

# The Arabic booth

*When Maha El-Metwally interprets at the United Nations, she works in the Arabic booth. She decided to find out more about its history and its influence*



Maha El-Metwally is a conference interpreter for the languages Arabic (A), English (B), French and Dutch (C). She works for a wide range of international organisations, including the European Institutions and the United Nations. She is a member of the board of ITI. She also offers training on interpreting skills. You can contact her at [maha@culturalbridges.co.uk](mailto:maha@culturalbridges.co.uk).

On Tuesday 18 December 2018, World Arabic Language Day, the United Nations celebrated the 45th anniversary of Arabic becoming the UN's sixth official language. As a conference interpreter for Arabic myself, I have always wanted to know more about the circumstances surrounding the adoption of Arabic as a UN official language and about how the first interpreters were recruited, so I took the opportunity to find out more about the history of the Arabic booth at the UN.

## Coming into recognition

In the 1950s the UN only employed three Arabic translators, and only selected documents were translated into Arabic. If Arab leaders or other Arabic speakers wanted to speak in Arabic at the UN, they had to provide their own interpreters.

In 1960, on the occasion of the UN's 15th anniversary, former Egyptian president Nasser delivered a speech in Arabic at the UN General Assembly in which he stressed the importance of adding Arabic as an official language, since it was spoken by more than 100 million people at the time...and, of course, Nasser had had to bring his own interpreter with him.

It took till the Arab-Israeli war (October 1973), and the oil embargo that followed, for the UN to recognise the importance of the Arab world and its language. As a result of the war, the price of an oil barrel rose from \$3 to \$40, and the Arab world began to be seen as an influential part of the world.

At the 28th session of the General Assembly, a number of Arab countries presented a draft

resolution to add Arabic as an official language in the General Assembly and its main committees. The resolution was adopted on 18 December 1973 on the condition that Arab countries would cover the costs of the Arabic translation and interpreting services for three years through a trust fund. Libya and Saudi Arabia agreed to provide the money, and actual services started at the 29th session of the General Assembly in 1974.

## The first Arabic interpreters

Now that the resolution had been adopted, the next step was to find

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the interpreters. This task was given to Bahaa Fahmy, one of the three Arabic translators employed by the UN secretariat. On 30 July 1974, he was sent to Egypt to conduct tests and interviews. Egypt has a long-standing tradition of translation dating back to 1835 when Refa'a Al-Tahtawy, who revived the country's translation movement, founded Al-Alsun School of Languages, now part of Ain Shams University in Cairo. (It is no wonder that the official Arabic translation of the UN Charter was done in Egypt.) In 1963, when the Organisation of African Unity was established and

Arabic was adopted as an official language, a number of Egyptian students were sent to Geneva to study interpreting; and Al-Alsun School for Interpreting was established in 1968. Bahaa Fahmy's mission was successful and he managed to hire 16 freelancers, who travelled together to New York on the same plane on 15 September 1974. The first permanent Arabic interpreter was Sayed Abounaga, who had previously been working for UNESCO.

Ali Shady, who started at around the same time, told me about his own route into interpreting.

'I graduated from the English Literature department at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University in 1961. Immediately after taking my final exams, I started working as a translator at the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. Then I taught English for five years at a secondary school. In 1966, I joined the President's Office for Economic Research as a translator. It was there that I met the late President Nasser's interpreter, Mr Selim Rizkalla. In October 1969, Chase Manhattan Bank held a conference in Beirut, and they asked their representative in Cairo to find them a good interpreter. I was surprised that Mr Rizkalla nominated me for that task as I had not done conference interpreting before then. I was reluctant to accept, but Mr Rizkalla encouraged me by saying he expected me to become a good conference interpreter. I went to Beirut only to find myself the sole interpreter in the booth. The keynote speaker was David Rockefeller, who talked about the horizons of the US economy in the 1970s. He talked for 90 minutes, and I surprised myself that I interpreted it all without missing a beat. It was certainly a risk that I took, but it changed my life. I knew there and then that I was destined to become a conference interpreter. I decided to study interpreting, so I did a diploma in simultaneous interpreting at Al-Alsun School, which I completed

in 1971. I worked as a freelance interpreter till the time when the UN announced the first competitive exam for Arabic interpreters in 1974. I passed the exam and I was hired to work at the first session of the General Assembly that included Arabic as an official language.’

