Le jour J
26 avril 2012
Université Saint-Joseph

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I am delighted and honored to be here again. In October 2010, we signed the memorandum of understanding which added the University St. Joseph to the network of nearly two dozen institutions in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East associated with the United Nations. In fact, the USJ was the second one in the Middle East. I remember most fondly your hospitality and my time on your campus, and in Beirut in 2010.

Thanking you for the invitation, I am also grateful for the topic you suggested – coexistence of languages at the United Nations – since this permitted me to delve into this fascinating subject, to think about it and to pick the brains of many knowledgeable colleagues. It made for an exciting, enriching and stimulating few weeks, and I much appreciate that you have given me this challenge.

Do languages actually coexist at the United Nations? The term coexistence suggests not harmony, but an element of tension and conflict. Yet, is this the case? On reflection, I do not actually think that languages at the United Nations “coexist.” Instead, we have multilingualism, which gives languages rights and which serves two distinct purposes: Firstly and most importantly, languages have symbolic value. Secondly, languages facilitate communication and understanding. Both functions demand the highest possible quality from our language staff, which means about 500 translators, 300 interpreters, 250 Editorial Assistants, 70 editors and 50 verbatim reporters, not to forget a dozen or so terminologists, working in the Department’s four duty stations New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi as well as in the Regional Commissions in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Beirut and Santiago.

I ask your indulgence to accompany me on a journey to the genesis of multilingualism in the United Nations, of its symbolic value, actual meaning and of the implications of both for language staff at the United Nations. After all, we are here to celebrate the promotion of the Institut des Langues et de Traduction to Faculté des Langues.

At the beginning of the United Nations was not the word, but catastrophe, in fact a series of catastrophes: After the horror of WWI, the League of Nations failed and the opportunity was missed to organize peace: Japan invaded Manchuria, Italy invaded Abyssinia, Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, started WWII and carried out the genocide against the Jews.

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The United Nations, a creature of its time, was born with the loftiest of aspirations, namely to realize what was never achieved in human history, the preservation of peace. A new era was to begin. Like the medieval cathedrals which impressed the people with their grandeur and demonstrated the validity of the faith, the new Organization's aspirations were visible in the soaring Secretariat and the sweeping General Assembly buildings in Manhattan. The Organization's global reach was demonstrated by its official languages. While the League of Nations had only three (E, F, S), the United Nations started with five (C, E, F, S, R) and, in 1973, added Arabic as the sixth. From the beginning, though, the United Nations also had two working languages (E & F), in pragmatic recognition that sometimes less is more and that a multitude of languages can hamper operations and, paradoxically, communication. Another point worth making is that the United Nations Charter is authentic in all six languages (a fact to which an entire article—111—is devoted), which means it is not translated. Multilingualism, so my contention, like the majestic building, is in the first instance symbolic. Symbolic of the time and circumstances of the Organization's establishment and of its global reach.

As the United Nations matured, the General Assembly adopted several resolutions, proclaimed 2008 to be the International Year of Languages, named UNESCO as the lead agency and requested the Secretary-General to appoint a Coordinator for Multilingualism. Multilingualism adds texture to the Organization's mission and is key for its broad legitimacy in all parts of the world. Its languages convey a sense of ownership and partnership: The United Nations is not the property of one or a few, but of all. It is very much an idea, a vision, an aspiration, a hope and it derives its unique legitimacy and its unmatched convening power from its universal membership.

Preamble of the Charter:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind...

CHAPTER I PURPOSES & PRINCIPLES Article 1

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression of other breaches of the peace...

"The San Francisco conference establishing the United Nations produced ambitious hopes and designs. The new Organization would be nothing like the League of Nations, which had stood futilely on the sidelines as the world descended into war in 1939. It would have authority and enforcement powers" (Mark Malloch Brown, The Unfinished Global Revolution (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), page 46. Mark Mazower: No Enchanted Palace: the End of Empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations (Princeton University Press, 2010) takes a more hard-nosed view: The UN was founded to perpetuate the global dominance of Britain and America while accommodating the unwelcome emergence of the Soviet Union. George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau dismissed as illusory the notion that sovereign states would subordinate their interests to any supranational institution. See also Abba Eban: "The U.N. Idea Revisited" in Foreign Affairs Vol. 74 (5), Sept.-Oct. 1995, pp. 39-55.

General Assembly Resolution A/RES/50/11 of 2 November 1995 requested the Secretary-General to treat all language services equally and provide them with the resources and working conditions to enable them to optimize the quality of their services. It stressed the importance for the Department of Public Information of using all UN's official languages when carrying out its activities and reaffirmed the need to achieve absolute parity for the six official languages on the UN's websites. It also encouraged United Nations information centers to pursue their local action in favor of multilingualism. Such priorities were recalled in Resolution 61/265 on multilingualism in 2007, as well as in resolutions concerning the Information and Conference planning Committee.

