The View from the Tower of Babel

Air Force Foreign Language Posture for Global Engagement

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Editorial Abstract: The United States Air Force projects power globally, but it cannot communicate in the native language of the countries where it flies and fights. The absence of a central language program, an outdated database, and uncertain requirements force it to recall reservists, hire contractors, and create “just-in-time” training to meet each need. The Air Force must have a language champion and several new initiatives to become self-sufficient.

Editor’s Note: The call for foreign-language proficiency and cultural awareness in the Air Force continues to grow. As we go to press, the Air Force chief of staff has issued a Chief’s Sight Picture titled “Officer Force Development: International Affairs Specialists,” which notes that foreign area officers will be replaced by international affairs specialists, who will follow one of two tracks: regional affairs strategists or political-military affairs strategists.

Once upon a time, everybody spoke the same language. Then the boys in Babel, just south of a town now called Baghdad, concocted a scheme to build a huge tower to the heavens. After some early successes, their project failed. So much for one language throughout the world. Linguistic scholars put the number of languages spoken throughout the world at approximately 4,000, not including many more dialects and regional accents. With the continued emergence of regional and ethnic identification—one has only to think of the remnants of Yugoslavia—nations with only one official language a decade ago now form separate states with a polyglot of languages. This is the world in which the Air Force must operate and succeed.

The United States Air Force is an air and space expeditionary force, capable of global power projection whenever and wherever it is needed. Yet, with no central language program or overarching language plan, it remains essentially unable to communicate in the native tongues of many countries where it must operate. In order to effect a radical departure from this course, the Air Force must review its language needs, catalogue its assets, and plan for meeting its shortfalls in the quickest and most economical
manner. It must also recognize language as a distinctive capability within its air and space expeditionary
defending force. Institutionalizing the processes by which the Air Force recruits, trains, sustains, and manages its
language professionals is key to shaping our service’s future effectiveness.

Calls for greater emphasis on language skills in the Air Force and subsequent recommendations to
achieve them are nearly as old as the service itself and usually come on the heels of language shortfalls
experienced during a contingency. Many forums have proposed solutions to language gaps, but no
substantive change from “business as usual” has occurred. Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi
Freedom stand as constant reminders that sometimes America does not choose its place to fight and that
the global war on terrorism requires us to think and act globally. To succeed, we must have the ability to
communicate with our allies and understand our enemies—we must master these global tasks for every
part of the world.

New impetus for change has emerged from the top down. In August 2002, a “Chief’s Sight Picture”
from the Air Force chief of staff emphasized the global nature of America’s security: “Our expeditionary
force requires airmen with international insight, foreign language capability, and cultural
understanding.”1 In 2004 the Department of Defense’s (DOD) Language Transformation Initiative
resulted in The Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, a broad guideline for transformational change
throughout the DOD.2 Both of these top-down imperatives have focused decision-maker-level attention
on a decades-old problem.

The Language Legacy of
Pearl Harbor

America’s shortage of linguists has remained an issue since World War II, and many pundits compare
the failure to translate key documents prior to 11 September 2001 to a similar situation on the eve of 7
December 1941.3 Debate over the accuracy or even the fairness of such a comparison lies far beyond the
scope of this article. Suffice it to say that language skills, or the lack thereof, played a part in both
tragedies.

In the ensuing decades, short-fuse contingencies (Haiti, Somalia, and Bosnia) requiring the use of
“exotic” or “low flow” languages (Haitian Creole, Somali, and Serbo-Croatian) confounded the
personnel process.4 The Air Force language community deemed many of these exotics too difficult to
maintain in sufficient numbers as career fields and opted for more traditional language fare: Russian,
German, and French, for example. As a result, few of the exotics were either identified or available to
meet contingencies. Because deploying units had little access to translators and/or culturally savvy
personnel with language skills, the Air Force had to scramble to meet its language needs.5

Notable language-support shortfalls have occurred in the Middle East as well. An after-action report
from Operation Desert Storm specifically stated that the “USAF had an inadequate number of Arabic
speakers throughout the . . . [area of operations].”6 The Downing Commission’s investigation of the
Khobar Towers attack of 1996 cited the lack of Arabic translators as a contributing factor, clearly highlighting translator limitations: “At Khobar Towers, the 4404th Wing (Provisional) had only one interpreter, on duty or on-call 24-hours a day. When the Security Police needed to talk to their Saudi civilian police counterparts, they first had to contact the interpreter, brief him on the situation, and request that he contact the Saudi police.” During regular force-protection meetings, Saudi officials provided letters to US personnel that discussed ongoing security issues. However, the commission found that these letters were never translated, observing that “this made it difficult, and in some instances impossible, to ascertain what happened and what concerns were raised at these meetings.”

