

Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Volume 3, Issue 1

2006

Article 5

Assessing the Foreign Language Needs of the Department of Homeland Security

Medha Tare*

*University of Michigan, mtare@umich.edu

Copyright ©2006 The Berkeley Electronic Press. All rights reserved.

Assessing the Foreign Language Needs of the Department of Homeland Security*

Medha Tare

Abstract

There has been a recent government-wide effort to examine the nation's language needs for both the purposes of security and to increase general cultural awareness. Recent surveys of government agencies have shown that more than 80 agencies require some sort of foreign language capability to complete their missions. These surveys were, however, completed before the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) stood up, and while there may be great need for foreign language capabilities in DHS, such as in their border patrol or customs duties, that need has not been fully documented. An assessment of DHS language needs would provide information about current and future needs and would allow the department to properly implement procedures to alleviate any problems. Potential language needs are discussed and several recommendations are made to DHS so that they could work to maintain their language capabilities, rather than fall behind.

KEYWORDS: homeland security, foreign language, public policy

*This paper was written under the mentorship of Dr. Laurence Raine. The research for this paper was performed while on appointment as a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Fellow under the DHS Scholarship and Fellowship Program, a program administered by the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) for DHS through an interagency agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). ORISE is managed by Oak Ridge Associated Universities under DOE contract number DE-AC05-00OR22750. All opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the policies of DHS or ORISE.

A Government-Wide Effort

Since the events of September 11, 2001, one of the resources that the federal government has been forced to reexamine is its foreign language capability. A 2001 study found that more than eighty federal agencies required foreign language proficiency to fulfill their duties.¹ In the past few years, a government-wide effort has begun to ensure that the language needs identified by various departments are being met.

The Department of Defense and the Center for Advanced Study of Language at the University of Maryland convened the National Language Conference in June 2004 where they brought together experts from government, academia, and private industry to discuss the state of the nation's language capabilities. These experts identified needs and made recommendations which were drawn up as the white paper, "A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities," in an attempt to spur the creation of a national foreign language agenda.² The theme of the conference emerged after two days of discussion as, "A Sputnik Moment," recalling the 1957 impetus for the National Defense Education Act; conference participants hoped that the events of the last four years sparked the same renewed dedication to language studies in the U.S.³

In addition to the "white papers" produced by the conference, several pieces of legislation have been introduced to Congress which concern foreign language education and maintaining a supply of foreign language professionals. During a hearing on "Intelligence Community Language Capabilities" by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Representative Anna Eshoo (D-CA) stated, "As a nation, I think we've not sufficiently valued and embraced foreign languages. So we have to do everything we can to improve our capabilities because the security of our nation and the safety, certainly of our dedicated men and women serving abroad, really depends on it."⁴

The movement toward addressing the nation's foreign language issues has also

1 Crump, T. *Translating and Interpreting in the Federal Government*. American Translators Association, 2001

2 Center for Advanced Study of Language. *An Introduction to American's Language Needs and Resources: National Language Conference Briefing Document*, 2004

3 Freedman, S. G. "After Sputnik, It was Russian; After 9/11, should it be Arabic?" *The New York Times*, June 16, 2004

4 House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Policy and National Security Subcommittee. *Committee Hearing on Intelligence Community Language Capabilities*, Federal Document Clearing House Political Transcripts, May 13, 2004

been buttressed by two executive departments' initiatives to examine their own policies and procedures regarding language needs. The Department of Defense (DoD) has begun its "Defense Language Transformation," and the Department of State its "Language Continuum."⁵ Recently, the Department of State announced the National Security Language Initiative which will support the development of language skills from grades K-12.⁶ Many departments recognize that their effectiveness in dealing with national security and international diplomacy depends in part on their foreign language capability.

Why Should We Assess Department of Homeland Security Needs?

It is important for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to join this government-wide effort to improve foreign language capabilities. An assessment of the many agencies' current capabilities, policies and procedures, and needs would allow DHS to employ specific strategies to build up their capabilities. Several surveys of government language capabilities were conducted between 1999-2002; DHS as a department was not included since it had not yet officially stood up.

