

Working Across Translation:

Translation from English to Dari and Pashto

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MEMO

From: Suzie LeBlanc, TCAP Field Manager
To: TCAP staff, experts and trainers
Subject: Translation from English to Dari and Pashto

In September at the Park Star Hotel in Kabul, a donor working in Afghanistan presented the main findings of one of its projects evaluation. Some 179 educators, many from our partner institutions¹ were trained through a stellar program (4 weeks pre-departure training followed by 14 weeks abroad). The evaluation was thorough and as we watched the presentation on the conference board's large screen one comment, made by the various groups surveyed, kept coming back every second slide: "Poor translation of documents – Poor interpretation". The participants seem to have missed a lot on the learning because they could only partially decipher the written documents and understand what the trainers were saying.

Back to the office, I share this information with our translator / interpreter² who understands their frustration. I see that he is working on a glossary of education terms. I look at his screen and there is the words "case study". He then explains to me that the common meaning in Afghanistan is "criminal case" which is often how "case study" is translated. In an effort to avoid similar pitfalls, he develops glossaries. Proceeding word by word and expression by expression, he defines each term of the education jargon and searches for a Dari equivalent or a paraphrase. His hope is to help bridge English and Dari. He will likely succeed and his efforts are highly valuable, but the bridge is narrow and much may fall off...

It is admitted by linguists that the linguistic system (pronunciation, grammar and words) of each language is not merely an instrument to voice ideas but can shape ideas. The rational process of formulating ideas is not independent from its support, language. Consequently, the human linguistic modules help organize reality and thoughts into concepts and symbols to ascribe significance to what we do and what we are.

Translation is the transfer of one set of symbols denoting concepts into another set of symbols denoting the same concepts. As Michelle Fram-Cohen explains about old Hebrew:

The revival of ancient Hebrew language in the late 19th Century demonstrated the dependence of language on outward reality. Those who wanted to use Hebrew language had to innovate an enormous number of words in order to describe the new objects that did not confront the ancient Hebrew speakers (...)Ancient Hebrew could not by itself provide a sufficient image of modern reality for modern users.

Dari is no different. When I recently discussed the difference between management and administration with my national colleagues, several of them knew only one Dari word for both management and administration.

Reading Ms. Fram-Cohen I recalled my sister explaining to me that the dynamism of a language is evidenced, among other things, by its ability to generate new words for new realities, using the resources that the language already has. Then what happened in Afghanistan? Aren't Afghanistan Dari and Pashto dynamic enough? Why don't they have the words we need? Was it the extreme isolation of the population groups and the country's equally extreme topography that prevented communication between groups and the emergence of new words? Was it the centuries old ways of life? Could it be the high illiteracy rate, Afghanistan as a predominantly oral culture people don't rely on books. Afghanistan is a country without

¹ Teacher Education Directorate (TED) and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) of Kabul, Bamyan and Jalalabad.

² There is no training in translation in Afghanistan. We are lucky to have recruited the best among a large number of candidates.

newspapers, but stories and poems are memorized, told and retold.³ The door between literary and everyday language has long been ajar. Even in casual exchanges, Afghans rely on allegory, metaphor, parables and jokes to convey meaning.⁴

This was captured by the brilliant video *Afghanistan: Lost in translation* produced by John D. MacHugh and available on You Tube. In the story an American sergeant knows that rockets are being fired from a nearby village. His Afghan interpreter flags down a red-bearded elder who points to the mountains. “The Taliban are over there – not far away”, the old man says in Pashto.

I would like to tell the Americans a story. In our country we grow wheat and we have ants. There is no way we can stop the little ants from stealing the wheat. There are so many little ants; it is almost impossible to stop them. I’ve told this story to help the Americans understand the situation in Afghanistan.

The sergeant gets impatient. The translator explains that the old man is giving many examples to indicate that “the insurgents are behind this road, behind this mountain.” The video is of course about the problem of translation and in this case, the translator fails mightily.⁵

In this kind of context, translating is not only about facts and words; there is an interpretive component that requires great imaginative efforts. Conceptual and factual equivalence does make translatability possible but we must never lose sight of the stylistic differences between languages and cultural gaps between populations. Adding to the difficulty is the different language registers, such as educated, vernacular, specialized, etc.. For instance, could Afghan Dari provide for the following?