**Upon Further Review. . . .**

It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that we have ignored these and other shortfalls in language support. During the past two decades, numerous articles, reports, and audits have appeared that reported these same problems and recommended a wide range of solutions. Of particular note is the Officer Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team of December 1994. Chartered by Air Education and Training Command (AETC) and the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Headquarters USAF, its goal was to “examine enhanced language skills as improvements to USAF global operations.” The team reviewed field reports, IG inspections, and Government Accountability Office (GAO) evaluations, finding them routinely critical of the shortage of language-trained Air Force personnel at major air commands and during operations. The GAO bluntly stated that the “USAF lacks a command language program”; furthermore, according to the Air Force inspector general, “USAF personnel with regional knowledge and or foreign language proficiency [are] not being identified or effectively utilized.” Among other things, the team recommended that the Air Force (1) establish a single office for language advocacy in the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs, (2) increase foreign language proficiency pay (FLPP), (3) capture “self reported” language data and enter it into the personnel data system, (4) establish an Air Force goal that at least 10 percent of officers develop and maintain minimum language skills, (5) include language-proficiency data on officer career briefs for promotion boards, and (6) concentrate on precommissioning programs to find (or train) officers with language skills. To date, however, none of these recommendations has come to fruition.

Why were these problems—thoroughly reviewed, well articulated, and the object of numerous recommendations—not yet resolved? Col Gunther A. Mueller, chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages at the United States Air Force Academy, observes, “With English as the primary language of diplomacy, economics, and military operations, it was easy to get by. The USAF reflected national trends of declined interest in foreign languages.” A US Department of Education report of 2000 put it another way: “America is both the most global and the least global nation in the world. We have a problem that no one else has: we can pretend the rest of the world doesn’t exist.” In other words, wherever we go, they should all learn English. That might work in Europe, where English is a second language, but in the desert or the urban environs of Baghdad or Tikrit, English does not come easily to those who populate the disputed barricades there.
Another reason lies in the intelligence-centric perception of language in the Air Force. Because so many language-training dollars go to support intelligence requirements, language appears solely an intelligence issue and disappears from the radar of other career fields. Current numbers seem to bear this out. The DOD’s primary source of foreign-language education, the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) at the Presidio of Monterey, California, trained 870 Air Force personnel (830 enlisted members and 40 officers) in academic year 2003–4, over 90 percent of whom were slated for intelligence billets.15

One final explanation: the Air Force has successfully met each language challenge in the past three decades—but just barely. Implementation of “just-in-time” language training, the hiring of scores of contract linguists, and—most recently—the two-year mobilization of reserve linguists have all helped meet active-force shortfalls with varying degrees of success.

Until now the Air Force has muddled through each of its successive language crises, a practice that begs for a more accurate corollary to the old axiom “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”—specifically, “If it ain’t hard broke, why worry about a permanent fix?” If the Air Force can sustain an acceptable level of language support to its overseas missions without making hard choices for more money and more active duty language billets, then why not continue as it has? If it can mobilize reservists and guardsmen to bring their skills on board to meet contingency requirements and also pay for contract support for the rest, why would a consolidated language program be necessary?

The answer is that we cannot afford the luxury of a fragmented, late-to-the-dance language program in today’s environment of coalition warfare and expeditionary air forces. Not only do we have to understand our enemies and the way they think and act, but also we must understand, cooperate with, and coordinate with our allies. And we must do this in real time. To assume that each coalition partner will defer to English as the lingua franca for war fighting is to doom an international partnership before it begins. To be effective in the international arena, we must employ our collective cultural heritage—as a nation of immigrants composed of native and multicultural speakers—and our brightest people to discourse, think, and act globally.

Even Managing Language Requires a Special Language

The Air Force has “language-inherent” positions filled by personnel whose career specialty is directly tied to a specific language skill (e.g., cryptolinguist). “Language-designated positions” require a specific language skill (e.g., a Spanish-speaking pilot). A key difference between the two is that most enlisted positions are language inherent (language as a career) while all officer positions are language designated (language as an additional/special duty).16 Most of the Air Force’s 3,700 language-inherent billets reside in the intelligence career field, while the 900 language-designated positions are spread across the spectrum of its officers’ Air Force specialty codes (AFSC).17 No officers have “linguist” as a primary AFSC.
The Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) measures three categories—reading, listening, and speaking—and expresses results from “0” (lowest) to “5” (highest), plus intervening gradations indicated by plus signs (a system devised by the International Language Roundtable). The DLIFLC graduates most of its students—over 78 percent—with a tested proficiency level of “2/2/1.” Put another way, an individual with 1/1/1 scores in Arabic possesses “survival skills,” while one with 4/4/4 could debate the US Middle East policy on al-Jazeera television. Speaking, which is rarely emphasized, often proves the most difficult skill to test because of the need for interaction with a trained speaker. Interestingly, although the DLPT scale runs from one to five, military members receive ratings only through three.