These surveys did, however, include government agencies which were later brought into DHS. Therefore, the language needs of some current DHS agencies were made apparent. For example, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Intelligence Division, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection expressed a need for language specialists to respond in a national security emergency situation.⁷ Also, the U.S. Coast Guard, which conducted its own language needs assessment in 1999, found that its daily duties were hindered by language limitations.⁸

These findings do not suggest, however, that language needs are completely ignored in these agencies; currently, border patrol officials are trained in Spanish at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center.⁹ However, if a department-wide assessment was conducted, other critical languages could be determined and those needs could be addressed. The goal of a needs assessment would be to provide specific solutions to specific needs.

5 Center for Advanced Study of Language, p. 14

6 Powell, D and Lowenkron, B. National Security Language Initiative Fact Sheet. 1/5/06

7 National Security Education Program. *United States Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps Feasibility Study*, 2003

8 National Security Education Program. *Survey of Federal Language Needs*, 2001

9 Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. 2003-2004 Catalog of Training Programs

How to Assess Foreign Language Needs

An analysis of language capabilities and needs can be conducted through the perspective of the Strategic Market Forces Framework described by Brecht and Rivers (2000). This model, based on economics, examines the demand, supply, capacity, and need for language expertise in order to determine the current status of the foreign language market.¹⁰ Applied to DHS, this model would define demand as the current official foreign language requirements in the department, supply as the language expertise available to the department, capacity as the capability of the available expertise supply to fulfill current and future needs at the department, and finally need would encompass the specific number of professionals needed and at what proficiency in the necessary language.¹¹ Note this general model provides an understanding of what questions should go into an assessment of current DHS capabilities and needs. One wants to ensure that the need is reflected by the demand and that the necessary supply is available.

The question of what specific language needs DHS might have also provides insight into how to plan for fulfilling future needs. Because of the unique mission of DHS to protect the homeland, it has both internal intelligence and security needs, as well as a responsibility to the American public to provide services and protect in times of emergency. Within the ranks of DHS employees, there are many examples of language need which can be filled by employees in two general categories.¹² The first category consists of those employees whose foreign language proficiency is necessary in addition to some other skill. An example would be a Border Patrol officer who has significant procedural training in addition to his foreign language training. The second category consists of those employees whose job is characterized by their language ability. An example of this would be a translator or interpreter who is hired for that specific skill.

While the previous needs are examples of “in-house” DHS needs where language is necessary for the completion of daily missions and tasks, DHS is among the federal agencies which provides a service to the public. In times of crisis, the Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate responds to public need. One possible barrier in providing public services is language. According to a U.S. Census Bureau report, eighteen percent of the population speaks one of 380

10 Brecht, R. and Rivers, W. *Language and National Security for the 21st Century: The Role of the Title VI/Fulbright-Hays in Supporting National Language Capacity*. Kendall-Hunt and the National Foreign Language Center, 2000

11 Brecht and Rivers. p. 20

12 Clifford, R.T. “Foreign Language Needs in the U.S. Government” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 511. p. 109-121.1990

different languages other than English at home, and roughly eight percent of the population speaks English less than “very well”.¹³ These members of the population, or those who have limited-English proficiency, regularly require services such as medical and court interpreting; however, they also need interpretation services in emergency situations. For example, after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, now part of DHS, hired translators for more than thirty-five different languages at its downtown Manhattan Disaster Assistance Service Center.¹⁴ Determining both types of language needs and addressing them will ultimately allow DHS to better fulfill its mission to “reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism” and “minimize the damage from potential attacks and natural disasters.”¹⁵ Information such as the number of language professionals needed, which languages are critical, and current DHS policies regarding language recruitment, hiring, and training must be determined.

Recommendations for Meeting Short-term Language Needs

Once the department has identified its immediate needs, there are several models in place regarding policies and procedures that can be instated. The Government Accounting Office (GAO) released a report in 2002 examining the language policies of four government agencies: the U.S. Army, the Department of State, the Foreign Commercial Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹⁶ In a summary of those policies, the report discussed strategies that the agencies used to address their language needs. The GAO analysis found that these strategies fell into three general categories: staff development, external resources, and uses of technology.¹⁷

The staff development strategies include language training, pay incentives, and attractive career paths for linguists. In-house language training is currently conducted by the Department of Defense and the Department of State respectively at the Defense Language Institute and the Foreign Service Institute.

