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TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN NEPAL

Mark Turin

Abstract

Offering the first written reflection in English outlining and critically assessing the work of the Translation and Interpretation Unit in the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), this theoretically-informed and practically-oriented article outlines the framing documents and vision that led to the establishment of UNMIN in 2007. In addition, this article reflects on the key organizational location of the Translation and Interpretation Unit within the substantive wing of Mission leadership that helped its staff contribute to effective public messaging and communications. Following a critical review of the sparse existing literature on field translation, and positioning the underlying research questions that inform this article, the process of developing, building, staffing and sustaining the Translation and Interpretation Unit is discussed alongside the growth of language and culture services in UNMIN more generally. Finally, I discuss the challenges of such work for the staff members employed in the Unit, and situate the Nepal experience within a wider frame that includes some structured reflections on UN field mission translation and interpretation work more generally.

Keywords: United Nations, field interpretation, translation in conflict, official translation, peace process

1. Introduction

This article offers what is to my knowledge the first written reflection in English outlining and assessing the work of the Translation and Interpretation Unit in the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN). In addition, this article is one of very few publications that addresses translation and interpretation in United Nations field missions, and therefore adds some rich detail and context to an area of translation studies that remains curiously underdeveloped.

UNMIN was established on 23 January 2007 to monitor the disarmament of Maoist rebels and the

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preparations for the Constituent Assembly election in 2007 in Nepal, and the mission ceased operations on January 15, 2011. Thanks to an initial scoping exercise that led to its establishment, UNMIN was resourced with a well-staffed Translation and Interpretation Unit to assist both the substantive and administrative components of the Mission with a full suite of language services including but not limited to simultaneous and consecutive interpretation and bidirectional written translation between English and Nepali.

As this contribution outlines, the work of the Nepali and international staff in the Translation and Interpretation Unit soon expanded to include support for a number of the many languages spoken in Nepal beyond Nepali and English (the Central Bureau of Statistics identifies 123 languages spoken in the nation, 2011, p.4), and embraced additional language-related activities such as lunchtime Nepali language classes for international mission staff and the development of a customizable and regularly updated mission lexicon. In close cooperation with members of the Public Information and Outreach unit, Translation and Interpretation Unit staff became both official and unofficial cultural ‘liaison’ workers, moving with increasing dexterity between literal translation and cultural interpretation (Venuti, 2012,p.6), in both Kathmandu and the districts.

The body of this article is structured as follows. First, I situate field translation and interpretation services within the theoretical literature of translation studies, and draw attention to a few key research questions and themes that frame the following discussion. Second, I offer an outline of the framing documents and vision that led to the establishment of UNMIN and reflect on the key structural location of the Translation and Interpretation Unit within the substantive wing of Mission leadership that helped its staff contribute to effective public messaging and communications. Third, I discuss the process of developing, building, staffing and sustaining the Translation and Interpretation Unit which I had

the privilege of directing for a little over a year from May 2007 to June 2008, and I outline the growth of language and culture services in UNMIN more generally. Finally, I discuss the challenges of such work for the staff members employed in the Translation and Interpretation Unit and conclude with some structured reflections on UN field mission translation and interpretation work more generally.

2. Situating United Nations field translation as an area of research

Baker's *Translation and Conflict* (2019) is one of the first studies to establish that translators and interpreters participate in circulating as well as resisting the narratives that create the intellectual and moral environment for violent conflict and social tensions. Baker draws on narrative theory to examine the ways in which translation and interpreting "function in this context and to explore how the discursive negotiation of conflictual and competing narratives is realized in and through acts of translation and interpreting" (2019, p.1). A key paragraph that outlines Baker's position is worth citing in full:

[...] translators and interpreters are not merely passive receivers of assignments from others; many initiate their own translation projects and actively select texts and volunteer for interpreting tasks that contribute to the elaboration of particular narratives. Neither are they detached, unaccountable professionals whose involvement begins and ends with the delivery of a linguistic product. Like any other group in society, translators and interpreters are responsible for the texts and utterances they produce. Consciously or otherwise, they translate texts and utterances that participate in creating, negotiating and contesting social reality. (p.105)

Those who have worked in field translation as I have can attest to the veracity of this statement. The implicit agency and explicit power that field translators wield—not to mention the accompanying responsibilities that such work entails—are both rarely in frame during our work and at the same time permeate all that we do. While helpfully outlining some of the many ways in which translators and interpreters "accentuate,

undermine or modify aspects of the narrative(s) encoded in the source text or utterance, and in so doing participate in shaping social reality" (Baker, 2019, p. 5), strangely absent from this now classic text is any discussion of, or examples drawn from, United Nations peacekeeping or field missions—an absence all the more acutely felt as there is so little published literature on this growing community of under-resourced and structurally-vulnerable translators.