General Assembly Resolution A/RES/54/64 of 6 December 1999 requested the Secretary-General to appoint a Senior Official as Multilingualism Coordinator.
The universal membership needs to communicate. The founding document of the United Nations, the Charter, provides that it should be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the pursuit of its principles and purposes. This basic mission of the Organization would be difficult to achieve without translation and interpretation. The world's diverse cultural and linguistic communities and traditions would find it infinitely harder to address global issues if they did not first understand each other clearly. This is particularly true for the work of the United Nations in expert areas, such as Law of the Sea, Human Rights, Drugs, Crime & Terrorism to name only a very few.

But can one claim that the six official languages used at the United Nations actually facilitate communication and enhance understanding, not only among the representatives of 193 governments but among the world’s people? After all, the six official languages are the mother tongue or the second language of roughly 3 billion people on the planet, which means of about half of the world population, and in about half the countries of the world (or the UN), namely in about 100. Six languages for half is phenomenal, considering that there are over 6,000 languages spoken, and considering that 300 languages are required to reach 90% of the world’s population. But six languages cover only half. One could say that this selectiveness contradicts the two core principles of the United Nations: Universality and sovereign equality. Perhaps, but the United Nations is symbolic of the time and circumstances of its creation and the languages are those of the victorious powers of World War II. Just as it is incredibly hard, well-nigh impossible, to enlarge the Security Council, adding more languages also is hard to achieve, since it threatens to unravel the whole construction.

Any number of major languages are left out, and over the years attempts have been made to obtain recognition as an official language for Japanese, German, Portuguese, Hindi, Bengali and Turkish. But, if the main point is symbolism, the symbolism of the post WWII era, it is not practical or cost considerations, which have prevented the addition of languages. My country, Germany, when it joined the United Nations in 1973, began funding a German Translation Section, not because Germans are incapable of speaking or understanding English and French, but because of the symbolic value of having United Nations documents in German published under the Organization’s logo. And since German is the main language also in Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, these countries also share the running costs of the German Translation Section.

The reality of the United Nations - as of the rest of the world - now is the dominance of English as the lingua franca (about 94 per cent of texts submitted for translation at United Nations Headquarters, and only slightly less at the United Nations Office at Geneva, are in English). The Secretariat works in English, and so do delegates in informal consultations after the interpreters have left. Draft resolutions are only submitted in English, the language of most of the Institution, even if there are actually two working languages, namely also French in addition to English.

4 Being one of the most spoken languages in the World, ranking 5th or 6th, in 2009 elected representatives in both Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura unanimously voted in resolutions calling for Bengali to be made an official UN language. (20) Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also put forward the proposal during her address at the 64th UN General Assembly Session, arguing that Bengali holds a unique place as a symbol of peoples faith in the power of languages to sustain cultures, and indeed the identity of nations. (Quoted from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Official_languages_of_the_United_Nations).

5 In September 2011, during a meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed a desire to see Turkish become an official UN language. (Quoted from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Official_languages_of_the_United_Nations).
United Nations interpreters and translators in the other five official languages have learned to process speeches and texts of non-native speakers and make sense of poorly written phrases and sentences. A noteworthy consequence of the dominance of English is the emergence of “UNese” - a jargon understood by insiders but arcane for the general public. The features of this distinctive UN dialect include a list of acronyms, peculiar terms and usages such as ‘intervention’ which means “a speech” and ‘to be seized of a matter’ which means that a UN organ or body is keeping something on the agenda or under active consideration.

Only one of the six official languages of the United Nations - Chinese - can be said to belong to only one Member State, although Chinese is used by far-flung Chinese-speaking communities around the world. The other five languages are what the French would call “langues en partage” - shared languages used by many different countries. Some of these countries may have no historical or cultural attachment whatsoever to the language in question, but for practical or political reasons, have adopted that language as a medium of international communication. Arabic, English, French and Spanish - and to a certain extent Russian - are used by many countries, each with its own national dialect or variety of the language. These varieties can differ considerably, even to the point of being mutually unintelligible. The challenge to United Nations language staff is to find a core vocabulary, and a generally accepted variety of the language that somehow manages to avoid the risks of miscommunication.

Needless to say, the standardized vocabularies and usages developed by United Nations translators do not always satisfy all users. As a result, the language services occasionally receive queries and complaints from individual Member States about the choice of a particular word or construction.

A concrete example of how incorrect translations or terminology can take root as a result of the working methods that are specific to the United Nations is the French expression “paradis pour les terroristes” (which translates literally into English as “heaven for terrorists”). The Security Council was holding informal consultations on a draft resolution in English which contained the expression “a haven for terrorists.” A French-speaking participant - not a translator - rendered this into French as “un paradis pour les terroristes.” The translation which the French Translation Service of the Secretariat would have used is “sanctuaire pour les terroristes.” Thus, based on an erroneous understanding of the English term “haven” (perhaps even misheard by the French speaker as “heaven”), a mistranslation was ultimately inserted into the French version of the draft resolution and this wrong translation has definitely caught on, as a quick Google search will reveal. Maintaining consistency in the translation of key terms can also be a challenge in the United Nations context.