13 United States. Department of Commerce. *Census 2000 Brief: Language Use and English-Speaking Ability*, 2003

14 Federal Emergency Management Agency. *From 9/11 to One-to-one: FEMA’s Disaster Assistance Service Center*.

15 United States. Department of Homeland Security. “What is the mission of the new Department of Homeland Security?”

16 United States. General Accounting Office. *Report to Congressional Requesters. Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*. GAO-02-375. January

17 General Accounting Office, pp. 15-21

Pay incentives may be instated to encourage employees to maintain or increase their language proficiency or to learn a new language. Finally, attractive career paths have been developed to decrease the attrition rate of language professionals.

The second type of strategy focuses on bringing foreign language professionals into the department. These strategies include hiring contract staff, recruiting native speakers of the critical languages, and recruiting language-capable professionals. Many agencies will hire contract staff to fill immediate or short-term needs. Some federal agencies, including the U.S. Army, also put effort into recruiting native speakers of critical languages. This resource of heritage speakers in the U.S., or those citizens who are bilingual in another language as well as English, may prove to be very valuable to agencies which need highly proficient language professionals. The potential for this portion of the language “supply” is underscored by the U.S. Census finding that fifty-five percent of those who spoke a language other than English at home also spoke English “very well.”¹⁸ Finally, several agencies, including the State Department, stress language ability in their recruitment process by giving extra “points” in the hiring process to those individuals who have demonstrated language proficiency.

The third category of strategies primarily consists of efforts to use technology to strengthen language capability. This includes machine translation, such as the Phraselator, which has been used by the army.¹⁹ Other efforts also include creating a database of employee language abilities, such as the Law Enforcement Interagency Linguist Access (LEILA) database, which provides information about language contractors and is available across the Department of Justice.

A similar program, the Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps, is under review after a study conducted by the National Security Education Program found that there is sufficient need for skilled linguists during crisis situations to warrant keeping proficient speakers on reserve.²⁰ This type of reserve corps may also work to fulfill the public language needs of DHS discussed earlier. If, for example, U.S. census language data were used to identify pockets of non-English speaking communities, those foreign languages may be targeted by the volunteer reserve corps in order to provide language services in a particular area of the country in times of emergency. Such information about where various heritage communities are located in the country is available; one source is the Modern Language Association Language Map which shows the density of speakers in the country

¹⁸ Department of Commerce. p. 2

¹⁹ Atkinson, B. “A hand-held translator is boon to GIs in Iraq,” *The Baltimore Sun Company*, May 18, 2004

²⁰ National Security Education Program. *U.S. Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps Feasibility Study*, p. 5

for thirty of the most commonly spoken languages in the U.S.²¹ A database of paid interpreters would also be useful to serve everyday needs of court and medical interpreting. These types of “dual-benefits solutions” would create a language infrastructure that would serve the public in peacetime and during a national emergency, such as the 9/11 attacks. Brecht and Rivers (2000) stress this need to “warehouse” language capabilities because, without such resources, “agencies must react to sudden demand by ad hoc programs of recruitment and training” which “inevitably results in shortfall of supply.”²²

Maintaining Language Capabilities

In addition to implementing procedures to meet immediate language needs, DHS must put in place a system to maintain its language capabilities. One example of how this can be accomplished is evident in the Defense Language Transformation which calls for appointing a Senior Language Authority for each service or agency within DoD who will represent that agency’s language issues on the Defense Language Steering Committee.²³

Another important effort is to join the language community which has emerged among federal agencies. A DHS language officer should represent its language capabilities and needs at various language-focused interagency groups. These include the Interagency Language Roundtable, which has regular meetings with representatives from various federal agencies in order to discuss common needs and goals.²⁴ Another such organization is the National Security Education Program which has representatives from the federal government on its board to advise the program on the execution of its scholarship and fellowship program.²⁵ Finally, there is the Steering Committee which will emerge from the National Language Conference and will ideally lead the resulting “white papers” into the hands of Congress.

Finally, DHS may be able to take the lead in supplying language professionals through its own educational initiatives. Much of the recent legislation looking at bolstering U.S. language capability urged various initiatives and incentives to increase educational opportunities for foreign language study in languages critical to U.S. security. For example, the Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act

21 Modern Language Association: <http://www.mla.org>

22 Brecht and Rivers. p. 101

23 United States. Department of Defense. *Defense Language Transformation Information Paper*, June 2004

24 Interagency Language Roundtable: <http://www.govtilr.org/>

25 National Security Education Program: <http://www.ndu.edu/nsep/>

suggested a National Security Fellowship for students studying disciplines important to national security, including foreign languages.²⁶ DHS has already put in place its Department of Homeland Security Scholars and Fellows Program which provides scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students who are studying issues critical to homeland security. The program also requires an internship on a DHS-funded project; this program could expand its scope to students of foreign languages needed within DHS, once those languages are identified.