Having highlighted, as Brownlie (2007) does, the "impossibility of neutrality, and thus the necessity of recognizing the interventionist role of translators", I am left wondering how such recognition helps those embattled language workers on the tense front lines of global conflicts or natural and political disasters (p. 135). All too often, it seems, theoretically-nuanced and critically-engaged arguments are made by university-based scholars about the complicity, complexity and embodied power dynamics of translation in sites of conflict and war. Rarely if ever, do we hear from translators and interpreters themselves, in their own voices, reflecting on the challenges of the work. I hope that this article, in some modest way, can help to rebalance that conversation by contributing some practical and empirical data from one field context: Nepal.

The case has been effectively made by Cao and Zhao (2008) that "UN translation is a specialized area of translational activity and has its own characteristics and special demands necessitated and dictated by the nature of the work of the UN," and that "very little has been studied and written" about it (p. 39). Yet, Cao and Zhao's study—commendable as they are—are limited to reviewing written translation at United Nations headquarters and does not mention, even in passing, United Nations field missions operating in languages beyond the official six. In addition, Cao and Zhao offer no clues as to why this important arena of translation and interpretation has been overlooked in both analysis and theory, particularly since they acknowledge that "documentation is the life-blood of virtually all gatherings at the UN" (2008, p. 39). In the absence of other explanations, I will venture to offer some factors that in my mind come together to make United Nations translation and

interpretation an under-analyzed and under-theorized space. In no particular order of relevance, they include a highly conservative and consensus-based work culture that is inherently risk averse and reluctant to expose error and fault; the difficulty for outside researchers to gain access and permission to study, evaluate and review United Nations services and protocols; a punishingly high work-load placed on UN translators and interpreters with little margin for error leaving no time for critical self-reflection; and widespread ignorance—both within the United Nations and outside of it—about the centrality of language services for smooth communications and operations across the organization, and particularly in politically-sensitive field missions.

3. A vision for establishing field translation and interpretation in Nepal

The official organizational history of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) can be sketched out as follows. UNMIN was established by the Security Council on 23 January 2007 by resolution 1740 (2007) at the request of the Government of Nepal, to assist in the monitoring of the ceasefire arrangements, the preparation and conduct of the election of the Constituent Assembly in a free and fair atmosphere, as well as the management of arms and armed personnel of the Government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). In accordance with resolution 1740, the Mission would operate under the leadership of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General, with a planned staff complement of 1,073 personnel.

From 2007 to early 2011, the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) provided oversight and support for UNMIN, which assisted Nepal in its transition to peace following a decade of armed conflict. UNMIN played an important support role in the successful holding of an historic Constituent Assembly election in April 2008 that was a major milestone in the peace process.

As a special political mission, UNMIN assisted and helped to build confidence in the peace process, including through its arms monitoring responsibilities under Security Council Resolution 1864 (2009). Unarmed UN arms monitors were

deployed in Maoist cantonments and in satellite sites around the country as well as at one Nepal Army arms storage depot in Kathmandu.

In accordance with Security Council Resolution 1939 (2010), UNMIN withdrew from Nepal on 15 January 2011. Subsequently, DPA established a Liaison Office in Kathmandu to continue its engagement with key interlocutors in Nepal. The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, visited Nepal in March 2013 and January 2015 to personally engage with political leaders in Nepal and to explore pathways to further successfully implement the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, particularly the ongoing constitution drafting process.

