understand the French nautical terminology and rank structures maintained by the new Djiboutian security organization, while expanding their knowledge to better understand U.S. and Japanese Coast Guard ideologies and terminology. In effect, in a few short years the Djiboutian Coast Guard personnel have developed linguistic and cultural patterns that differ slightly from their Djiboutian Navy counterparts who receive the majority of their training from France.

East Africa or West Africa, the militaries of Francophone countries adhere to specific protocols and respect certain unspoken rules that are not immediately evident to the American military service member. Most of these countries' militaries operate under more formal hierarchies with a more pronounced separation between the officer and enlisted ranks. In the U.S. Army, for example, enlisted service members receive in-depth technical and professional training very early on in their careers. As a soldier approaches the ranks of the non-commissioned officer (NCO), he is expected to accept more responsibility, and training becomes increasingly more focused on the development and perfection of leadership skills. On the contrary, the West African soldier will rarely be assigned significant responsibilities and once promoted to the NCO ranks, any leadership expectations will be limited due to the traditionally centralized military structure common to most West African militaries. Recent training initiatives organized by the United States and France aim to promote the professionalization of the African enlisted ranks, but the existing structures often limit or even hinder communication.

As recent as 2010, I participated as the lead interpreter responsible for the assignments of seven French/English interpreters supporting a multinational special forces exercise in Burkina Faso. Of the seven, the most talented and capable interpreter was a U.S. Army National Guard sergeant. Born in Anglophone Cameroon and raised in Francophone Cameroon, this trained interpreter understood many of the cultural nuances common to several West African countries. More importantly, his linguistic mastery and years of experience as a journalist and interpreter operating in multiple diplomatic and multinational settings, coupled with a keen intuitive sense and worldly point of view, resulted in a capability that far exceeded that of his peers. However, during initial meetings prior to the exercise, certain African officers refused to listen to his interpreted messages due to the fact

that he was standing before them in a sergeant's uniform. The following day, I instructed all interpreters to wear civilian clothes. With a simple change of uniform, the interpreter was suddenly respected for his exceptional skills and was soon regarded as the top interpreter, regularly sought for senior-level and ministerial discussions pertaining to the exercise. In this case, an understanding of African protocol and relevant customs pertaining to military ranks prompted an adjustment that ultimately served to maximize the effectiveness of the interpreter team.

U.S. military protocol, by contrast, is often perceived by African counterparts as too informal. Our "mission comes first" mentality and achievement-oriented energy, generally considered proactive and positive within the U.S. environment, often lead us to commence meetings without respecting daily protocols that serve to form the foundation of relationships across African partnerships. Experiences on the continent have taught us to respect the extra five minutes of courteous salutations and polite conversation that so often precede meetings with African counterparts. Even the simple morning handshake that is expected when operating in company with French military partners is occasionally misunderstood. The American racing by with a well-intentioned "Good morning!" may be perceived as inconsiderate for ignoring an outstretched hand. The interpreter plays a key role in understanding and respecting such sociological and cultural differences, not only within and between the various militaries, but also between the various ethnicities and non-military social groups represented during military engagements conducted in Francophone West Africa.

#### *West African Culture and the Impact of Oral Tradition*

I offer examples of military cultural differences first due to the fact that the military interpreter is more likely to initially comprehend and relate to cultural differences and similarities on a military level. As relationships develop and friendships are forged, the interpreter will gain valuable insights into the ancestral, social, cultural, or national experiences unique to the environment. For example, in spite of colonial influences, the populations of this region have managed to successfully preserve and respect certain oral traditions that have been passed down from one generation to the next for hundreds of years. Once initiated, the outsider begins to notice and understand certain unspoken and spoken intentions present in West African military dialog. Among so many examples of these cultural "lessons learned", one particular episode stands out.