**Crunching the Numbers**

DOD testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence indicated that the military has about 25,000 military and civilian personnel with “some capability” in about 70 languages. However, present worldwide operations bring US forces into contact with about 140 languages. The Air Force has about 6,000 officers (around 6 percent of the total force) with tested capability in 54 languages. This figure includes all officers who have taken the DLPT since 2000 but represents only tested language skills, not the sum of the Air Force’s potential capability. Enlisted numbers are higher—around 9,000 who have tested since 2000. The problem stems from the state of the Air Force’s linguist database itself, which does not comprehensively account for all Air Force language skills; moreover, the service does not require its members to provide data to populate it. This holds true of all of the total force’s language databases, each of which is maintained separately.

In an attempt to gain a clearer picture of its capability, the Air Force conducted a service-wide foreign-language self-assessment in 1996: over 41,000 Air Force personnel reported foreign-language skills. However, because data for the survey did not require validation via the DLPT, someone could claim fluency in a language, say French, without proving it. In current practice, all Air Force members are “encouraged” to “self-assess” via the Virtual Military Personnel Flight and to take the DLPT to validate their language skills on their own.

However, many have chosen not to do so because it is not mandatory. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some personnel decline to identify their capabilities to avoid assignments to contingency areas. Some native speakers decline to take the DLPT to avoid being returned to homelands from which they had originally fled. Others report that their commanders did not allow them to take the DLPT because of reluctance to have their people identified with language skills, leaving them vulnerable to deployment away from their primary duties. Still others indicated that their base education offices had neither the staff nor equipment to administer the DLPT for certain languages and could not administer parts of others, particularly the speaking examination.

**Air Force Language Programs: More Than Just One**
Besides the intelligence community, the Air Force has several other consumers of language and language stakeholders, each operating with various degrees of autonomy and achieving different levels of success. Two of the largest are the foreign area officer (FAO) program, under the secretary of the Air Force's Office of International Affairs (SAF/IA), and the Air Force Medical Service’s international health specialist (IHS) program, under the Air Force’s Office of the Surgeon General.

The FAO office (SAF/IA), which recruits officers from all operational career fields, is not, as commonly perceived, an intelligence program. It is, however, one of only a few programs in the Air Force in which officers need language skills for entry and can actually use them daily. The hallmark of the FAO program is the additional language training available through its Language and Area Studies Immersion program—an intensive in-country language and cultural immersion lasting one month. Since fiscal year (FY) 1997, over 1,100 Air Force personnel have participated in the program, offered in 40 different languages at 39 separate locations. The fact that it has increased DLPT test scores for 99 percent of the people who participated provides a telling measure of its effectiveness.

The Air Force Medical Service’s IHS program combines medical and linguistic skills, as well as cultural expertise in a second language. As of April 2004, its 233 members represent 34 languages and hold an IHS special-experience identifier in addition to their medical AFSC. The program is organized into teams aligned with major theaters of operation and designed to optimize military-military and military-civilian partnerships within the medical community. Like members of the FAO office, the IHS staff tracks and qualifies its own linguist/medical community.

**Language Training—Just in Time?**

The DLIFLC’s courses of instruction, generally lasting a year, vary by language; Arabic, one of the most difficult, takes 18 months. The typical DLIFLC graduate needs much more training and experience to become effective in the field. Cryptolinguists need another 73 training days at the Intelligence School at Goodfellow AFB, Texas, just to master the technical terms of the business. Similarly, Air Force interrogators must attend the Army’s interrogation course at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, before they report for their first duty. With its shortest in-residence language course taking seven months, the DLIFLC obviously provides no quick language fixes. However, in the scramble to find linguists after 9/11, the DLIFLC provided just-in-time language training to deploying troops and created “turbo” courses to retrain linguists from other Middle Eastern languages in critically needed skills. When this effort did not satisfy the growing language need, Guard and Reserve personnel on two-year mobilizations filled another part of the language surge, aided by other reservists on voluntary short tours of active duty.