What this official history of UNMIN's brief presence in Nepal does not tell is how this unique field mission ended up with such a strong commitment to effective, multilingual communication. Prior to the establishment of UNMIN, the United Nations Secretary-General requested that Mr. Staffan de Mistura and his Personal Representative, Ian Martin, previously head of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Nepal, undertake a Technical Assessment Mission between 9 and 17 December, 2006. This Pre-Assessment Mission to Nepal made no specific reference to language assistance requirements since it was not within the scope of the visit but referred in broad strokes to the need for communications with local actors in the Public Information annex. The Nepal Country Profile, previously prepared by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations Situation Centre in September 2006, had already identified Nepal's considerable linguistic diversity.

Documented in the 16-page Security Council report S/2007/7 is a strong commitment to knowledge dissemination and communication (pp. 13-14). The document outlines the centrality of a "public information and outreach strategy" and notes that considerable challenges could be expected in "ensuring its information reaches low-literacy communities and non-Nepali speakers." This explicit and welcome awareness of Nepal's multilingual reality and the subsequent highlighting of the importance of radio in

connecting with remote communities can be attributed to the formative field experiences that Ian Martin and Kieran Dwyer, later UNMIN Spokesman and Head of Public Information, had in Nepal through their work in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Moreover, both Mr. Martin and Mr. Dwyer had served in senior positions in the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), another country home to great linguistic diversity (Taylor-Leech, 2008), and had come to appreciate first-hand the importance of an inclusive and comprehensive information strategy that made effective use of translation services to ensure unified messaging and communications.

In short, even before the mission was established, senior mission leadership understood and appreciated that UNMIN would be operating in a country with an unusually high level of linguistic diversity and multilingualism. With central United Nations language services designed to support only the six official languages of the United Nations (Cao and Zhao, 2008, p. 39)—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish—a customized approach would be needed. Having recognized Nepal's unique ethnolinguistic conditions during the planning process, the country-specific needs formed part of the rationale for establishing a self-standing Translation and Interpretation Unit. In the establishment phase of UNMIN in early 2007, before the mission budget had been officially approved and the Translation Unit Chief and staff had been recruited, a single overworked and beleaguered Nepali national had been appointed to work as the sole translator, and reported into mission leadership. It was quickly recognized that there was far too much work and responsibility for a single translator, and valuable time and opportunities were acknowledged to have been lost on account of the limited capacity for translation and interpretation services within the mission during this start-up phase.

As part of the proposed resource requirements for the mission, a Translation and Interpretation Unit of 12 posts was suggested. After additional justification had been provided by the mission, the staffing level was approved by the relevant UN budgetary committees. In the finalized mission

budget and organizational chart, UNMIN's Translation and Interpretation Unit reported into the office of the Chief of Staff and was attached to the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (OSRSG), and not to the mission's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) as was standard operating procedure in other field missions. This innovative decision was bold and had lasting implications: it provided the operational space for translation and interpretation services to be aligned with the substantive work of the field mission and for the unit staff to be physically collocated with the Public Information and Outreach team. UNMIN's Translation and Interpretation Unit would be directed by a Chief of Unit whose responsibilities, according to the vacancy announcement, would include the following:

Reporting to the Chief of Staff, the incumbent shall perform the following functions: Plan, organize and supervise the work of the Unit, which will provide the full range of translation and interpretation services in Nepali and English to all substantive and administrative offices at UNMIN headquarters (with the exception of the Electoral Division); Monitor work priorities to ensure the provision of timely translation and interpretation services; Establish standards required for all interpreters and translators in UNMIN, including the preparation of guidelines, instructions for interpreters and translators, a regularly updated "mission dictionary" of terminology to be used; Ensure that the outputs produced and services provided by the Unit meet high-quality standards; Recommend action on personnel, budgetary, procedural and other matters relating to the efficient operation of the Unit; Participate in the testing and evaluation of prospective language staff, and make recommendations concerning the selection, promotion and retention of staff in the Unit; Train interpreting and translating staff.

