

A Tenuous Link to Success:  
Proper Use of Interpreters in Counterinsurgency

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"We are very good at navigating the physical terrain we have to be just as good at navigating the human terrain."<sup>1</sup> This quote by Brigadier General Lake reflects the importance of proper communication with native peoples during counterinsurgency operations. After six years of war, Marines remain unprepared for the confusing and nuanced world of cross-cultural communication. When the center of gravity is the populace, correct communication between Marines and the native people is vital. Lack of cultural preparation prior to the invasion forced the Marine Corps to build the bulwark of its interpreter pool with locally hired Iraqi interpreters. In order to ensure success in future counterinsurgency operations, the Marine Corps must reconsider the use of local interpreters due to cultural damages caused by interpreter corruption, incompetence, and insurgent infiltration.

### Corruption

The mere presence of Marine forces in Al Anbar Province changed the fabric of the society. Old and trusted societal norms were disrupted as people struggled to come to accommodate a heavily armed foreign presence. The need for Marines to articulate messages to the population in order to rebuild government and

infrastructure made the interpreter a vital link in the hierarchy of power. Marine battalions come and go every six months while interpreters often remain in the same area of operations for several years; some have been in the same towns since the beginning of the war. Longevity in an area allows an interpreter to build a base of influence that is rarely noticed by Marines, but which is evident to the populace. Arguably, as interpreters became a key link to success, the opportunities for both perceived and real corruption increases.

Corrupt interpreters use their position to gain favor from the populace, to favor a tribe or individuals and even to collect money for the insurgency. Through favorable translations, they steer contracts toward individuals willing to pay bribes. Due to intimate knowledge of the culture, interpreters observe and understand nuances of dialect, body language, and behavior that go unseen by Western eyes. A bad translator will use this to his advantage by labeling individuals which he does not favor as "bad men" based solely on his status as a cultural guide. All too often Marines feel bewildered by cultural differences and are willing to believe everything the interpreter says.

As nefarious practices occur, the population no longer views the Marines in a positive light. Ultimately, it is the people who feel the pain of corruption as even well-intentioned Marine commanders make wrong decisions based on improper guidance or mistranslation. The population may endure limited corruption for a short time, but once corruption influences Marine actions, the populace will turn against the Marines as the people are unable to differentiate between the Marines and their spokesman, the interpreter. The author has witnessed the frustration of civilians, especially contractors, who feel that Marines are not receiving a correct translation of what they are trying to say. In fact, contractors began to hire their own translators to ensure that the Marine interpreter translate correctly during negotiations over contractual bids.<sup>2</sup>

As important as it is for a Marine to recognize corruption, it is also important to recognize that Iraqis might not consider all perceived corruption as wrong. Cultural differences in moral judgment may lead to misunderstanding between interpreters and Marines. For example, an Iraqi sees no moral ambivalence in using his job as interpreter to favor friends, destroy enemies, or gain financial benefit.<sup>3</sup> It is acceptable in the Arab world for a middleman, in this case the interpreter, to receive a

reward whether it is money or prestige. Americans, however, view such misuse of position as corruption and cronyism. Therefore, Marines preparing to work with an interpreter need proper cultural understanding and flexibility. Marines must distinguish between one who is "acting as the middleman" for a small reward and gross violations of conduct that would harm the mission.

#### Incompetence

Early in the conflict, high operational tempo left Marine commanders scrambling for translation support for everyone from the squad to corps level. Expedient hiring of bilingual locals who were not trained translators resulted in a percentage of incompetent actors in the translator pool. Arabic is a widely diverse language with distinct dialects even within the same country.<sup>4</sup> The majority of local interpreters in Iraq have no training in translation. Even an experienced translator may find it difficult to interpret everything that he hears.

Incompetent translation can get people killed in an environment where the slightest provocation can turn neutral Iraqis into insurgents or insurgent sympathizers. Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, quotes Army officials serving as

advisors to the Iraqi Army when he writes, "The interpreters that were available were often "substandard," speaking little or no English.... the Center for Army Lessons Learned also released a study that found one unit that only learned after 10 unproductive months how badly its translators conveyed their instructions to their Iraqi students. The translations were so poor that the Iraqis had trouble to even understand the concepts taught by the Americans."<sup>5</sup>

Saving face is important for Iraqis and although translators may speak English and at times act like Marines, they are still Iraqi and will do what they can to avoid embarrassment or shame. During translation, if an interpreter either does not understand what the Marine is saying or does not know enough English in order to translate the Arabic, he will rarely ask for clarification. He will often endeavor to translate what he believes is being said (without confidence that he completely understands) in order to save his reputation. This leads to mistranslation, confusion, and impacts credibility.

#### Infiltration

The greatest risk with over-reliance on foreign national translators is infiltration by insurgent

operatives. Enemy infiltration of the interpreter corps is nothing new; the U.S. military in Vietnam also used native, untested interpreters in their intelligence collection operations. "The South Vietnamese intelligence structure was weak, fragmented, and heavily infiltrated with enemy informants which hindered U.S. collection and dissemination efforts."<sup>6</sup> As in Vietnam, the enemy in Iraq takes advantage of every gap in the American armor and often targets the dependence that Americans have on Iraqi citizens who translate and live on bases. They recognize the excellent placement and access that translators have to American operations and the potential to place operatives at the sides of commanders at all levels.

Insurgents infiltrate the translator corps using both willing and unwilling agents. Willing agents are individuals who become translators with the mission to collect information, spread disinformation, observe tactics, and conduct sabotage against Coalition Forces. These are the most dangerous, and they are often trained to hide their activities. Unwilling infiltrators are interpreters loyal to their job and the Marine Corps, but who are forced into working for insurgents through threats to their person, family, or other interests. While cultural familiarity is one of the translator's strengths, it can



also be cause for him or her to question their loyalty to the Coalition. Iraq has been an operational security nightmare due in part to misplaced trust in interpreters and Iraqi security forces.