A few years ago, I was caught off guard by the comments of a Burkinabé Gendarme lieutenant. We had just been introduced and continued to converse as we entered a conference hall to attend a ministerial-level meeting related to security cooperation initiatives in northern Burkina Faso. As we greeted the other military officers assembled for

the meeting, the lieutenant then turned to the Minister of Transportation and proudly stated, “Bonjour, Esclave!” to which the minister pleasantly replied, “Hello, Master”. Admittedly, I am not a native French speaker, but after years of study and training coupled with the fact that I had been living in Burkina Faso for over six months at that point, I had become relatively comfortable interpreting and conversing in all types of situations. Suddenly, however, I began to question my linguistic capacity. Perhaps I had misunderstood the accent or the intonation? Maybe my synapses were not firing correctly at the end of a long day, but I was certain that the young lieutenant had just called the minister a “slave”. And indeed, he had. Following the meeting, I enjoyed the lieutenant’s animated and good-natured description of the oral tradition referred to by many in this part of the world as “parenté à plaisanterie”, a sort of regulated social code founded on joking relationships established between specific ethnicities or groups of people, a code that not only allows interlocutors to insult one another but actually encourages such behavior! My first exposure to the tradition was a product of the regulated and long-established “slave/master” relationship between the Samo and Moose ethnic groups of the region. Of course, the minister clearly out-ranked the lieutenant, but in this case, oral tradition trumped formal state protocol rules. Several Burkinabé friends and associates explained that this code plays a fundamental role in the mitigation of social conflicts and serves to foster group cohesion. At a minimum, it usually provokes a good laugh.

### *Socio-Cultural Knowledge Acquisition and Preparation*

Comprehension of the innumerable social and cultural nuances unique to the milieu requires continuous general research, detailed preparation prior to each specific military engagement activity, and experience on the ground. While certain knowledge can only be gained through direct experience, the interpreter can facilitate and improve knowledge acquisition by consulting human sources or experts in the given field and by preparing personal glossaries that are tailored to the subject matter and terminology pertaining to the specific event (Gile, 2009: 151). In my particular case, both processes have been fully integrated. Personal glossaries are constantly updated with information gained through collaboration with French SOF officers, Malian non-commissioned officers or European Liaison Officers at AFRICOM, to name a few. Further, as a U.S. Navy officer, I am often obliged to seek English lexical expertise on certain U.S. Army, Marine and Air Force terms and acronyms before I can even begin to contemplate a French equivalent that is acceptable to the African or French military audience. Increasingly, the interpreter is confronted with linguistic cross-contamination, specifically when it comes to acronyms. For example, I recently resolved a translation difficulty with the assistance of a French Army officer who confirmed that the French now regularly use the ISAF-adopted acronym “TIC” (troops in

contact) as a part of their routine operational vocabulary. Hence the challenge for the interpreter or translator that searches a French language source without the knowledge that certain terms are actually Anglicized.

Confronted with a more complex acronym challenge, I recently toiled over the translation of a French update briefing that contained the phrase “MEP FARP QRF”. Given the French military’s regular adoption of English acronyms, I immediately recognized the acronyms FARP (Forward Air Refueling Point) and QRF (Quick Reaction Force). Given the phrase’s use of U.S. acronyms, I fell into a trap that had me searching numerous English word lists and relevant sources to find the meaning of the third term, “MEP”. After a good twenty minutes, I picked up the phone and called the resident acronym expert, a French military liaison officer serving at AFRICOM. His response? “It is not a real military acronym. “MEP” stands for *mise en place* (“establishment”, in this context), but we kept your acronyms in the phrase for efficiency because we have not invented French acronyms to represent those two concepts.” I do not like to abuse the privilege of having such expertise just a phone call away, but he answered a question in 30 seconds that I had been struggling to answer for over 20 minutes. Fortunately, this communication with the AFRICOM LNOs has resulted in the development of a mutually beneficial relationship.

