



## In the language of my enemy... and my friend...

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 26/07/2018

Défense & management

**Endorsing the following statement by General Stanley McChrystal, Commander of ISAF from 2009 to 2010, "Language learning is as important as arms control," the author stresses the crucial importance of the linguistic and cultural factor in defence issues and advocates its systematic consideration in the preparation and conduct of operations.**

Since 2001, an image has spread around the world, appearing on television screens and magazine covers. It is that of a man in uniform, often heavily armed and covered with a shell of ballistic protection, surveying a country visibly far from his own. He is often flanked by a travelling companion with a mottled outfit and a face that is sometimes hidden: his interpreter. This unlikely pair has become so familiar in the operational panorama that we no longer pay much attention to them. Yet it is a symptom of a serious disease that plagues Western armies: ethnocentrism. Conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan have brought it to light over the last ten years, to no avail. We continue to think of ourselves as the centre of the world, as a universal and universalist model of thought... And yet, among the more than seven billion people on the planet are our enemies. Most of them speak neither French nor English. Their native languages have shaped their ways of thinking, their way of fighting. We have studied on organization charts and maps what we believe to be the organization of their forces. We read reports on their doctrine, their strategy. It gives us the impression that we know them, and some of them are even experts on them. So how do we explain the fact that we have not yet defeated them?

Every war is a war of perception. The perception we have of our enemy is too often binary, Cartesian. In the image we have of him, we forget that he does not think in our language but in his own, and that his language influences the way in which his thoughts are structured. This blurred or incomplete perception distorts reasoning. It encourages inappropriate or even fatal decisions. The recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have in this sense confirmed the general trends of history. However, there is nothing inevitable

about this: recent initiatives to reverse this trend have multiplied on the other side of the Atlantic, demonstrating a new awareness and a new approach to relations with the enemy... but also with the partner.

In the human being, language is a function that is expressed in an elaborate way mainly through sounds (speech) but also through symbols (writing)[1]. 1] This function is still largely a mystery and still gives rise to expert quarrels. Without getting lost in theoretical explanations that are still being debated, it is possible to make several remarks highlighting the impact of language in our daily lives. First of all, language is a vehicle for conveying messages and expressing ideas. In this respect, it enables knowledge to be transmitted and acquired: it is therefore a learning tool. Moreover, it differs according to geographical location: different environments and constraints would explain a different evolution of language from one point of the globe to another [2]. 2] This great wealth of languages independently developed by humanity is not without consequences: an idea expressed in one language is sometimes difficult to transcribe into another. Similarly, the association idea/sound/image varies from one language to another. Comparative experiments measuring the brain activity of two subjects speaking different languages who were asked to write the same word gave different results. Therefore, if language has an influence on the structure of thought, it is better to have an idea of how the other person expresses himself or herself in order to better understand how he or she thinks. This idea finds early military and strategic application in inter-state power struggles. In China, as early as the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 B.C.), talented spies infiltrated the courts of rival principalities because they spoke their enemy's language perfectly. In some cases, this talent gave them direct access to the prince [3]. 3] Closer to our time, the rare language has become a means of coding: not knowing it deprives access to understanding the enemy's plans. The use of the Navajo dialect by the U.S. military during the Pacific War is now celebrated in the movies. Other more recent examples of the use of mountain dialects show that this simple method is not outdated. In spite of these strong signals from history, the beginning of the 21st century has <sup>shown</sup> serious shortcomings in taking into account the linguistic factor and, in particular, its human aspect in defence issues.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 and the events that followed provided the most terrible illustration of this. The failure of intelligence denounced by the official reports published in the aftermath of the attacks can be explained in part by a lack of linguists. A third of the conversations intercepted by the American services in connection with the 11 September attacks could not be translated in time. According to researcher Benoît Dupont [4], Washington had invested primarily in technological tools to collect data but not in translators capable of deciphering them. This information is confirmed by a former FBI official: on the eve of September 11, when the terrorist jihadist threat was a priority for the service, the federal apparatus had only about 40 Arabists and less than 30 Persian speakers. Special Agent Ali Soufan, then working in the FBI's counterterrorism unit, said that the number of FBI agents who could understand Arabic in the service was limited to the fingers of one hand. In his book "TheBlack Banners" [5], he describes how first-class prisoners such as Abu Zubaydah were handed over to interrogators who did not speak Arabic or have no knowledge of the Middle East and Islam. The 2003 intervention in Iraq shows similar shortcomings. For most of the war, due to a lack of trained personnel, US forces failed to meet the challenge of the language barrier, with dramatic consequences for the conduct of the campaign. According to former Iraqi Defence Minister Ali Allawi, even coalition officers presented as bilingual had difficulty being understood[6]. 6] The use of locally recruited interpreters sometimes had counterproductive effects and unexpected consequences: for example, when Denmark withdrew its troops from Iraq, for security reasons, it had to give asylum to 700 Iraqi translators, i.e. as many as the Danish contingent of soldiers[7].