Contract linguists, many of them native speakers, were quickly hired as well, but problems with them persist. Today, we have filled only 4,000 of the approximately 6,000 required contract-linguist positions. Moreover, contractors have come under closer scrutiny after highly publicized problems at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison. Additionally, some were rushed into service without proper evaluation for security clearances. When asked about this security gap, spokesmen for the contracting
firm involved indicated that the government was responsible for obtaining clearances for their employees.\textsuperscript{34} Huge costs for contract linguists have accrued during Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom: an estimated $2 billion in 2004.\textsuperscript{35} This total does not include a language bill for another $97 million for contractor operations in the Balkans through FY 2006.\textsuperscript{36}

The global war on terror drove an unanticipated language need that demanded immediate support. The military’s supply tail simply could not catch up—and has yet to catch up. Until it does, we will have to pay enormous contract-linguist bills and continue mobilizations of reservists. Compounding the problem of military retention is the lure of pay in the civilian sector: median pay for a contract linguist with a Secret clearance comes to $40,000, compared to the base pay of $22,532.40 for an E-4 linguist with over four years of service.\textsuperscript{37} This disparity has created a vicious cycle whereby the lack of military linguists drives up the price for contractors, and the high price for contract linguists lures military personnel into civilian ranks.

The nation’s colleges represent a potential source of individuals with the requisite language qualifications, although, according to the DLIFLC, a 2/2 graduate of Monterey has capabilities equal to or better than those of most four-year language graduates.\textsuperscript{38} A recent survey by the Modern Language Association (MLA) indicates that over one million college students enrolled in foreign language studies in academic year 2002–3, up 3.8 percent from 1998. Another 350,000 studied at two-year colleges—a huge jump of over 36 percent in the previous four years. However, over 75 percent (graduate and undergraduate) concentrated on Spanish, French, and German studies. Total numbers reveal an interesting statistic: although 8,725 undergraduates enrolled in the study of Arabic, that figure amounted to less than one-third of the total undergraduates enrolled in American Sign Language (21,734)—and even less than those enrolled in Latin (28,740). Two-year colleges reflect a similar trend.\textsuperscript{39}

**Equal Pay for Equal Work**

The disparity in FLPP between active and reserve components serves as an irritant to the retention of linguists in the Guard/Reserve. Reservists often see partial FLPP—calculated as one-thirtieth the rate of FLPP authorized per month for active duty compensation for each period of training—as a disincentive. In dollar terms, an active duty member in a language-designated position or in a career language AFSC receives $100 per month in FLPP for maintaining a tested level of 2/2 in one language, while a reservist or guardsman maintaining the same proficiency receives only $13.33 per month—not enough to buy a tank of gas at today’s prices to drive to weekend training 100 miles from home.\textsuperscript{40} In May 2002, the *Ninth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (QRMC)* acknowledged this pay disparity and recommended authorizing the service secretaries to pay “RC (Reserve Component) members not serving on active duty the same amount of monthly pay as AC (Active Component) members for maintaining proficiency in designated critical languages.”\textsuperscript{41}

A DOD initiative of 2004 to pay all linguists (including Guard and Reserve) an FLPP bonus has borne fruit in the Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005. Under its provisions, the individual service secretaries may authorize up to $12,000 a year as a foreign-language-
proficiency bonus to active duty members and up to $6,000 to members of the Guard and Reserve.\textsuperscript{42} However, Congress appropriated no funds to effect such a change, and it remains to be seen if Air Force money will be available to make this proposal a reality.

**Man versus Machine**

We continue to see much commentary on machine translations and handheld translators. Headlines such as “IM, Machine Translation on the Front Lines of Iraq” and articles on devices such as “The Phraselator” conjure up images from *Star Trek*.\textsuperscript{43} It appears from much press reporting that a major breakthrough has occurred in machine-translation technology. However, according to the DOD’s testimony to Congress, current state-of-the-art technologies “cannot replace skilled human translators, interpreters, and interrogators in providing actionable information.” Automated translations equate to a “1+” DLPT score.\textsuperscript{44} We use today’s machine-translation systems for document triage and for filtering written materials for further study by human translators. Current cross-language communicators appear useful only in carefully scripted scenarios.\textsuperscript{45} Machines—an awkward substitute in contemporary field situations—will not replace humans in the foreseeable future.

