Book Review: Meeting the Language Challenges of NATO Operations

Real life observations of failed communications between military forces in conflict areas and the local interpreters they recruit are a highlight of this book that attempts to bridge the gap between a real world situation and the professionalization of language services.

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Meeting the Language Challenges of NATO Operations:
Policy, Practice and Professionalization

Ian P. Jones and Louise Askew
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This book is part of the series Languages at War edited by Hilary Footit (University of Reading) and Michael Kelly (University of Southampton). The editors have wanted to promote an interdisciplinary approach to the role of languages in war and peace enforcement. Thus, some of the other authors in the series have presented aspects of applied linguistics, translation studies or intercultural communication.

Ian Jones and Louise Askew for their part bring two sets of skills to their particular book. Jones, an associate member of AIIC, is a former head of linguistic services at SHAPE and contributed to evaluations conducted by NATO in various fields of operation such as Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and finally Afghanistan. He was then commissioned by NATO to write a complete strategy for an efficient language service to support operations in the field. Askew is a translator and worked as a revisor of English translation in the Balkans. She was awarded her PhD on language policies in international organisations and is currently working for the International Committe of the
Red Cross.

In their introduction the authors indicate that they believe the value of their book lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between academic studies of translation and interpretation (i.e. the theory of interpretation) and the difficulties faced by interpreters in the field (i.e. the practice of interpretation). They do give a number of references to learned books and articles, but in fact the true appeal of their work in my opinion is in their real life observations of failed communications between military forces in conflict areas and the local interpreters they recruit. The decision by NATO to ask Jones to prepare a comprehensive strategy is the best contribution the book makes to this field of enquiry.

Chapter 1 covers the aftermath of WW II and the changing role of NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by NATO’s peacekeeping operations in the Balkans after the signing of the Dayton Agreement.

Chapter 2 deals with NATO’s realisation that it needs to institutionalise the growing use of English and create a common military vocabulary to ensure interoperability between the different national forces in its theatres of operations.

Chapter 3 describes the involvement of the World Bank, UNHCR, the EU and NATO itself in bringing Russia into the cooperative efforts to ensure the success of the cease fire in the Balkans. Identifying the problems raised by poor communications in the field where 60,000 soldiers are sent to keep a fragile peace shows how a bewildering lack of consistency in the level of linguistic skills and ignorance on the part of officers of what good interpretation could do for them is often responsible for the breakdown of communication. Jones’ description of how local interpreters were recruited will be of interest to the AIIC group Interpreters in Conflict Zones (ICZ) since he shows that what was lacking was a clear linguistic strategy, a proper description of job requirements and basic training before deployment.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 deal with the struggle to implement a series of ad hoc solutions meant to overcome the problems arising from inadequate working conditions, insufficient language skills and absence of any coherent introduction to what was expected from local interpreters wherever the authors were working. Chapter 5 is a fascinating synopsis of the events in Serbia and Kosovo in the period 1998-99.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 cover three visits in 2003, 2006 and 2009 to Afghanistan where at first the working conditions and accommodation, access to documents (from computers to other tools for the preparation of relevant terminology) were woefully inadequate. Furthermore, even when a head of linguistic services came to be recognised as necessary, the first persons sent out were only there for a couple of months, were not guaranteed any continuity, and were not picked for their language proficiency or managerial skills. The gradual improvement both in the facilities offered interpreters and the level of skills they develop testifies to the success of the plans instituted by Jones to set up systematic selection and training of local interpreters.

Chapter 9 raises another interesting question: the matter of trust so essential to ensure the success of communication across linguistic or cultural barriers. Does trust rely on making the linguist part of the military unit he is assigned to? That is, by giving him a uniform and a weapon? This provides the soldiers with a feeling of security but it also raises an ethical problem since it may jeopardise the reliability, accuracy and neutrality of the interpreter.

AIIC’s ICZ group has lobbied against arming interpreters. The group has also more recently sent a petition requesting the UN to provide better protection for interpreters who have worked for the armed forces of several countries in Afghanistan since they and their families are often directly targeted by the Taliban.
Chapter 10 is the culmination of the combined experience of Jones and Askew in the various theatres of NATO operations. It describes the result of Jones’ work for NATO in the drafting of a comprehensive linguistic policy which he calls the NATO doctrine. He finds the outsourcing of language services to be costly and inefficient since interpreters recruited by private contract are usually poorly trained and not professional and thus ineffective in the field. In the light of the different situations described in the previous chapters and similarities in the shortcomings he and Askew had observed, he produces a blue print for the organisation of linguistic services which would ensure more successful communication and can be used by international organisations and NGOs. I found the lengthy verbatim reports of interviews with local interpreters to be somewhat repetitive. However, as concrete examples they show that despite differences in the specificities of each situation, there are common features defining poor linguistic services. This is interesting and may help to convince military or other authorities of the need to avoid the pitfalls of a haphazard organisation of interpretation.

The reader of this work will be reassured that the linguistic doctrine that emerges is a systematic analysis of what is necessary to improve the efficiency of communications across cultural and linguistic divides. The steps suggested to achieve this aim are very much in line with what is currently taught in all the best interpreting schools. I refer in particular to the need to set up formal selection processes to screen individuals with the necessary language skills. This should be followed up with training sessions to teach basic techniques of consecutive and simultaneous interpretation. Other topics should include the fundamental principles of accuracy, completeness of the message to be transmitted, absolute confidentiality and an understanding of the links between professionalism and the respect to which the interpreter is entitled if he performs his task adequately.

The book dovetails nicely with the Conflict Zone Field Guide for Civilian Translators/Interpreters and Users of Their Services published in 2012 by AIIC, Red T and the FIT. In that document strong emphasis was laid on the need for better training to improve the quality of services and also on the necessity for users of interpreters to grasp the importance of providing adequate working conditions.

Recommended citation format: