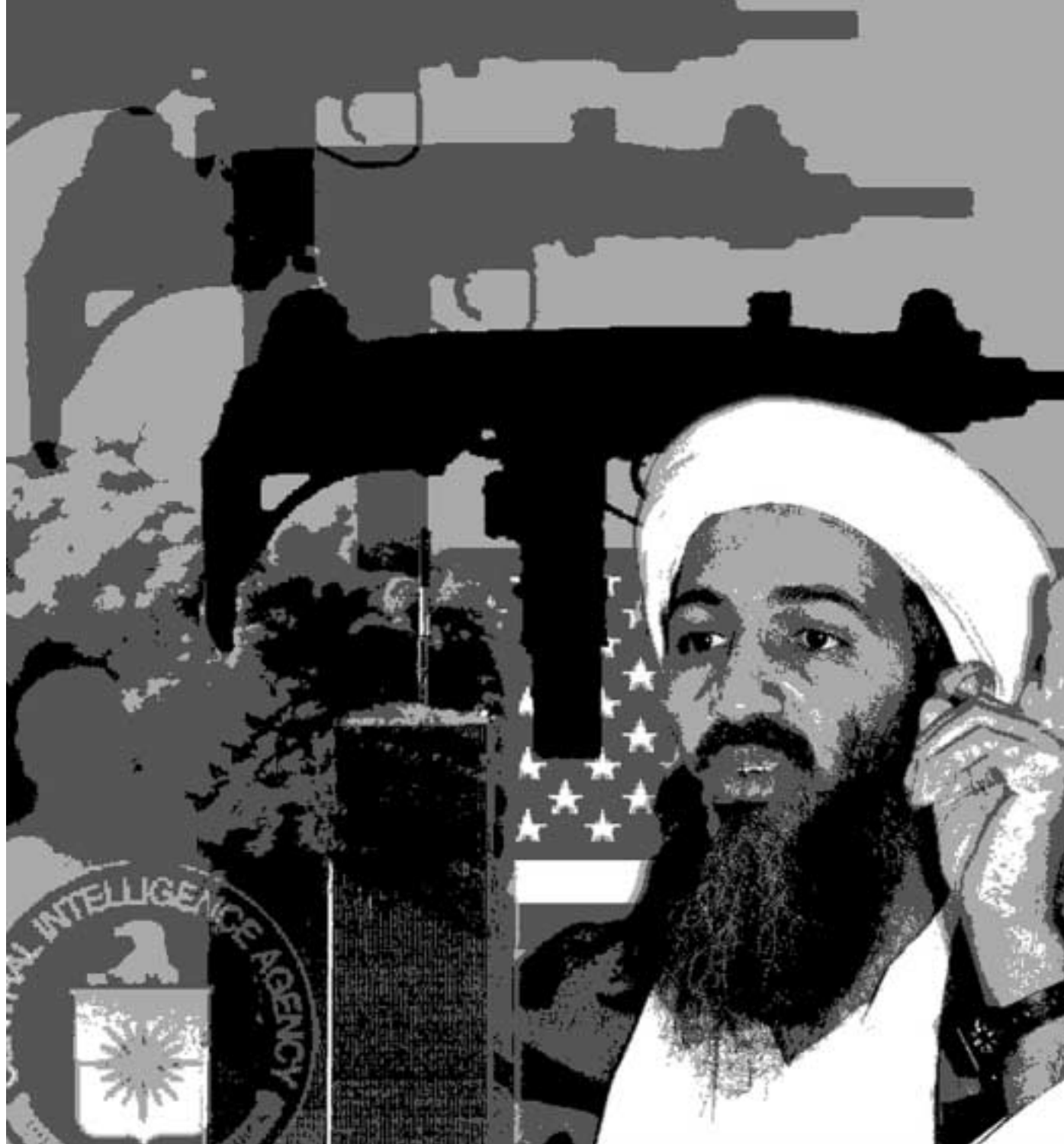


Translation and terrorism



A shortage of interpreters means terrorist warnings may be slipping through the security net. **Alexandra Russell-Bitting** reports from the ATA conference

Could the September 11 attacks have been prevented if the US intelligence community had had sufficient translation resources? Is a shortage of translators severely hampering the War on Terrorism? What has the US government done since the attacks to remedy the shortfall? These pointed questions were raised during the recent Annual Conference in Atlanta at a meeting on translation and terrorism organized by the ATA Public Relations Committee on Friday, 8 November, 2002.