**Solving the Air Force’s Language “Problem”**

There is a new urgency to solve the language dilemma in the Air Force and, indeed, in all of the DOD. The latter’s *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap* proposes numerous DOD programs and new initiatives that will affect the Air Force and its sister services.\textsuperscript{46} However, such a trickle-down approach will take time; meanwhile, the Air Force can launch many initiatives on its own. Although a number of solutions have been suggested before, none of them managed to change the Air Force’s institutional culture. Our service cannot project power globally and communicate as if it were at home. We cannot acquire language skills at the last minute on the plane to who-knows-where. A number of suggestions that address this dilemma come to mind.

**The Secretary of the Air Force: Chairman of the Board**

The secretary of the Air Force must anoint a language champion within his or her senior staff as the language program manager throughout the service. That person would become the “chairman of the board for language,” allowing various disciplines to maintain some control over their own unique needs. This champion would institutionalize the Air Force’s language program, provide downward-directed policy and funding to various Air Staff offices with language requirements (intelligence, security forces, IHS programs, special operations, Office of Special Investigations, etc.), represent the Air Force to the DOD-level language program manager, and serve as the senior language authority.

**Who Needs What in a Future-Focused Air Force?**
It’s well past time to conduct a comprehensive assessment of language needs throughout the Air Force. We must do this on several levels to assure completeness; we cannot allow it to become just another survey lest it suffer from lip service. Moreover, we cannot limit the assessment to a reflection of current crises but must include future-focused Air Force and DOD thinking. Requirements must be gleaned by discipline (security forces, medical personnel, cryptolinguists, etc.), by major command (Air Combat Command, Pacific Air Forces, etc.), and by combatant command to assure its completeness. This approach will require some effort to eliminate redundancy caused by the inevitable reporting of overlapping requirements, but it will also illuminate areas of need that might escape a cursory, “square-filling” look.

Guidance should state the desired overall effects, both for the Air Force and for its contribution to joint operations, so that thoughtful and appropriate decisions can be made. A combined air operations center, for example, might require an FAO to advise on the second- or third-order cultural effects of a particular operation; it may also require a linguist to bridge the language gap between coalition partners in strategy sessions or in negotiations for basing, airspace, or a dozen other issues. This same linguist, or another, might also provide translations of native newscasts (think al-Jazeera in real time) to report on popular opinion or the perception of coalition operations.

To ensure visibility, we must codify these requirements in existing operation plans. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual 3141.01A, Procedures for the Review of Operation Plans, includes a checklist item for identifying requirements for linguist support and addressing shortfalls. Creation of a language unit type code (UTC) would facilitate language support to contingencies by providing planners a building block to grab instead of reinventing language requirements for each new crisis. The results of the surveys previously discussed can shape its size and content, but it should stand alone as a template for planning. The UTC should be self-contained, with cryptolinguist, translator, interrogator, and foreign-area--specialist AFSCs in sufficient quantities, grades, and ranks to support the combined force air component commander’s mission. We can add specific languages as required, but the principle of language support will already be in place. Moreover, a language UTC’s statement of designed operational capability should outline its functions in enough detail to allow its attachment to any other required contingency force. This UTC should remain flexible enough to plug into the required language skill set for a specific geographic region and/or roll it into planning for the air and space expeditionary force.

**Who Knows What Today?**

The Air Force should conduct a mandatory rather than voluntary language survey of all its personnel—active, reserve, guard, civilian, and all individuals in its various accession programs. It should also extend a volunteer survey program to Air Force retirees through The Afterburner newsletter, tied to the National Security Education Program’s Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps initiative.
Current Air Force databases reflect outdated (some pre-2000) language-proficiency information and require manual manipulation to determine the service’s actual language capability. Reserve databases reflect even older data, rendering them practically useless as planning tools. The Foreign Language Self Assessment, a vehicle that already exists via the Air Force’s Virtual Military Personnel Flight, could be made available to all targeted groups by granting them access to the data-collection system via the Internet. Making this self-assessment mandatory, however, will not prevent individuals from providing less-than-factual data if they so choose (a nod to human nature), but it will increase the database beyond what is currently available through voluntary reporting. A bigger net will catch more, if not bigger, fish.

We must delete existing, unreliable databases and create a comprehensive one that lists languages, perceived fluency (foreign-language self-assessment), tested fluency (the DLPT), and method of obtaining the proficiency (the DLIFLC, college, or native speaker)—and update it annually. This labor-intensive task could involve literally contacting each individual via telephone to obtain current data, but the Air Force for the first time would have an accurate picture of its language capabilities.