“... to content supported by developmentally appropriate and empirically and/or theoretically validated 'best-practice' teaching methodology, eventually and gradually supported through the use of ubiquitous technology for both teaching and learning”.

“There is accountability for delivering promised performance and demonstrating valued behaviours, reinforcement for meeting performance and values expectations and incentives for alignment and disincentives for misalignment with these values”.

Academics in Iran working in Farsi could probably translate these paragraphs, but this is Afghanistan and we use Dari. After almost 30 years of conflict, only interrupted by the Taliban’s crackdown on education, the Afghanistan higher education system has been put under tremendous pressure. It has to catch up with the rest of the world’s learning centers. Even the most educated Afghans among those working with us do not possess the level of Dari language that would be the equivalent to the English TCAP experts and trainers use (notwithstanding the problems identified earlier). Then what can be done so that being an expert doesn’t become a problem?

TCAP experts have spent years of their life to become references in their field of expertise. They have in-depth knowledge of refined concepts expressed in sophisticated language and understood by their peers, with whom communication is easy. As I value their expertise, I’ll ask two things: first, to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in working with two very different languages and second, to go the extra length and REALLY make their knowledge and expertise available to our Afghan partners. I will share a few tips I drew from my experience in the field and with TCAP so far:

³ When I worked in Arghandab and managed a small community radio, I was amazed at the popularity of poetry. I thought that radio animators were reading poems. They were not. Individuals were calling in to recite some verses they had memorized and loved.

⁴ For that reason even everyday day Dari is never as direct as English.

⁵ Watching the video one might wonder what the sergeant would have made of the story anyway, had it reached him.

- Use short sentences, avoid using more than 2 prepositions per sentences, avoid using paragraph long sentences impossible to translate;
- Refrain from using multiple synonyms (e.g. skilled and competent). The subtle difference in the meaning of those two words cannot be conveyed in Dari. We will find one word that express the general idea they each convey;
- Carefully select your words, for each word that does not belong to common English or for highly specialized term, find a more accessible one;
- In the absence of a suitable synonym, do not leave it to our guessing, explain by use of a footnote for the translator or directly in the Power Point Presentation (below each slide you have the option to add notes and definitions);
- During the presentation, make explicit the links that need to be made, never assume that they will be obvious for the participants or that they were not lost in the translation;
- Validate often their understanding of the key concepts by asking the participants to provide examples of what you are explaining;
- Quotes are extremely difficult to translate, use as few quotes as possible and select short ones, highly technical or theoretical quotes should be avoided;
- When timing your presentation remember that with the interpretation you will require twice as much time as it would take in your usual language, in my experience, one hour of lecture with simultaneous interpretation takes two hours;

As a rule of thumb, when participants understand they will interact with each other, ask questions and make comments. When Afghans do not understand they will not ask. Questioning in Western cultures is viewed as eagerness to learn or desire for a more in-depth understanding. We like people who ask questions. Such is not the case in the Afghan culture. Asking questions means that you don't understand. In addition it is somehow considered rude to do so (professors or trainers are expected to know it all); hence when they don't understand Afghans remain silent.

TCAP has only one translator / interpreter. We contracted out some translations in the past but the result was disappointing. We now try to do all our translations in-house. This involves a bit of planning on the part of the experts and trainers working with us. A professional translator translates between 400 and 600 words per workday,⁶ some days our translator can double that number. We ask that texts and Power Point Presentations be forwarded to us in advance. Also, if you are revising a document or making a new version of it, please use the change tracker.

These efforts will pay back as you'll be better appreciated by your trainees and Afghan counterparts and will achieve greater results. Afghans value the knowledge you have and that we trust is worth sharing, in exchange I want to make sure that we always show them respect.

Like one of the UN former General Secretary once said *The world is in the hands of translators.*

Kabul
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⁶ This memo has 1715 words.