Both AFRICOM interpreters and French LNOs work in bilingual environments daily, therefore ongoing collaboration is helpful to both parties. This relationship, however, should be expanded to include all Francophone assets. I have often collaborated with French officers that confirm the translation of a phrase or acronym used regularly by the French Army only to be corrected later by an African officer confirming that his country’s army uses a different term. The real challenge presents itself when the French and African officer are in the same room disputing the correct use of a certain term, as Anglophone officials are standing by asking for a concise interpretation of the conversation. In this case, who is right? Often, both are right. Although both armies speak the same language (French), terminology and argot for each have evolved as a function of the diverging experiences of each, hence the aforementioned ISAF-adopted French use of the U.S. acronym “TIC” to describe troop contact with the enemy. The Malian paratrooper regiment composed of personnel trained in France, the United States and China will likely employ a military vocabulary that is quite different from that of the Belgian-trained light infantry battalion in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Recognizing and respecting these linguistic variances, particularly those that are adopted as a result of the influence of international military cooperation culture, is the key to understanding the situation of communication and ultimately providing the most accurate interpretation or translation.

These are just a few examples provided to underscore the importance of focusing knowledge acquisition on the social and cultural diversity characteristic of the military

environment of Francophone West Africa. Given the U.S. military's fondness for "roadmaps", I refer the interpreter's attention to an apt metaphor that serves as a model to facilitate application of the Interpretive Theory in the culturally complex environment in question. Daniel Gile (ESIT Paris) refers to a cultural "road-map" in which each language and its associated culture can be linked to a set of available road signs. When producing a source-speech, the "Senders" use the signs available in the source language and places them along the roads of a particular route. The translators use signs available in the target language and place them along the same general route. The main objective of the translator (or interpreter) is to lead the "Receiver", or end user, to the same destination as originally depicted by the Sender. As far as possible, the translators must try to place their signs in a configuration that is consistent with the Senders' use of their own signs. When reading a translation, Receivers have time to stop and look at the signs along the way, perhaps note a particular selection or arrangement of signs, approve or disapprove. On the other hand, listeners, when listening to a speech (to include the interpreter's speech), travel at high speeds and have less time to contemplate the individual signs. For translators, it is therefore important to be able to select and place target-language signs carefully so as to lead Receivers to the destination along a route closely resembling that depicted by the Sender, whereas for interpreters, "it is more important to be able to drive rapidly to their destination, following speakers at an imposed speed." (Gile, 2009: 73-74).

Operating in Francophone West Africa, military interpreters have the advantage of an innate understanding of at least one set of these "cultural road signs", specifically those indicators that refer to sociolinguistic and cultural aspects of the general military environment. This understanding also serves as point of common ground between U.S. interpreters and their multinational counterparts. In essence, such international military camaraderie forms a foundation upon which linguistic and cultural collaboration can be developed thereby enhancing the quality of interpretation and ultimately, the effectiveness of communication. Development of a dedicated cadre of trained professional military conference interpreters would offer this and many other advantages.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF A MILITARY CONFERENCE INTERPRETER PROGRAM**

The military interpreter often is the first to initiate communication on the ground, and as the initial "voice", this person enjoys the first opportunity to establish rapport between partner nations involved in the particular event. Often, shared military experiences members quickly open the door to improved communications. In some respects, the interpreter and the foreign service member are speaking the same military language, a particular jargon that an inexperienced civilian interpreter would not automatically understand. In this regard, the military interpreter is one step ahead given past knowledge



acquisition and regular access to new, evolving information that is relevant to the military setting in question. Some information is automatically acquired through the interpreter's daily exposure to military events and doctrine. Due to his integration in the military organization, he understands the Department of Defense's strategic objectives and relevant mission requirements that are unique to his own service branch and to his particular command. In addition to this information advantage, the military interpreter is well-versed in service-specific and joint military jargon and acronyms. Lastly, the military interpreter is subject to military ethics and discipline and is held accountable for performance and actions.