**Pay the Force, Not the Contractors**

Focusing on recruiting and retaining skilled language personnel can significantly reduce current translation costs. In addition to the foreign-language self-assessment, all accessions to the Air Force should be screened for language aptitude via the Defense Language Aptitude Battery, as well as anyone else desiring to take the test. Although this battery “evaluates potential ability to complete formal language training,” it’s given only to candidates for foreign-language training, those headed for special-duty requirements, and—interestingly—line colonel-selects within 120 days of their notification of selection for promotion. Let’s see who else has the aptitude for language in the Air Force.

In addition, FLPP should be increased and made available to everyone who qualifies for it. The average civilian contract linguist with a Top Secret clearance receives $62,000 per year while FLPP currently amounts to about $3,600 a year. Thus, the cost of one contract linguist would pay FLPP for about 17 linguists. Retaining even half that number on active duty or in a reserve component makes this incentive cost-effective.

The good news of a large FLPP bonus in the FY 2005 National Defense Authorization Act is tempered by the bad news that it included no additional funds to pay for the bonus. The Air Force must either seek DOD help to pay this bill or find the funds itself. Oddly, the Air Force self-imposes a restriction to FLPP by requiring a Secret clearance—something that no other service does. The logic of requiring such a clearance continues the trend of intelligence-centric language management. With roughly 90 percent of all language requirements falling into the unclassified pile—think TV broadcasts, newspapers, and the Internet—it is past time to do away with this artificial barrier. It is also time to allow anyone to take the DLPT without a “Mother, may I?” from their commander—another self-imposed Air Force restriction.

Guard and Reserve personnel also have a limited number of training days available (in most cases, 24 inactive-duty days, plus an annual tour of 12–15 days) to maintain the same language proficiency.
standards as their active duty counterparts. We should amend Air Force Manual 36-8001, Reserve Personnel Participation and Training Procedures, to authorize additional ground-training periods for language training, similar to additional flying-training periods currently used by Guard and Reserve pilots for flying-training proficiency.54

Other than monetary incentives, we do not recognize the considerable achievement of obtaining (and maintaining) 3/3/3 language proficiency in the Air Force. Thus, we should amend Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2803, Air Force Awards and Decorations Program, 15 June 2001, to award an Oak Leaf Cluster to the Air Force Training Ribbon for obtaining a DLPT score of 3/3/3 in a targeted language. This ribbon currently recognizes only completion of initial skills training. Since a 3/3/3 DLPT is fast becoming the benchmark for all language professionals, recognizing it via an Oak Leaf Cluster isn’t a stretch. In conjunction with the cluster, we should further amend AFI 36-2803 to award one Weighted Airman Promotion System point to enlisted personnel for obtaining this level of language expertise. This translates into a tangible, promotion--related benefit for increased skills and adds another incentive to excel. Costs are negligible, but their impact could prove significant for enlisted linguists.

Find Them Already Trained

Given the long lead time to train a new linguist at the DLIFLC, few quick fixes exist for the difficult languages we need. However, recruiting individuals with existing language capabilities would considerably shorten the training turnaround time. If the Air Force is indeed serious about solving the language dilemma, it’s high time to revisit this issue.

A good place to start is at home. What about targeting language-inherent groups (i.e., native speakers) for recruiting? Although the Air Force has attempted to do so, unsuccessfully, in the past, it is time to try again. Our service should closely study the Army’s initiative in the Muslim communities of Detroit to recruit them for the Army Individual Ready Reserve.55 In the meantime, the Air Force should study other ethnic enclaves throughout the country for future recruiting in target languages. This may provide a “surge” capability, particularly for translation/liaison work that does not require a security clearance. A startup tool, the MLA Language Map uses data from the 2000 census and sorts 30 languages and three groups of less commonly taught languages by zip code.56

Although we could profitably recruit college foreign-language majors—particularly in “investment” languages identified by the DOD—one only has to recall that the Air Force does not have a linguist AFSC for officers.57 Therefore, any college graduate would have to enlist in order to use his or her language skills or be accepted for a commission in another specialty with the hope of using these skills down the road—provided they don’t atrophy in the interim. We might more productively recruit students in two-year colleges who have studied DOD investment languages for enlisted billets. Presumably, these students will have mastered the basics of grammar and pronunciation, so that they would spend considerably less time at the DLIFLC than would someone with no background. We should vigorously explore this avenue, with emphasis on identifying those junior--college programs that teach languages on the DOD’s target-language list.
SAF/IA should expand its Language and Area Studies Immersion program as a proven method to increase language proficiency in a relatively short period of time. In addition, we should consider stateside immersion courses, using native speakers as instructors in a controlled environment. These immersion alternatives are particularly critical to the development of speaking skills and cultural awareness.58