4. Recruitment and growth: Developing language and culture services in a UN field mission

On starting my work at UNMIN in May 2007 as Unit Chief, it became very apparent that alongside

supporting all aspects of the mission with translation and interpretation services, it was imperative that we immediately hire and train staff to work at the Kathmandu headquarters and soon after that, hire local staff to support language services in the districts in which UNMIN had a field presence. One of the challenges we faced at that time was the stark reality that—aside from the Society of Translators Nepal which was only established in 2009 with the goal of bringing together translators working in different parts of the country to promote translation activities and translation quality¹—Nepal had no apparent accreditation service for Nepali language translators and interpreters and no functioning professional body that could oversee such work, let alone any standards and recognized certification for the many other languages spoken in the nation (Turin, 2005). While there is a rich history of skilled interpreting and translating across and between a range of local, regional, national and international languages in Nepali literature, scholarship and the media, there was no single body or institution in Nepal that the United Nations—invested as it is in ‘best practices’ and ‘transparency’—could approach for assistance and guidance. This reality was in striking contrast to United Nations expectations in headquarters that “to work as translator in the UN, one must first pass the UN translator’s examinations.” (Cao and Zhao, 2008, p. 44). The absence of a Nepal-specific accreditation body provided an opportunity for some creative recruitment to hire the following staff complement: a language editor, eight translators/interpreters, two editorial assistants and one administrative assistant. Rather than professionally trained translators and interpreters, the UNMIN approach was to engage with what others have referred to as “community interpreting services” (Ra & Napier, 2013).

While the staffing for the unit was generous, it needed to be fine-tuned to reflect the language services that the Translation and Interpretation Unit was being asked to deliver. Curiously and at once revealingly, given the increasing numbers of Nepalese who have sought post-secondary (and

even secondary) education in English medium schools and colleges in Nepal or abroad, it was easier to identify and recruit Nepali staff whose written English was at native levels of fluency than it was Nepali staff who displayed the same dexterity in written Nepali. A large proportion of both the written translation and spoken interpretation that our unit was asked to deliver had Nepali as the source language and English as the target, and it soon became clear that it was not difficult to hire staff who could excel in such work. On the other hand, recruiting staff members—whether national or international—who had both a nuanced understanding of English and whose written Nepali was sufficiently sophisticated (without being overly Sanskritized) to translate a Security Council resolution or Secretary-General’s report into elegant and understandable Nepali was significantly more difficult. In our attempt to recruit a diverse and capable team, the human resources unit in the field mission resorted to an approach that could only be called ‘broadcasting’ in the most literal sense of the term: reaching out to contacts in the academy, connecting with the media and with members of Nepal’s dynamic civil society circles and approaching individuals directly who had demonstrated levels of excellence in both written and spoken Nepali and English. The HR team ran advertisements for the many vacancies in the national press and online, outlining that the mission was looking for candidates who could provide high-quality spoken interpretation and written translation covering a broad range of subjects including social, legal, constitutional, electoral and military vocabulary.

While an advanced university degree (understood to be Master’s level or equivalent) was desirable and even required by the UN Personnel unit for the more senior appointments, it was certainly not compulsory and was perceived to be less important than rich and relevant experience. By the end of 2007, our staffing complement was near complete, and we had recruited journalists, writers, film makers, NGO workers, recent graduates and crucially—a point which I will address more comprehensively in the following section—a skilled technologist who also doubled up as an interpreter. Our success was bitter sweet:

¹ See <<http://translators.org.np/page-about-us-1>> last accessed 24 May 2019.

recruiting highly talented Nepali staff to work in UNMIN—whether in the Translation and Interpretation Unit or in other substantive divisions of the mission—temporarily removed these individuals from the industry or field in which they had been working. This painful irony was noted by many: while UNMIN’s Nepali ‘brain trust’ was significant—with a number of Nepal’s leading scholars, writers, journalists, political analysts and communicators taking senior posts in the organization—the mass recruitment of Nepali talent effectively stripped this very same capacity out of the civil society organizations and media sector that the mission was looking to strengthen. This issue is common in all countries that have a UN mission presence, and there are of course significant benefits to temporary employment in the United Nations both for the individuals themselves and for wider society, not limited to the highly competitive salary, good benefits and further career opportunities with the UN.

The United Nations is mindful of the ethnicity and gender of its staff, and strives to be an inclusive and representative employer. In common with many other aspects of Nepali professional life, advanced levels of literacy and linguistic ability in both Nepali and English is more commonly—but by no means exclusively—found among upper caste (and upper class), urban Nepali men than among women, historically marginalized communities or individuals from remote districts (Literacy Mapping Study Team, 2013). Within these constraints, and reflecting back on our recruitment process, we did reasonably well to hire and retain a number of highly educated women, some individuals from historically marginalized communities and also Nepal’s only blind interpreter—an unusually skilled individual who became a recognizable face for UNMIN as the interpreter of choice for Mr. Ian Martin, our Head of Mission and Special Representative of the Secretary General in Nepal.