### *The Military Interpreter's Support for the Decision-Making Process*

The aforementioned information advantages, combined with thorough preparation and ongoing knowledge acquisition, enable the military interpreter to better support the leadership's decision-making processes. For example, understanding the Commander's Intent or the Commander's Critical Information Requirements related to a particular military event helps the interpreter to better express the intentions of the interlocutors involved. As an example, I was assigned to interpret for two U.S. general officers during a maritime security conference involving ministers from several African countries. The conference focused on the potential for military cooperation initiatives that would be organized by the United States with NATO and West African partner participation. While preparing for the conference, I learned via a French press source that China had just offered a multi-billion dollar security assistance package to a group of African countries, many of whom would be represented at the maritime conference to be held the following week. I shared this information with the generals prior to the conference which helped them to prepare for potential discussions related to the matter and to ultimately evaluate the potential impact of the Chinese assistance package on established and potential U.S. military cooperation initiatives.

On another occasion, I was designated to interpret during a meeting between a senior U.S. officer and the head of state of a West African country. A local interpreter accompanied the president, and I was assigned to interpret on behalf of the U.S. officer. As the president spoke (in French), he referred to a major security issue affecting a section of his country, a problem that was being provoked primarily due to the presence of organized crime and the activities of one particular criminal. The president's interpreter filtered the original message, translating the words "*brigand*" and "*bandit*" as "terrorist" at every mention. Given the continuous repetition of this error, I deduced that the interpreter was aware of certain guidelines and restrictions that would govern the United States' ability to provide military training and equipment. Specifically, Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act grants the Department of Defense certain authorities to provide such



training and equipment to foreign militaries. 1206 programs, however, are specifically limited to programs directly linked to counterterrorism efforts.<sup>4</sup> In essence, the local interpreter was aware that the bandit and his cohorts would not inspire much reaction on the part of the U.S. DoD. A “terrorist”, however, would likely elicit a more favorable response in terms of security cooperation initiatives. Following the meeting, I shared this observation with the U.S. official which helped him to make a more informed decision in response to certain requests posed by the president.

Certain situations warrant the interpreter’s input and feedback. Given the military interpreter’s integration within the military unit or command, he has the potential to become a sort of trusted agent upon which the leadership can rely. A cadre of military interpreters, with the requisite language skills, a high level of professional interpreter training and experience, and the analytical capacity to process and communicate relevant situational knowledge, would offer military leadership a key strategic advantage.

#### *U.S. Department of Defense Training Initiatives*

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) published its *Defense Strategic Plan for Language Skills, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities, 2011-2016*. The plan represents the DoD’s commitment to further enhancing language and cultural skills of its service members while improving regional expertise and understanding.

U.S. forces and our international partners will continue to participate in missions worldwide to protect and defend national interests and security. Inherent to these missions are language and culture barriers that impede the ability of our military and civilian personnel to successfully carry out essential missions. As we continue to operate globally, it is imperative for U.S. forces to work alongside of our allies and local populations. This action cannot be done without winning the trust of local people and government officials. We must be able to communicate effectively and demonstrate respect and appreciation for other cultures and ways of living. Only then will U.S. forces be able to confidently and competently meet the current and future challenges of a globalized world.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of linguistic capabilities and cultural awareness, the DoD recognizes the need for vast improvement across the board. The strategic plan emphasizes language acquisition and cultural immersion by promoting new methods, to include training collaboration with international counterparts. The DoD currently invests a significant amount of time and money to provide valuable language training to personnel. For example, AFRICOM personnel now have access to language acquisition Defense Language Institute

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, see the Defense Security Cooperation Agency’s Section 1206 Train and Equip information sheet at <http://www.dsca.mil/programs/section-1206-train-and-equip>

<sup>5</sup>Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, *Department of Defense Strategic Plan for Language Skills, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities, 2011-2016*. Available at : <http://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Documents/RFM/Readiness/DLNSEO/files/STRAT%20PLAN.pdf>

courses offered in French, Arabic and Swahili, among others. However, DoD language training objectives seem to suggest that a certain level of *school translation*<sup>6</sup> is enough to qualify the military linguist as a professional translator or interpreter. Language programs focus on mastery of the foreign language but translation is general limited to what would be deemed school translation. With the exception of the Army's O9L Interpreter/Translator program, professional interpretation training is not included in DoD language curriculums.