Senior language officials from the FBI, Pentagon, the CIA and the media were invited to speak in a panel discussion moderated by Kevin Hendzel, ATA PR Committee Co-Chair.

The meeting, co-sponsored by ASET International, JTG, Inc. and Rencontres Traduction Financière, represented the first time senior representatives of the US intelligence community appeared before the professional translation community to discuss the impact of federal language capacity on anti-terrorism efforts.

The event drew a crowd of over 700, who packed the auditorium at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta, along with a stream of journalists, leading to unprecedented media exposure for the translation and interpretation industry. Filmed segments of the panel, along with individual interviews with ATA translators and the exhibit hall, ran on all the network stations – NBC, CBS, ABC and Fox – along with CNN Headline News. The Associated Press did a story that was posted on CNN.com, and a local Hispanic newspaper, *Atlanta Latino* also published a report.

Federal Language Capacity in Crisis

In his opening comments, Kevin Hendzel noted that the impact of 9/11 included the realization for many Americans that the whole world does not speak English and that the lack of skilled translators is a threat to national security. There are 200 million Arabic speakers in 25 countries and 40 million speakers of Pashto, Dari, Farsi and Uzbek, said Hendzel, but only 614 students in the US are currently studying those languages.

The National Security Education Act was passed in the early 1990s to help remedy the shortage of linguists, yet the situation has actually worsened. By 2000, it was serious enough for congressional hearings to conclude that ‘the levels of language expertise

that were adequate in years past just don’t cut it today.’ After September 11, there were disturbing press reports that voice interceptions in Arabic had gone untranslated.

The panelists were Glenn H. Nordin, Assistant Director for Language at the Office of the Secretary of Defense; Dr. Ronald Wolfe, an Arabic language expert, former Air Force linguist, who lived 16 years in Egypt and translated the first round of al-Qaeda tapes; Dr. Richard Brecht, Director of the National Foreign Language Center; and Margaret Gulotta, Chief of Language Services at the FBI.

1. Is There Really a Shortage of Linguists?

In response to Kevin’s first question about whether press reports about the shortage of linguists were true, Margaret Gulotta downplayed the problems, saying that while the FBI has a way to go, the situation has

needs experts in Arabic, Pashto and other less commonly studied languages. A big problem, he said, is that linguists are not properly remunerated. For example, after he passed the State Department’s Arabic exam in 2000, he was only paid \$17.50/hour as an independent contractor. That someone so highly qualified, with a degree from Georgetown and 16 years’ experience in an Arabic-speaking country, would be paid at such a low rate drew gasps and moans from the audience of sympathetic linguists.

In response to questions from the floor on the subject of pay, Margaret Gulotta responded that linguist pay is slowly increasing, but warned the linguists present that they would ‘never get rich working for the government.’ She admitted that not all the languages the FBI needs have been covered. For instance, of the 150 Arabic translators targeted, 130 have been hired.

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2. Can the National Security Agency Prevent Another Attack?

Referring to language capacity at the Department of Defense, Kevin asked whether the NSA is overwhelmed. Glenn Nordin noted that analysts need foreign languages, but the DOD refuses to hire staff linguists in order to preserve ‘flexibility.’ Yet a potential pool of linguists exists in the form of active and reserve military, the civilian workforce and independent contractors. For example, there are over 1,000 contract linguists in the Balkans alone, according to Nordin.