At its most expansive, the goal of the Translation and Interpretation Unit was to develop a capability within UNMIN to embrace the linguistic diversity of Nepal and meet the aims and objectives of the mission through effective communication with local actors. This was to be

achieved by giving the Unit the responsibility of standardizing terminology across the mission, compiling a mission-wide style sheet, supporting all regional and district language assistants with a frequently updated mission lexicon and training as needed, translating core documents into Nepali and English, and providing authoritative UNMIN translations for both internal and external dissemination. As Cao and Zhao (2008) note, one of the primary goals of UN translation services is for UN documents to be “produced with legislative authorization and mandate which are usually contained in resolutions adopted by UN organs” (p. 45), and such genres of official, bureaucratic and administrative translation occupied a great deal of our translators’ time. Alongside the translation and interpretation tasks with which the Unit was formally charged, which I outline further below, other projects that the Translation and Interpretation Unit staff undertook included:

1) **Coordinating** with language assistants in other sections of the mission (arms monitors and electoral officers) and with other UN agencies to ensure that translations of United Nations terminology were standardized and that common guidelines were followed. For language assistants working within UNMIN but outside of the Translation Unit, this coordination involved numerous training workshops and early engagement with the recruitment and supervision.

2) **Consulting** with translators at foreign missions and embassies to discuss better information sharing and coordinating work to avoid duplication of effort. Early on, we discovered that translators and press officers in the larger embassies (British, US, Indian and others) were regularly tasked with translating into English the very same Nepali language press releases, editorials or political manifestos that we were simultaneously working on. Through effective coordination and the development of relationships of trust, we were able to pool resources and focus effort—both within and outside the mission—to ensure that time-sensitive documents were only translated once and then widely shared. As Jiménez-Crespo (2012) has noted, “time pressure is one of the main situational factors in professional translation, and so far it has not been

granted the attention that it deserves” (p. 71). In addition, through the development and nurturing of these collaborative and cooperative relationships, translators and press officers in embassies became focal points for the dissemination of UNMIN translations and would even contact our unit to bring relevant and recently released documents to our attention, share their own resources and inquire whether we were working on specific translations.

3) **Editing** the final official English translation of the Interim Constitution of Nepal and associated amendments, and supporting the electoral team with unofficial but technically correct translations of Election Acts and Regulations relating to the forthcoming Constituent Assembly election. In early 2008, and in recognition of our now well-established technical linguistic capacities and commitment to precision in translation, the UNMIN Translation and Interpretation Unit was approached by the Constitution Advisory Support Unit, a small and specialist group within the United Nations Development Program in Kathmandu that had been contracted to support the Government of Nepal with its constitution writing process. A number of our national and international staff members worked intensively on refining the official translation of the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2063 (2007), and our work was generously recognized in the preface to the document.² In this work, we had to negotiate what Cao and Zhao (2008) refer to as the “calculated ambiguity in international instruments” (p. 47). They note, as we did, that “not infrequently, deliberate imprecision and generalities are found in treaties” (p. 47). The same may be said of constitutions. The complexity of such work lies primarily in identifying which subtleties were intentional in the minds of the drafters, and which were not.

4) **Designing, compiling, maintaining and disseminating** a web-based Unicode Nepali-English mission lexicon with terminology related to the peace process, elections, military ranks,

explosive devices and political and civil affairs.³ This lexicon was made available through UNMIN’s intranet to all language assistants, translators and interpreters at HQ, regional offices and staff at the Election Commission and was regularly updated with new vocabulary in response to the needs and requests of specific units. Our goal was not only to support all language assistants across the mission with an up-to-date and officially authorized mission lexicon, but also to work towards consistency of expression and translation within UNMIN and beyond, and thereby cut down on translation errors and misunderstandings which could have lasting negative consequences. Cao and Zhao (2008, p. 48) note that “over the years, the UN has developed its own style of writing and established the format for each category of documents” and in many ways, it became the primary responsibility of the UNMIN Translation and Interpretation unit to manage, parse and negotiate these. The experience of our team would support the statement that: “The occasions when one is unable to find equivalents for a word or concept in another language are frequent” (Cao and Zhao, 2008, p. 46).