One Army officer stated, "We know we've got Baathist and Fedayeen working for us as interpreters...except nobody knows how to get rid of the bad ones. There aren't enough counterintelligence agents to run counterintelligence ops against the interpreters." It is not uncommon for a unit to receive validated intelligence, plan a raid and find nothing more than a dry hole due to security leaks involving interpreters. The same Army officer said, "We heard about dozens of cases where the infantry would find out where stuff was, brief the interpreter, but the interpreter would get out of sight and when the infantry went on the raid, the stuff wouldn't be there."<sup>7</sup>

### Solutions

It is unrealistic to assume that the Marine Corps will ever be self-sustaining in its linguistic abilities. To create a fluent speaker is too costly and time consuming for the Marine Corps to have more than a minority of trained personnel in any given language. Therefore, the need for non-military interpreters will only increase as

future battles become less conventional. Certainly, during future military operations, indigenous translators will be important elements to success; therefore, proper procedures when working with translators will be of great value to anyone deploying to these areas.

Currently, local interpreters are hired and supervised by contracted civilian companies. The companies are not able to fully evaluate potential hires and conduct proper supervision over a vast, combat-filled area. To solve this, the Marine Corps should hire naturalized American citizens with backgrounds in the native culture and language. Instead of using these individuals as interpreters only they could instead be used as supervisors and trainers of local personnel once in country. To make such a program effective, each battalion should be assigned one or two of these individuals. They should conduct pre-deployment training with the unit and be absorbed into the fabric of the unit as much as possible.

Translator corruption, incompetence, and enemy infiltration are serious threats which may appear daunting to Marines preparing to deploy. It may seem too difficult for a Marine raised with a Western mindset to be able to properly judge the performance of interpreters. Although daunting, preparation and knowledge in the proper use of

interpreters will be of worth to the deploying Marine. This goes hand in hand with the recent trend towards the understanding and proper treatment of culture in the military.

Realistic and sensible preparation, beginning with a basic understanding of the local culture and language will also contribute to mitigate the problems with local interpreters. Marines should gain as much cultural knowledge as possible before deployment; an understanding of how indigenous people communicate, to include non-vocal methods will aid in telling whether an interpreter is translating correctly.<sup>8</sup>

It may not be possible to eliminate completely the pitfalls that come with the use of local personnel, yet simple steps can be taken to alleviate the effects. A Marine must train the translator to say exactly what the Marine says with exactly the same attitude. In effect, a translator is an extension of the Marine himself and should properly reflect attitude, body language and nuance. If the Marine is angry, then the interpreter must be angry too. He should not amplify or express his own opinion above and beyond what he believes the Marine is trying to say. The Marine and translator must practice before work in order to

gain a strong working relationship, and at these sessions the Marine can train the interpreter.

Interpreters should never be allowed to stay in one area for more than a year and as each new Marine unit enters the area they must evaluate interpreters' performance and quality before trusting them. Field Manual-Interim (FMI) 3-07.22 the U.S. Army's *Counterinsurgency Manual* offers the following tips to evaluate the quality and veracity of translations:

1. Periodically check an interpreter's accuracy, consistency, and clarity. Have an American fluent enough in the language sit in on a lesson or interview to ensure that the translation is not distorted, intentionally or unintentionally. Another way to be sure is to learn the target language, so that an interpreter's loyalty and honesty can be personally checked.
2. Check with the audience whenever misunderstandings are suspected and clarify immediately. Using the interpreter, ask questions to elicit answers that will tell whether the point is clear. If it is not, rephrase the instruction differently and illustrate the point again. Use repetition and examples whenever necessary to facilitate learning.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

Marine Corps' dependence on indigenous interpreters is a weakness that will not go away in the future. Training more military linguists and the recent Marine Corps focus on language and cultural operations will help, but it will not completely eliminate the need for local translators. A cadre of interpreter supervisors trained and inducted into a unit prior to deployment will help alleviate some of these issues. Interpreter corruption, incompetence, and infiltration by the enemy are obstacles that not all Marines are prepared to handle, but by taking basic steps they can alleviate these problems significantly.

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## Notes

1. Brigadier General Richard M. Lake, "Corps Expands Language, Cultural Learning." Marine Corps Times, 4, February, 2009, at: [http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2009/02/marine\\_language\\_training\\_020209w/](http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2009/02/marine_language_training_020209w/).
2. The author spoke Arabic extensively with Iraqi contractors, detainees and community leaders while serving in Iraq.
3. Major Ben Connable, "Marines are from Mars, Iraqis from Venus." 30, May 2004, at: <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com>.
4. Languages of Iraq, Ethnologue at: [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=IQ](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=IQ).
5. Anthony Cordesman, "Iraqi Force Development and the Challenge of Civil War." 27 November, 2006, at: [http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/061004\\_iraqi\\_force\\_dev.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/061004_iraqi_force_dev.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup>. Major Robert W. Livingston, "Low Intensity Conflict Intelligence: Lessons From Vietnam," USMC, CSC 1990.
- <sup>7</sup>. Paul Sperry, "Army interpreters betraying soldiers," WorldNet Daily, 10 February, 2004, available at: <http://www.worldnetdaily.com/index>.
8. Barak A. Salmoni and Paula Holmes-Eber, *Operational Culture for the Warfighter*, (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2008), 237.
9. U.S. Army, *Counterinsurgency Operations* FMI 3-07.22, Washington D.C. 2004.

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