He also pointed out that not all translation work requires the highest-level security clearance. For instance, linguists are needed to review unclassified news from the foreign press. Such information is essential to develop a knowledge of foreign culture without the ‘spin’ the American media might put on it so that important information won’t be inadvertently discarded.

3. Why Aren’t Enough Linguists Being Trained?

In response to a question from the floor about the lack of translation degree programs in US universities, Margaret

improved. Since 9/11, over 500 linguists have been hired without sacrificing the requirements for security clearance and language expertise at the Master’s Degree level, she insisted.

Yet the other panelists were less upbeat. In Glenn Nordin’s opinion, the shortage of linguists is indeed ‘failing to meet intelligence requirements.’ The lack of teaching, learning and using foreign languages in the US, he said, ‘endangers US national security and international security.’

‘Too Few Speakers of Too Few Languages’

Richard Brecht concurred and noted that there has been ‘no sustained effort to remedy the shortage’ of linguists. This is not a sudden language crisis, he pointed out, but an ongoing, long-term crisis. September 11 did not change the world, it changed our understanding of the world, kindling a spark of awareness that ‘our ignorance has implications for our safety.’ We have ‘one huge deficit,’ Brecht stressed, ‘too few speakers of too few languages.’

In Ronald Wolfe’s view, the commercial market for translation is geared towards Western European languages, whereas national security

Gulotta agreed that there are not enough translation and interpretation programs. She emphasized that T&I programs are crucial since, as all professionals know, 'speaking two languages doesn't make you a translator.'

Kevin followed up with a question for the panelists on why the situation hasn't got any better, despite the five national initiatives that have been launched over the past 40 years, described in one of several handouts. Richard Brecht responded that the US has had this same crisis for over 50 years. The problem, he said succinctly, is that we 'ain't got a plan' and that the government initiatives taken have had 'too little focus.' Things always get better for a time. To cope with the perceived threats from abroad, US authorities trained Russian translators in the 1960s and Arabic translators in the 1970s, but then drift sets in.

For instance, after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, a language training program was quickly set up, but once the perceived threat to national security had passed, the program lost steam. Brecht also cited 'incredible ignorance' on the part of the government, which apparently thinks that it can teach candidates Arabic in six weeks instead of six years.

to the choir, but urged the ATA to 'go out and sing your song' on professional development.

He also noted that the government agencies in the intelligence community have been co-operating with each other since 1982 in the Foreign Language Committee, and suggested that government intervention could also come from municipal governments.

To another question from the audience about whether there is any federal money for translation and interpretation programs, Brecht replied that the federal role in education is very weak and that legislation needed to be enacted for funding to be provided.

4. What Skill Level is Required of Translators?

We hear the terms 'native speaker' and 'heritage speaker' mentioned in the media, Kevin said, and asked the panelists what actual expertise is required of linguists in the intelligence community.

Wolfe pointed out that a 'heritage speaker' (or 'kitchen table speaker' – presumably someone who learned a language other than English as a child or from immigrant parents) is not a translator. Saying that 'if you can speak a language, you can translate it' is like saying 'if you can breathe, you can be

education system is not the government language system, he reminded the audience. According to Nordin, we must invest in education from the elementary through the high school level, and in the retention and enhancement of heritage languages. He urged that more time and money be spent on at least three years of language study, including in-country study.

'Pure Technology Is Not the Answer'

Margaret Gulotta cited current government initiatives, such as the National Virtual Translation Center, but cautioned that computers are only useful to help human translation because of the issue of accuracy. Ron Wolfe agreed that technology is important but that pure technology is not the answer, noting that human translation is not fully understood by management in government. Glenn Nordin also advocated computer-assisted translation rather than machine translation and mentioned Alan Melby's session on MAT 'toolbuilders.'