7] In the American ranks, these failures have not gone unheeded. At the instigation of military leaders who were aware of the need to take into account the cultural and linguistic factor, a new approach became necessary. After years of trial and error, the Department of Defense adapted existing tools to its needs and developed new programs to limit the effects of the cultural and linguistic deficiencies of its military. Screenings in Iraq or Afghanistan are now preceded by an initiation sanctioned by a proficiency test. The level is adapted to the function being performed. One of the major players in this new approach is a joint organization, the Defence Language Institute in Monterey, California. A veritable linguistic university for the armed forces, Monterey has a wide range of courses, including distance learning, and even responds to requests on short notice, as was the case during the recent earthquakes in Japan [8]. 8] The Marine Corps, for its part, has a tailor-made tool, the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning or CAOCL, which takes into account both the cultural and linguistic factors. The areas of interest of these two organizations now extend beyond Iraq and Afghanistan to include areas such as French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. Promotions from these two institutions have already begun in operation. They have in part armed contingents of the Afghan Hands programme wanted by General Stanley McChrystal when he commanded the international security assistance force in Afghanistan. Implemented in 2010, Afghan Hands, also known by the acronym AfPak Hands, has the ambition of forming human interfaces between the Afghan authorities (civilian and military) and the international coalition. Educated in the Dari or Pashto language and Afghan culture, Afghan Hands are intended to occupy long-term (several years) reserved jobs related to Afghanistan. Immersed in a non-American environment, speaking the language of their partners, they are the expression of an understanding of the importance of the language factor in the preparation and conduct of operations.

Often overlooked, the language factor has proven to be unexpectedly crucial. One need only look at some of the misunderstandings surrounding English among NATO allies in operations to be convinced of this. As a power turned towards overseas, the French army has for a very long time taken into account rare languages and has trained its personnel for contact with the population. With the inevitable disappearance of the colonial empire, part of this heritage was lost. This is not a reason to be lost in nostalgia, but to look at a certain reality in the face: despite the critical view we sometimes have of our allies, we are not immune to being confronted with what others have paid dearly for ignoring it. Our enemy does not think in our language, but in his. So does our friend.

1] The majority of linguists believe that speech is universal, while writing is not.

2] For more details on this subject, read Noam Chomsky, "12] For more details on this topic, read Noam Chomsky, "On nature and language" Cambridge University Press, 2002 .

3] Ralph D. Sawyer, "The Tao of Spycraft- intelligence theory and practice in traditional China" Westview, 2004.

4] Interview with Benoît Dupont, Director of the Centre de criminologie comparée de Montréal, Géopolis, RSR, 12/08/2011.

5] Ali H. Soufan & Daniel Freedman, "15] Ali H. Soufan & Daniel Freedman, "The Black Banners" W.W. Norton & Co. 2011.

16] Ali A. Allawi, "The occupation of Iraq, winning the war, losing the peace", Yale University Press, 2007.

17] Mathieu Guidère, "Iraq in Translation or the art of losing a war without knowing the language of your opponent", Éditions Jacob-Duvernet, 2008.

8] François Dicks, "Languages in the service of the operational, the example of the Monterey Institute".

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<b>Release date</b>	12/02/2021

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