The Defense Language Institute describes O9L as a program that provides translation and interpretation skill development in eight-week courses for native and heritage speaking soldiers as part of their Advanced Individual Training. This training, however, is limited to a few select languages (Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Pashto).<sup>7</sup> Further, the program is limited to recruitment of native speakers of these select few high demand foreign languages. The Army is currently developing plans to expand the program to the Pacific and Africa Command areas of responsibility.<sup>8</sup> With this, interpreter/translator training programs will expand to include new language pairs. Perhaps the Army will also consider the reciprocal value of its professional interpreters possessing native English speaking capabilities.

My research aims to support the enhancement of the Army O9L program to extend the professional training period to allow for completion of a full professional conference interpreter training program designed to elevate standards beyond language proficiency to a level that would align U.S. military interpreter capabilities with that of professional conference interpreters operating in similar international settings.

### *Professional Training for Military Conference Interpreters*

Increasingly, international military cooperation in West Africa involves direct involvement with not only senior military officials, but also with senior diplomats and representatives from strategic international organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and NATO. The military interpreter operating in this complex international arena must be capable of performing up to the professional interpretation standards to which these international organizations are accustomed. As

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Gile describes *school translation* as translation designed to help students acquire foreign languages. Translation exercises in the school setting serve mostly as drills to test foreign language proficiency (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) School translation is intended to serve the students themselves, in a closed system that is limited to the teacher and language students. The main purpose of *professional translation* is to help people who speak different languages communicate in specific situations. (Gile, 2009: 26-27).

<sup>7</sup> For more information see Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center's *General Catalog, 2011-2012*, available at: [http://www.dliflc.edu/archive/documents/DLICatalog2011\\_2012\\_NEW.pdf](http://www.dliflc.edu/archive/documents/DLICatalog2011_2012_NEW.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> 2009 Army Posture Statement, Interpreter/Translator Program Information Paper, available at: [http://www.army.mil/aps/O9/information\\_papers/interpreter\\_translator\\_program.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/O9/information_papers/interpreter_translator_program.html).

Daniel Gile asserts, “Top level interpreters are required to be able to make speeches at a language quality level expected from the personalities they interpret, be they diplomats, scientists, politicians, artists, intellectuals, and appropriate for the relevant circumstances: press conferences, political speeches, scientific presentations, intellectual discussions, etc.” (Gile, 2006 : 9). In West Africa, I have been called upon to interpret for admirals and generals from multiple countries, ambassadors, ministers and heads of state. I have also been called upon to interpret for children receiving medical treatment and soccer teams promoting civic action in their local communities. The military interpreter must be up to the task, whether that means rendering an interpreted message appropriate for the partner nation’s senior government officials or communicating with school children during a civil military coordination activity. A tailored conference interpreter training program based on the Interpretive Theory of translation and developed in accordance with International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) recommended standards will enable military interpreters to the requisite level of competence to successfully manage the challenges presented in the multinational cooperation environment.

Echoing the first two pillars of the Interpretive Theory of Translation, AIIC underscores the mastery of working languages and excellent command of the native language as a prerequisite for basic conference interpreter capability.<sup>9</sup> Current DoD language training programs provide excellent instruction in multiple languages to thousands of U.S. service members in various locations in the United States and throughout the world. A military conference interpreter program would be established on the initial skill sets provided by existing language programs. As Danica Seleskovitch attests, « Pour l’interprète, la connaissance de plusieurs langues n’est pas un but en soi; c’est un préalable indispensable pour que l’interprétation telle que nous avons tenté de la définir puisse s’effectuer » (Seleskovitch, 1984 : 126). In effect, for the interpreter, knowledge of several languages is not a goal in and of itself but rather an indispensable prerequisite for the conduct of effective interpretation.

Initially, the training program would adhere to certain best practices for interpreter training programs as identified by AIIC<sup>10</sup>:

- A language aptitude test would be required for both the native and the working language(s) prior to commencement of the course. Access to the course would be based on demonstrated mastery of the languages concerned.
- Courses would be taught by qualified conference interpreters.