5. How Vulnerable Are We?

Kevin asked the panelists if there is a risk that we won't hear the warnings, that we will see mistranslations or that there won't be enough resources for translators. Margaret Gulotta acknowledged that in terms of resources, the 'FBI is not there yet. The Intelligence community must share its resources,' she said, and has in fact been talking for years. For example, it has set up databases of qualified linguists with security clearance and established standards. But there is a 'new sense of urgency' now, she said, so people are finally listening.

As for US vulnerability, Richard Brecht sent shivers down the spines of all the Washingtonians by stating that D.C. was the 'most dangerous place in the world.' We cannot solve the problem, he cautioned, but we can 'improve the odds.' Glenn Nordin was equally emphatic. Is the threat serious? 'You bet your booty!'

6. What Action Should Be Taken?

In his final question, Kevin Hendzel asked the panelists to prescribe solutions to the problem.

Margaret Gulotta issued a 'call to public service' at the FBI and other agencies, exhorting the attendees to 'Do something for your country.'

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Margaret Gulotta, on the other hand, reported that FBI culture was beginning to change even before 9/11 and that counterterrorism is now definitely focused. She cited the Bureau's 2003 budget, which was planned in 2001, in which language ranks third out of 50 items, after security and information technology. Gulotta assured the audience that knowledge of foreign language is just as important as other qualifications for recruitment.

Need for Cultural Understanding

Both Brecht and Nordin stressed the need for cultural understanding, which any translator knows is an integral part of language and translation. On the issue of possible co-operation with the ATA for translator training raised by a member of the audience, Nordin acknowledged that he was preaching

a pulmonary specialist,' he claimed to rousing applause. Besides a thorough knowledge of the source language, translators also need research skills.

A National Education System 'In Default'

Thanks to the United Nations, Wolfe continued, there are now more language materials available in Arabic. But with rarer languages like Pashto and Dari, there is no 'domain expertise' since there are few reference materials and the countries are not safe now for people to develop it. Because the language teaching system is 'in default,' the US government must train linguists.

Nordin added that the government has four language schools, including the Defense Language Institute and the Foreign Service Institute. The problem is that languages are not being taught in the school system. The national

'A National Language Policy' Richard Brecht had a radical proposal for a 'dramatic strategic partnership' led by government agencies. 'We need a National Language Policy,' he proposed passionately, to a round of applause. All Americans should have the right to learn English, the right to keep their second language and the right to acquire a second language. Language services should be provided by the government, just as in Australia.

We also need a federal language strategy, Brecht continued, which would include a National Language Adviser, a civilian language reserve, National Institutes for Language for research and development modeled along the lines of the National Institutes of Health, and a federal language education system.

Ron Wolfe and Glenn Nordin supported these proposals. Wolfe also mentioned his 'pet project' of using graduates of the Defense Language Institute to build up a core of linguists by upgrading their knowledge through a six-month investment. Nordin noted

'If you can speak a language, you can translate it' is like saying, 'if you can breathe, you can a pulmonary specialist'

that three of the four panelists had been trained by government and proposed 'disposable linguists' with security clearance but not limited to US citizens only. He underscored that the ATA's role is essential and urged the association to 'talk it, walk it.'

Passing the baton

Kevin Hendzel concluded the discussion by declaring a new 'paradigm shift.' He called on 'legislators, educators and academia to make a renewed commitment to foreign language education in the new national security languages.' Urging the new generation to act immediately and with determination in its mission of national security and sovereignty, he asked the audience for a wholesale commitment to their support and success.

The audience rose in a standing ovation, recognizing the panelists for

their outspoken – even fiery – support for the profession. These government experts took the discussion beyond translation of Arabic and less common languages to the overarching issues of national language education, translator training, the education levels required for skilled translators and the need for government support. Through the extensive media coverage, the event gave the ATA national exposure, helping to confirm its role as a voice for translation and interpreting professionals nationwide. Only one question remains: what will ATA offer as a follow-up at next year's conference? Stay tuned, say insiders. □

Alexandra Russell-Bitting has been a staff translator-reviser at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington D.C for 14 years. She is an active member of the ATA.



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