By way of example of standardized technical terms and organizational units with which field translators might not be familiar in either Nepali or English that we included in the UNMIN Mission lexicon, I offer: Mine Risk Education Working Group माइनको जोखिमबारेमा शिक्षादि न कार्यरत समूह, Electoral Experts Monitoring Team (EEMT) निर्वाचन अनगुमन विशेषज्ञ टोली and Platoon Commander, सेनामखु पित.

5) **Constructing** a dynamic and live online workflow manager so that translation assignments could be logged, tracked and easily retrieved, along with an online Nepali to Gregorian date converter and an automated bidirectional machine-assisted translation tool. These important innovations—implemented by our in-house

²The document can be downloaded from:

http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/rare/books/downloads/Nepal_Interim_Constitution_2007_first_to_sixth_amendments.pdf>.

³ The final version of the UNMIN mission lexicon can be downloaded here

<https://markturin.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2019/05/UNMIN_Mission_Lexicon_2008.pdf>

software developer and translator—were integral to our effectiveness as a unit and helped us to be more precise and more efficient in our tasks. As soon as it was clear that our unit was ‘open for business’, we became overwhelmed with translation requests from our clients in the mission. Some requests were short (a page of text from a manual) while others were huge (20-page political manifestos), and we found that many were duplicate requests resulting from clients across the mission learning of an important document that they wanted to read and approaching one of our staff members individually for a translation. On a number of occasions, we discovered—most regrettably—that two translators sitting in adjoining cubicles had begun translating the same document as requests had been received from two different clients within the organization. In order to better manage workload, oversee a torrent of translation and interpreting tasks, track progress on assignments, prioritize mission-critical requests and educate our clients about the complexities of our work, we developed a workflow manager tool that was maintained by our tireless administrative assistant. Reviewing, tracking and logging tasks became a key element in our success as a unit. This web-based tool was developed by a national staff member with coding experience using MySQL with an elegant PHP front end, using Nepali Unicode and incorporating a simple search function.

6) Emerging out of the online workflow management tool that we designed, and drawing heavily on the mission lexicon, we **built a machine-assisted translation tool** that pulled high-frequency words and terms from our existing glossary and pre-populated a file with a rough pseudo-translation (in English or in Nepali depending on the direction) with direct word matches. Not only do such tools help to reduce “the cognitive load during interpretation” (Fantinuoli, 2017, p. 24), but the tool significantly improved accuracy thanks to an increase in translation uniformity and speed of assignment completion. In addition, the repetitiveness of the work for our team of translators was somewhat reduced and burn-out mitigated. The United Nations Department of Field Support,

Communications and Information Technology Service Systems Section conducted a field visit to assess the tool in January 2009 with the goal of studying “the business case for this application, implemented functionality and the system specifications according to the principles outlined in the Department of Field Support (DFS) Systems Certification Program with an ultimate objective of evaluating its applicability in other missions where there are similar challenges for translation tasks” (2009, p. 2). Their report concluded that while this was a valuable and unique resource, it would be difficult to integrate it into United Nations systems, and as a result, this open source deployment that could have assisted other field missions withered on the vine and ended with UNMIN.

7) **Building** on the existing United Nations Editorial Manual,⁴ we took on the task of compiling a style guide for Nepali and English terms that were widely used by mission staff to ensure consistency over time and sensitivity to nuances in local terminology, including but not limited to terms such as Special Representative of the Secretary-General महासचिवकाविशेष प्रतिनिधि and Joint Monitoring Coordinating Committee (JMCC) संयुक्त अनगुमन समन्वय समिति. While the United Nations Translation Services in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is responsible for translations of all official United Nations documents, meeting records and correspondence at Headquarters from and into Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish,⁵ this central unit has no oversight over or resources to contribute to field missions working in languages beyond the six that are officially recognized. The result is that all United Nations field missions in linguistically diverse regions must design, maintain and build their own resources and authority lists without centralized support.