Academic programs have been further encouraged by the Homeland Security Education Act which not only proposes loan forgiveness for study of critical languages such as Chinese, Arabic, Korean, and Russian, but it also proposes a feasibility study for a National Language Foundation.²⁷ Examples of this type of research center include the Center for Advanced Study of Language, a university affiliated research center sponsored by DoD. Through its Science and Technology directorate, DHS has also encouraged new research and a relationship with the academic community by creating the Centers of Excellence program where research centers focusing on homeland security issues are sponsored at universities across the country. If such a center were devoted to applied linguistics, it could create the necessary language infrastructure for DHS.

These efforts would aid in maintaining the necessary language capabilities and providing a line of communication for language needs throughout the department. Ultimately, the goal is to put in place a language system that will grow with the young department rather than wait to address this issue and have it emerge as a weakness. An initial assessment of current practices and needs would allow the necessary administrative measures to be taken. Finally, the department need not start from scratch in its language efforts; there are several models in place for dealing with language capabilities and the goal of recent initiatives such as the National Language Conference has been for federal agencies to work together on this issue and coordinate their efforts to fill gaps in federal foreign language needs.

26 Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act, S. 589, 108th Cong., (2003)

27 Homeland Security Education Act, S. 2299, 108th Cong., (2004)

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, B. "A hand-held translator is boon to GIs in Iraq." *The Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 2004.
- Brecht, R. and W. Rivers. *Language and National Security for the 21st Century: The Role of the Title VI/Fulbright-Hays in Supporting National Language Capacity*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 2000.
- Center for the Advanced Study of Language. "An Introduction to American's Language Needs and Resources: Briefing Document." Presented at National Language Conference, 22-24 June 2004, <http://www.nlconference.org/docs/NLCBkgdweb.pdf>
- Clifford, R.T. "Foreign Language Needs in the U.S. Government." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1990, Vol. 511, p. 109-121.
- Crump, T. *Translating and Interpreting in the Federal Government*. Alexandria, VA: American Translators Association, 2001
- Freedman, S. G. "After Sputnik, It was Russian; After 9/11, should it be Arabic?" *The New York Times*. June 16, 2004
- Modern Language Association: <http://www.mla.org>
- National Security Education Program. Survey of Federal Language Needs. 2001. http://www.ndu.edu/nsep/Federal_Language_Needs_2001.htm
- National Security Education Program. United States Civilian Linguist Reserve Corps Feasibility Study. 2003. <http://www.ndu.edu/nsep/CivilianLinguistReserveCorpsFeasibilityStudy.pdf>
- Powell, D and Lowenkron, B. National Security Language Initiative Fact Sheet. 1/5/06 <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/58733.htm>
- United States. Department of Commerce. *Census 2000 Brief: Language Use and English-Speaking Ability*. 2003. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>
- United States. Department of Defense. Defense Language Transformation Information Paper. June 2004.
- United States. Department of Homeland Security. "What is the mission of the new Department of Homeland Security?" <http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/display?theme=10&content=429>
- United States. Department of Homeland Security. Federal Emergency Management Agency. From 9/11 to One-to-one: FEMA's Disaster Assistance Service Center, http://www.fema.gov/remember911/911_one.shtm
- United States. Department of Homeland Security. Federal Law Enforcement

- Training Center. *2003-2004 Catalog of Training Programs*, <http://www.fletc.gov>.
- United States. General Accounting Office. Report to Congressional Requesters. Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls. GAO-02-375. January. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02375.pdf>
- United States. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Policy and National Security Subcommittee. Committee Hearing on Intelligence Community Language Capabilities. Federal Document Clearing House Political Transcripts. May 13, 2004.
- United States. Interagency Language Roundtable: <http://www.govtilr.org/>
- United States. Senate of the United States. 108th Congress. Homeland Security Education Act, S. 2299, 2004.
- United States. Senate of the United States. 108th Congress. Homeland Security Federal Workforce Act, S. 589, 2003.