In political negotiations, words may sometimes have a significance beyond their obvious meaning. Recently, there was a disagreement among Member States over whether the Economic and Social Council should “reaffirm” or “recall” its previous decisions on a particular issue. One group of States was unhappy with the Council’s previous decisions on this issue and was not prepared to see them “reaffirmed” but only “recalled.” Another group of States took exactly the opposite view: it was happy with the decisions and wanted them to be “reaffirmed,” not just “recalled.”

An extraordinary compromise was struck and the decisions were “recognized” instead. Evidently, there is something absurd about a United Nations organ “recognizing” its own previously adopted decisions, but that was the agreed language. Unfortunately, there was a breakdown in communication and translators were not alerted that this highly illogical language was deliberate.
Thus, when confronted with this unprecedented usage, they faced a dilemma – either to translate it literally, which seemed to make no sense at all, or to use a more logical and carefully neutral term that was appropriate to the context, such as “noted.” Some language services opted for a more logical translation but were eventually compelled to issue corrigenda reinstating the peculiar and illogical agreed language which Member States wanted.

Lest I create the impression that United Nations translators and interpreters are infallible and are engaged in a never-ending struggle against the linguistic gaffes perpetrated by delegates or other Secretariat officials, I should cite an example in which our translators committed a gaffe of their own. A communication written in English by a Member State contained the following sentence: “Additional measures must be taken to restore confidence so that the citizens ... feel able to move freely, including the removal of the sleeping policemen on the Boulevard.” You will recognize immediately, I hope, that what is meant here is something called “speed bumps.” I regret to inform you that more than one language version contained a literal translation in which police officers were napping while on duty. I am happy to report, however, that the French translator correctly rendered the expression by “rampes de ralentissement.”

On a more serious note, all interpreters and translators – but especially those at the United Nations – must be prepared to subordinate their voices to that of the author or speaker and to strive to be the channel through which their thoughts and intentions are expressed in the target language. The United Nations interpreters and translators are brokers, go-betweens, facilitators in the great multilateral discussions of our day. They are never, and should never be, the centre of attention. Toiling far from the limelight, they must content themselves with the thought that they are serving a higher purpose.

It is clear that serving as a translator or interpreter in the United Nations is much more a vocation than it is a mere job. Let me dispel the notion that the translator or interpreter must simply be a good linguist, that is to say must have a good command of other languages. They must first be able to express themselves exceedingly well in their mother tongue – the translator in writing and the interpreter orally – and they must possess a highly logical and analytical mind. The interpreter must also possess the presence of mind not to be rattled by speakers reading off texts at breakneck speed or by the impenetrable accent of a non-native speaker. Especially important in the context of an international organization like the United Nations is political sensitivity. Translators and interpreters must be aware of the different positions on any given issue, and be able to put aside their own personal views in order to serve as an effective channel for the ideas of the authors or speakers whose views may not coincide with their own. They must also possess a knowledge that is at once deep and broad of the culture, the history, the political and legal system, and the economy of the countries whose languages they translate from.

Good interpreters and translators have intellectual curiosity, which leads them to be perpetual students, lifelong learners or teachers, who are interested in knowing more about more and more subjects and who willingly devote much of their own time to reading, studying and expanding their store of knowledge.

As linguists, language staff are also interested in the phenomenon of language and in learning new languages. As one might expect, they are better than average language learners, for whom acquiring new languages comes if not easily, at least with a modest investment of effort. In decades past, the United Nations translation services were filled with genuine polyglots who could work from dozens of languages. One sees this less and less these days, but United Nations translators are still required to
have a minimum of three languages: their main or active language, which must be one of the six official languages I mentioned earlier, and two other official languages. And they are always encouraged to go beyond that minimum requirement to acquire additional languages.

While the United Nations promotes and respects cultural diversity, it is also engaged in setting universal standards in many areas of life that are valid for all countries and cultures—human rights and humanitarian law are two obvious examples. In this standard-setting or normative work, language staff play a crucial role, sometimes struggling to come up with totally new terms to express new concepts. The major declarations and conventions adopted under the auspices of the United Nations must be appropriately translated into all the official languages—and sometimes into unofficial languages as well—if the Organization’s message is to be communicated effectively to the widest possible public.

Distinguished guests, I could go on. And on. But let me conclude while you are still awake by repeating that languages do not merely coexist at the United Nations, but that multilingualism matters. It is at the heart of the United Nations. Words, phrases, intonations, evasions, abbreviations, formulas count for much in human communication and all the more in the complex world of international diplomacy. United Nations language staff charged with filling the core principle of multilingualism with life, are a major asset in keeping alive the precious resource of linguistic diversity in the Organization. We remain “seized of the matter” and will continue to work with partners and friends like the Université Saint-Joseph. The promotion of our counterpart from Institute to Faculty (des Langues) pleases us and does us proud. Congratulations again, and thank you for your attention.

Merki M. Baumann.