In 1977, after the three-year period elapsed, the UN Secretary General during the 32nd session of the General Assembly submitted a report recommending that the Arabic language, like the other official languages, should be financed from the UN budget. The report was approved and the booth became a permanent fixture.

### Bespoke training for Arabic

In February 1981 Ali Shady – who had been working on establishing the Arabic interpretation and translation services at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – was recruited to head this new section. However, there were still not enough trained interpreters able and willing to fill the posts. Shady re-held the qualifying examination, but this only recruited three people; and he offered permanent positions to the freelance interpreters who were already working for the UN, but many of these preferred to remain independent as freelancers. There were not enough graduates of interpreting schools whose training met the UN requirements. In order to redress this, Shady proposed a bespoke training programme. The requirements were a university degree, fluency in Arabic and English or French, and an aptitude for interpreting; and the training itself focused on interpreting the official speeches, the general debate and the work of the committees of the General Assembly. The desired outcome was an interpreter who could deliver correct content, an interpreter who was familiar with the UN jargon and culture, and of course an interpreter who could produce a fluent rendition of the original speech.

Together with an official from the examinations department, Shady started a tour of several capitals in April 1982 to test potential interpreters. He visited Paris, London, Geneva, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Riyadh, Cairo,

Tunis, Algiers and Rabat. Following hundreds of tests, 10 candidates were admitted to the training programme. They received training for nine months, after which they were tested and hired as staff interpreters. More programmes were offered in 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1987.

One of the first was Michèle A. Like Shady, she had not gone directly into interpreting, and in fact she had acquired a Master’s degree in Law and then decided to go to study English in London. She wanted to extend her stay in London, and for this, she needed to be enrolled in a programme. She went to the Polytechnic of Central London to check what courses she could join and came upon the brochures about the polytechnic’s interpreting course. She did the course, and this was how she found out about the UN mission and that Shady was coming to London to test potential interpreters. She arrived in New York, where she participated in the first training. It had its challenges; she had been trained at the polytechnic to interpret from English and Arabic into French, but at the UN, she needed to work on

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her Arabic as an A language. She passed the exam that followed the training and worked as a UN staff interpreter till she retired.

In fact Michèle was an exception, because most of her cohort and subsequent trainees had had no previous interpreting training at all. Nadia Abou Rida was recruited to take part in the third training programme, in 1984. Abou Rida first trained as a pharmacist. She practised pharmacy for several years and then opted for something more creative. She joined Egyptian Radio, where she met Hoda Abul Farag, a veteran interpreter who was among

### Expanding Arabic from the booth

With Arabic established with its own booth, the language gained further recognition within the United Nations’ network. During the same 1977 session which recommended that Arabic should be financed from the UN budget, the General Assembly decided to introduce Arabic to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva, and to establish an Arabic Interpretation section in Geneva composed of 17 permanent interpreters. Two years later, the Assembly decided to establish a unit of seven permanent Arabic interpreters in New York, and in 1981 it made the decision to introduce Arabic to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), recommending the Security Council did the same. As a result of this expansion, the General Assembly also expanded the New York unit into a section with 24 permanent posts.

the first group of freelancers who serviced the Arabic booth, and who saw Abou Rida’s potential and advised her to take the UN aptitude test. She passed the test and went to New York, where she received a six-month training along with her permanent Arabic booth colleagues. She passed the Language Competitive Exam and was hired as a staff interpreter. She worked in the Arabic booth in New York then Geneva, where she became the head of booth till she retired in 2014.

I asked Abou Rida what she feels sets interpreting at the UN apart from interpreting at other organisations. She told me: ‘There are three main pillars of the UN work: peace and security, human rights, and development. A UN interpreter must be versatile and well informed of the different issues at hand and the positions of states. Interpreting for the UN requires very accurate rendition, since many organs maintain verbatim records of their meetings and their delegates’ statements. The techniques needed for the different organs of the organisation are not necessarily the same, and interpreters working for the UN have to take this into consideration.’

Talking to these colleagues taught me a lot about the history of my booth. I would like to conclude by giving special thanks to Ms Hala Ismail for the invaluable information she provided on the pioneers of conference interpreting in Egypt. And I am even more impressed now I know at last about the work that went into establishing my booth and the role of Arabic worldwide. 