8) **Providing** an important component in the ‘On-Boarding’ Induction Course for new staff relating

⁴See <<http://www.dgacm.org/editorialmanual/>>.

⁵See

<<http://www.un.org/Depts/DGACM/Translation.shtml>>.

to cultural sensitivity, Nepali history and local norms and standards. With hundreds of international staff and volunteers from scores of countries, and a large number of Nepali staff members who had been recruited from across the nation, it became clear that the cultural knowledge base of the UNMIN Translation and Interpretation Unit team could be harnessed to provide orientation assistance and answer specific questions about culturally-sanctioned behavior and social taboos in Nepal. With a diverse staff of men and women of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds, we found that the Translation and Interpretation Unit rapidly became a well-regarded site for mission staff to come with queries about how things worked in Nepal and ask questions about appropriate forms of behavior and social expectations.

9) **Supporting** the personnel unit, electoral field support and United Nations Volunteer units with reviewing the ethnic and regional diversity of staff members and applicants to positions, and evaluating language assistants by way of a rigorous language test which assessed spoken fluency and written competencies in regional, national and international languages. This was sensitive and complex work, but became increasingly necessary as UNMIN grew to full mission and staffing strength in preparation for the Constituent Assembly elections that were eventually held in April 2008. Given Nepal's linguistic and cultural diversity, it became operationally important to have local staff in the regional headquarters who had not only the communicative competence but also the necessary social networks to be effective. Human resources and personnel—mostly international—called upon our unit to support them in targeted recruitment in advance of the election.

10) **Preparing and delivering** a biweekly free and voluntary Nepali language class for mission staff during lunch breaks. What started out as an informal lunchtime gathering for interested international staff and volunteers to learn a few words of Nepali became a more regular feature of the UNMIN calendar, and brought together a wide range of staff from both substantive and administrative sections of the mission to let their guard down and try their hand at learning and

speaking a little Nepali. Aside from the obvious linguistic benefits of having international staff demonstrate their interest in learning the official and national language of the country in which they were working, the unintended social benefits and by-products of witnessing senior international staff in a position of communicative vulnerability (and often outperformed by their assistants) were noted by many who attended and participated in these free lunchtime language lessons.

11) A significant and unexpected positive upshot of many of the above interventions and initiatives was that the '**cultural liaison**' function that professional and experienced Translation and Interpretation Unit staff were able to provide to other sections of the mission—not always explicitly related to translation and interpretation tasks—became more widely recognized and appreciated. Specific examples of our impact include:

- In the course of translating compensation documentation following a fatal road accident, unit staff raised issues about nuanced English phrasing which when translated into Nepali would have created confusion and apportioned responsibility. Based on the advice of the unit, it was decided to release the statement in English only and to not translate it into Nepali.
- Team members became active participants in the mission induction and on boarding program, providing valuable assistance to the Social Affairs officer and often substituting in that officer's absence.
- Thanks to high skill levels and the diverse professional backgrounds of the national professional officers in the Translation and Interpretation Unit, informal arrangements were reached for three senior staff members to work on substantive issues in Public Information and Outreach, Gender Affairs and Child Protection for 10% of their time respectively. There were multiple benefits to such sharing of skilled professionals: including supporting other sections of the mission, and retaining excellent staff who might otherwise tire of translation by allowing them to work on content before it was sent for translation, thus supporting the

development of specialized translation skill sets within the unit.

5. Challenges and opportunities: Educating up and job satisfaction in field translation

Norman Shapiro, famously described “translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it’s there when there are little imperfections - scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any. It should never call attention to itself” (cited in Venuti 1995, p. 1).

In many ways, the effort of our staff in the Translation and Interpretation Unit was indeed invisible when we performed at our best. As Hossam Fahr, United Nations Chief Arabic Interpreter based in New York told me when I met him in person at the UN Headquarters on May 12, 2008, “good translation is like air, you only smell it when it’s bad.” This strategic invisibility—arguably necessary and common in many fields of work that are classified as ‘support’—was quite tiring for our committed Translation and Interpretation Unit staff and has been discussed by Courtney and Phelan (2019) whose research documents that “translators experience periods of stress due to their job demands, workload and deadlines” (pp. 110-111). This frustration was likely particularly acute given that while our team was part of the substantive wing of the mission, on numerous occasions, we were asked to work late into or even through the night on translations when other staff members had gone home for the day. In addition, given that our staff were not trained translators or interpreters, but rather effective communicators, journalists and writers in their own right, it was at times grating to be handed a pack of documents at the close of business and be asked to turn them around by the next morning.