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<sup>9</sup> International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) Website “Conference interpreting”, available at <http://aiic.net/page/4003/conference-interpreting/lang/1>

<sup>10</sup> International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) Website “Conference interpreting Training Programs: Best Practices 2010”, available at <http://aiic.net/page/60>

- The curriculum would include instruction in both consecutive and simultaneous interpretation.
- The course duration would be 3 semesters long.

During the first two semesters of the course, interpreters would learn the necessary techniques for effective interpretation (for example, note-taking for consecutive interpretation) while focusing heavily on knowledge acquisition skills and interpretation methodology consistent with the Theory of Sense. The curriculum management of interpretation difficulties that may present themselves in real-world situations of communication: jokes, technical difficulties, ethical challenges, conflict or arguments, etc.

The third and final semester would be dedicated to knowledge acquisition in a practical environment. One of three primary goals set forth in the DoD Strategic plan goal is to strengthen language skills, regional expertise and cultural capabilities of military personnel in order to increase interoperability and to build partner capacity. To achieve this goal, the plan sets forth the value of capitalizing on the language skills, regional expertise and cultural capabilities of international partners and allies (DoD Strategic Language Plan, 2011-2016). This third semester would involve an extensive in-country training program, similar to the familiarization training conducted by U.S. Foreign Area Officers. For example, the interpreter trainee would spend the semester in a Francophone West African country working in the military environment and collaborating with military interpreter counterparts. The most valuable education for me as a military interpreter was the chance to work a major military exercise in Burkina Faso, integrated into a multinational team of twelve military linguists: five Burkinabé Army and Air Force officers and NCOs, one Mauritanian, a d'Ivoirian, a Nigerien, a Cameroonian and four Americans. Over a four-week period, we collaborated daily on translation difficulties, cultural questions, uniform issues and multiple other subjects. To this day, most of us remain in contact and utilize our interpreter network to answer questions and share experiences. The purpose of this final semester would be to offer the military interpreter similarly rewarding experiences that would ultimately serve to improve interpreter proficiency and increase cultural awareness while building relationships and reinforcing international partnerships.

### WAY AHEAD/CONCLUSION

The African Union envisions “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena.”<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense supports this vision of a peaceful and prosperous Africa by focusing its missions in the region on capacity-building of African nations and organizations in a

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<sup>11</sup> African Union Website, “Vision and Mission”, available at: <http://au.int/en/about/vision>

manner that fosters development of "African solutions to African problems." As stated by the U.S. Africa Command Commander in 2013, "We very firmly believe in African solutions to African problems. My president has said it. The former secretary of State has said it. I've said it. We firmly believe it. But we also believe that we can help when asked."<sup>12</sup> When the DoD is called to the continent to help, communication plays a critical role. A key facilitator of this communication, the military interpreter must be up to the challenge. Proficiency and knowledge should be maximized to enable the interpreter to face the challenges presented in culturally and linguistically complex military environments.

In the West African security environment, in particular, the successful interpreter must comprehend the basic foundations of communication in the regions, to include the indelible impact of oral tradition, indigenous languages, colonial history and current geopolitical developments. Further, the interpreter must have a clear understanding of the military cultures involved in each situation of communication. In this regard, military interpreters have a distinctive advantage over their civilian counterparts. The establishment and employment of a cadre of professional American military conference interpreters, selected based on command of their working languages and then trained in an intensive professional conference interpreter program, would serve to reinforce relationships among our African partners and ultimately, to improve military cooperation across the region.

*Julie A. House\**  
*Translator and Interpreter*

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<sup>12</sup>U.S. AFRICOM Public Affairs, March 26, 2013 "General Ham: Small, Tailored U.S. Military Presence Best for Supporting African Nations", available at: <http://www.africom.mil/Newsroom/Article/10549/general-ham-small-tailored-us-military-presence-best-for-supporting-african-nations>

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