Another immersion opportunity exists via the Inter-American Air Forces Academy at Lackland AFB, Texas. Funded by AETC, the academy conducts over 46 technical, professional, and management courses in Spanish and trains almost 1,000 students a year from the armed forces of 17 Latin American countries. Many of the courses offered are similar to those throughout AETC; the academy’s curriculum also includes traditional classroom and leadership instruction. Air Force attendees could acquire credits for technical and professional education—under the auspices of AETC—in addition to increased language proficiency. In addition, friendships and contacts made within the academy would foster better professional relationships within the hemisphere.

*Heighten Language Awareness in the Air Force*

In order to bring about the vast majority of these initiatives, the Air Force must raise its language-awareness level. Simply talking about it will not be enough to create a climate for change. For example, the Air Force Special Operations School offers a five-day Middle East Orientation Course that contains no language block. This deficiency needs immediate attention.

We must publicize language issues, language-support shortfalls, and language successes, perhaps by creating a *Language Crosstalk* newsletter. Similarly, injecting language problems into Red Flag and Blue Flag scenarios would serve to heighten awareness for aircrews and decision makers; furthermore, adding language problems into escape-and-evasion training events would provide personal emphasis to trainees.

Many heritage observances occur at the base level throughout the year. Adding language-awareness events at the same time would be a natural tie-in, especially if base education centers made attendees aware of DLPT testing and FLPP opportunities. The Air Force’s professional military education courses should add language issues to their curricula, particularly in the study of coalition warfare and nation building.

Operational readiness inspections provide an excellent opportunity to test language readiness and to highlight the need for language support at deployed locations. Scenarios would require security forces to coordinate with local non-English-speaking security personnel to determine local threats. Mock hostage situations requiring translators and negotiators would test language and cultural awareness for commanders and security personnel. Pop-up security arrangements for visiting foreign dignitaries and coalition operations using the base command and control facilities would further test the capability of an Air Force unit to operate globally. Finally, in a Draconian sense, failure to complete any of these challenges successfully during an inspection could result in write-ups in the final IG report and drive documented corrective actions.
Cultural Change = 
Operational Change

A cultural change within the Air Force regarding foreign languages and the use of language-capable personnel can bring about a positive operational change to its global mission. To bring about such a cultural change, we must educate senior leadership on the need for language support in coalition warfare, from both allied and adversary perspectives. We must remove institutional barriers to language reporting. Similarly, compensation for a unique and perishable skill has to meet market demands, lest we lose the best and brightest to the contractor’s Siren call. All of this requires that the Air Force think globally and act internationally within its own organization. To do otherwise will leave us speechless and unknowing in the world of tomorrow. Our chief of staff has already articulated his vision for this change: “It’s that old joke you hear in Europe all the time. What do you call somebody that speaks three languages? Trilingual. Two languages? Bilingual. One language? American. That still applies today.”

Now is the time to turn his vision into reality.

Notes


3. Dennis Wagner, “Linguists Are Needed for the War on Terror,” The Arizona Republic Online Print Edition, 7 November 2003; and Michael Erard, “Translation Technology in the Age of Terror,” MIT Technology Review, February 2004, http://msnbc.com/id/4352578. On 3 December 1941, an intercepted, decrypted, and translated message gave what some historians believe was a clear warning of war. However, it did not undergo review until 8 December because of more pressing intercepts—specifically, the 14-part Japanese diplomatic message that was to be delivered to Secretary of State Cordell Hull on 7 December 1941. Moreover, the 14-part message was encrypted in the so-called Purple code—Japan’s highest and most important. The 3 December message, in a simpler code (PA-K2), was considered less important at the time. Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 79th Cong., 1st sess., 20 July 1946, sec. 230.

4. Exotic and low flow are two of several sobriquets used to describe foreign languages not commonly used or taught in the United States. One finds two other terms—wild card and the more politically correct less commonly taught languages—in reviews of the literature.

5. Maj Stephen J. Moree, “USAF Security Forces and Foreign Language Skills in the Global Environment: Are We Prepared?” research paper (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Command and Staff College, April 1999), 7, 16–17. Major Moree reports that intelligence personnel on loan to security forces generally perform well. However, on-loan translators from local intelligence resources made for
unpredictable planning for security-force deployments.

6. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Universal Lessons Learned, quoted in “Executive Summary,” Officer Foreign Language Skill Process Actions Team Report and Recommendations (Colorado Springs, CO: USAF Academy, December 1995), 5. During the US peacekeeping mission to Mogadishu in 1993, the press gleefully reported that only one US serviceman spoke Somali—a US marine who was, in fact, the Somali warlord’s son. Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti in 1994 revealed a serious lack of Haitian Creole speakers in all of the services. The on–station arrival of those few who were located occurred just as US forces were withdrawing. In another example, the Defense Language Institute ceased teaching Serbo-Croatian just as a crisis broke out in the Balkans.


8. Ibid., 49.


16. Lt Col Thomas Nolta, SAF/IAPA, point paper, subject: Air Force Foreign Language Management

18. Overview briefing, subject: DLIFLC.


20. Maj Cara Aghajanian, SAF/IA, e-mail, 30 March 2004. The number of people who have reported language skills but may have not tested is much higher: over 41,000—roughly 7.5 percent of the total force of 554,000 men and women.


25. Col Donna Fore, Policy and Requirements, Under Secretary of Defense, Intelligence (OSD-USDI), interview, e-mail, 11 February 2004. In accordance with AFI 36-2605, a member must have the unit commander’s written permission to take the DLPT. Buried within the text of the sample letter is an acknowledgement that should the testee pass the DLPT, he or she is subject to deployment.

26. Others include the Office of Special Investigations and the Human Intelligence (HUMINT) program, the latter subsumed as part of the Defense HUMINT Service under the Defense Intelligence Agency.

27. Overview briefing, subject: DLIFLC.


30. Overview briefing, subject: DLIFLC.


32. Turbo language training is defined as an accelerated language-training program involving linguists who are already proficient in a language similar to the target language. In the case of Dari and Pashto turbo courses, the students were drawn from the ranks of Arabic Standard linguists. Although short-fuse turbo courses were effective gap-fillers, one must remember that turbo participants leave their assigned language billets to fill an unanticipated requirement, creating another gap in the process.


34. A *New York Times* article reported that all contractor-company officials interviewed felt it was not their company’s responsibility to research the backgrounds of the people it hires for government contracts. In an interview, J. P. London, chief executive of CACI Inc., said, “No, we’re not in the background investigation business.” “Contractors in Sensitive Roles, Unchecked,” *New York Times*, 7 May 2004.

35. Fore interview.


37. For active duty pay tables, see http://www.dfas. mio/money/milpay. For a survey of contract-linguist pay, see http://www.intelligencecareers.com/surveys/2004_1Q/survey_2003_4Q_sling.cfm.
38. Overview briefing, subject: DLIFLC.


40. AFI 36-2605, Air Force Military Personnel Testing Procedures, IC 2003-1, att. 11, par. A11.3.2.2; and DOD Instruction 7280.3, Special Pay for Foreign Language Proficiency, 23 February 2000, par. 5.1.2.1.2. See also 37 United States Code 316.

41. See “Special and Incentive Pay for the Reserve Component,” chap. 3 of the Ninth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, May 2002), 144–45. The chapter makes a clear distinction between FLPP compensation and other applications of the one-thirtieth rule for other incentive-pay categories (say, jump pay); it argues only for a change to the FLPP. Interestingly, previous reviews have rejected any change in this rule, and their pronouncements have been used as justification not to change FLPP compensation.


44. Statement of Letitia A. Long, 10.

45. Ibid.

46. Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense, memorandum, 14 February 2005. The DOD convened a national language conference in June 2004 to propose a national language agenda. For the complete listing of all presentations from the conference, see http://www.nlconference.org. Additonaly, a bill entitled The National Security Language Act (HR 3676) was introduced in the House of Representatives in 2003, languished in committee, and was reintroduced in the 109th Congress on 4 January 2005 as HR 115. It has been referred to five separate committees for review.


48. For an extensive treatment of this subject, see Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps Feasibility Study
49. Headquarters USAF/DP, e-mail.


51. See “Salary Survey Results,” *Intelligence Careers.com*, http://www.intelligencecareers.com/surveys/2004_1Q/survey_2003_4Q_sling.cfm. Curiously, the median salary for a linguist with a Top Secret clearance and access to Sensitive Compartmented Information—a more restrictive and exclusive access to classified information—is only $45,000 per year.


53. Ibid., par. A11.4.6.


56. See *MLA: Modern Language Association*, http://www.mla.org/resources/census_main.

57. The DOD’s Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness publishes its list of investment languages—those of particular interest for training dollars, based on the needs of the war fighter. The current list includes Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, and nine others, plus two regional language groupings (Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa).


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