In order to better educate our own clients in UNMIN, we developed two ‘intake’ forms: an Interpreter Request Form and a Translation Request Form. Both of these documents were designed as much for the client as they were for us to assign and prioritize work. In the Interpreter Request Form, for example, we asked clients to identify the *format* of the event (was it expected

to be a formal speech, a large group meeting, an interview, a media event or something else); the primary *direction* of interpretation (Nepali to English, English to Nepali, or bidirectional); the *type* of interpreting that would be required (formal, whisper, summary and the like); the estimated number of participants and sector of society they came from (realizing, for example, that interpreting for high-ranking government officials and military officers was quite different to sitting in a field with villagers); whether written materials could be expected to be made available in advance; whether other interpreters might also be present, and the estimated length of the event. One of the goals of requiring such a form was to gently remind our clients that interpreters would need food and rest, and impress upon them to give as much context to the request as possible in order for our staff to be well-prepared and effective in their work. Revealingly, the last question on our form was: “have transportation arrangements been made for the interpreter?” as we had found that all too often, no space in the car, helicopter or flight had been reserved for the interpreter.

While some of the questions in the Translation Request Form mirrored those of the Interpreter Request Form, other specific questions asked the client to think carefully about the *type* of translation that they were requesting (oral summary, working draft or final); the *priority* status (low, medium, high or urgent/immediate – in which case, additional justification was needed); the *security* or *confidentiality* of the source document and translation, as well as whether the finalized translation could be uploaded to our internal translation *archive* managed by our system administrator. For written translation more than for spoken interpretation, the difference between asking for a summary of a document versus a finalized official translation could amount to adding days of work, so having a short ‘intake interview’ with our clients to better understand what they were looking for in the translation helped save everyone a great deal of unnecessary effort and result in a faster turnaround time for each task.

The innovative Translation and Workflow Management Tool that we developed in-house in order to help us address some of the challenges

we faced during handling of translation requests from English to Nepali and vice versa was externally assessed by the United Nations Department of Field Support, Communications and Information Technology Service Systems Section. The assessment noted that our tool—using open source software and no proprietary technologies—effectively assisted our unit with the standardization of the translated content, the management of the translation process, the distribution of workload between translators and the archiving of digital documents for search and audit purposes. The goal of their assessment was to explore the business case for this application, its functionality and the system specifications according “with an ultimate objective of evaluating its applicability in other missions where there are similar challenges for translation tasks.” Despite a very positive review, and explicit mention in the UN Secretary-General’s report of 12 May 2008 (S/2008/313), the open source tool has not, to our knowledge, been adopted in any other field mission. This is all the more regrettable as other field missions have been looking for precisely such systems, as identified in an After Action Review completed in June 2006 that recommended the creation of a Language and Conference Services Unit in the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB).

In April 2008, the Office of Best Practices in United Nations Peacekeeping conducted what is known as an ‘After Action Review’ of the UNMIN Translation and Interpretation Unit, a technique originating in the military for a structured review or debriefing process that aims to analyze what has happened, why it happened, and how it can be either repeated or done better by the participants and those responsible for the project or event. This 11-page internal United Nations document concluded with some specific actionable recommendations for the United Nations HQ in New York that included developing clearer guidelines on the structure and uses of translation and interpretation units in the field and including cultural assessment in Technical Assistance Missions in order to identify anthropologists or linguists who could assist in this work.

6. Conclusion

The present article outlines both the work of the UNMIN Translation and Interpretation Unit and the political and administrative context in which this work took place. This contribution is intentionally both descriptive, reflexive and analytical, and is the first publication in English to focus on this historical moment in translation and interpretation services in Nepal. It is my hope that it will lay the foundation for more critical and comprehensive evaluations of the work of the UNMIN Translation and Interpretation Unit in due course, and of United Nations translation and interpretation services more generally, both in headquarters and in field missions across the globe.

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