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Khastan Tawanestan! – “We Can, We Will!”

Shaping the Battlefield in Afghanistan in Dari and Pashto – not English

by LT Sean “Shoe” Stevens

How does a nation conduct a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) operation in a country in which it does not speak the local language? Can we facilitate the development of a transparent, corruption-free Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) without being able to communicate directly with its people? These are questions that I wrestled with time and time again during my deployment to Afghanistan. I witnessed first-hand a remarkable dearth in the ability of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) forces to communicate with Afghans. This lack of language abilities in both American military and civilian forces impedes our counterinsurgency campaign. As my tour in Afghanistan progressed, this realization motivated me to attempt—in some small way—to remedy this problem. As a result, I personally taught Dari to hundreds of military members and civilians, and created a six-lesson syllabus for future teachers to follow. While I experienced small successes as a result of my efforts, they were insufficient to overcome the dearth of language capability that threatens to undermine OEF.

A Formidable Linguistic Challenge

The language complexities of Afghanistan represent a unique challenge for US Forces. Afghanistan, a country roughly the size of Texas, is inhabited by people from a variety of cultures who speak well over thirty languages. Chief among these languages are Dari and Pashto, which are the two national languages of Afghanistan.¹ Linguistically, Dari is the Eastern cousin to Persian Farsi, a language with a rich, 1200-year literary history. Unlike its Persian cousin, however, Dari is mostly a spoken language. In fact, when compared to Persian Farsi, there are very few Dari dictionaries available for sale. Anecdotally, Dari and Persian Farsi are 99% the same in the written form, but are noticeably different when spoken. (I once incorrectly conjugated a verb and was accused of sounding like I was from Iran.) The relationship between Persian Farsi and Dari is roughly equivalent to that between French and Canadian French. Another telling description of Dari (which may offend some cultural sensitivities, but which I believe to be accurate) is that Dari is “Street Persian.” Pashto is a tribal language that has some vocabulary in common with Dari. At a basic level, the difference between the Dari and Pashto scripts (both based largely on Arabic), is that Pashto makes greater use of dots and accent marks, or diacritics. Almost without exception, the Afghans I have spoken with describe Dari as “Easy”

¹ CIA Website, “SOUTH ASIA: AFGHANISTAN,” *The World Factbook*, at <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>> (30 MAY 10).

and Pashto as “Difficult.” This may be because Pashto has a wider range of sounds and much more complex grammar than Dari.

Within Afghanistan, Dari is spoken mostly in the West (not surprisingly, as Western Afghanistan abuts Iran) and in the North. Dari is also the predominant language spoken in Kabul. Pashto is spoken mostly in the South and East and is the lingua franca in tribal areas, where formidable linguistic divides can exist even between neighboring valleys. Both languages vie for superiority, and in Kabul, school is mostly conducted in Dari, while Pashto is taught as a second language, often through the sixth grade. It should be noted that any comment on the prevalence of Dari or Pashto in Afghanistan is likely to be contentious.

No Clear Dividing Line between Dari and Pashto

My experience does not allow for a comprehensive description of the interplay between the two languages, but it has convinced me that no neat dividing line exists. Listening to the radio in Kabul first clued me in to their complex interrelationship. There are many evening talk-shows in Kabul which take calls from listeners in-between readings of poetry. When I first started listening to these talk shows, I was just beginning to learn Dari, so I would only understand bits and pieces, especially greetings. Over a few weeks, I realized that part of my struggle to understand the conversation came from the fact that it would start in Dari, transition to Pashto, and then thirty seconds later return to Dari. In a sense, this is similar to the “Spanglish” spoken in many Latino communities in America – a mixture and a constant interplay between Spanish and English. I quickly realized it was insufficient to speak only Dari or Pashto in Afghanistan – an emphasis on one, but a working knowledge of the other, was absolutely necessary to communicate.

Over the next few months, I encountered further intersections between the two languages. The predominantly Dari-speaking cleaning staff at my dining hall would regularly use of the word “Sabo,” the Pashto word for tomorrow. “Fardo” is the Dari word, which I rarely heard. One “Juma” (Friday), I was able to go for a hike up a local mountain called Gharish Ghar. Someone mentioned that Ghar meant “Mountain,” but I couldn’t find the word in my Persian dictionary. It turns out that “Ghar” is the Pashto word for mountain.

In apparent recognition of this interplay between Dari and Pashto, interpreters employed by the US government typically speak both languages. I have been told by a number of interpreters that this is a prerequisite for being hired. Yet, I know absolutely no US military or civilian personnel who were taught both Dari and Pashto, despite this bilingualism being a prerequisite to work as an interpreter in Afghanistan. In other words, as a nation, we are not providing the necessary tools for military or civilian personnel to *ever* linguistically be able to operate at the level of the contract interpreters that we hire. Simply teaching someone Dari or Pashto does not prepare them to speak modern “Afghan.” Modern Dari is Dari mixed with a smattering of Pashto – sometimes more than just a smattering, depending on the person speaking. Only by teaching Dari and Pashto will an instructor teach a student how to communicate on the streets of Kabul, and to my knowledge, this form of instruction is not happening. My experience base does not allow me to speak to Pashto, but using Kabul as a guide, I would not be surprised if Dari has found a way to creep into the Pashto spoken in Kandahar.

A Word about AFPAK Hands

To a certain extent, the problem of insufficient linguistic capability has been recognized and is being addressed by military leadership in Afghanistan. The AFPAK Hands program aims to create a cadre of linguistically educated regional specialists. These specialists receive initial and follow-on language training stateside, primarily in Dari or Pashto, based on the region where they will be working. The “Hands” also undergo immersion training, where they (ideally) live and work with their Afghan counterpart for a few weeks. This program is a step in the right direction, but fails to address the bilingualism discussed before, as well as being relatively small in scope when compared to the number of troops in Afghanistan (a few hundred Hands to 98,000 troops.) Still, another advantage to this program is that it trains predominantly non-native and non-heritage speakers.

We Rely Entirely on Native and Heritage Speakers

To my knowledge, we presently employ only either native (either Afghan or Afghan-American), or heritage speakers of Dari or Pashto as contract interpreters in Afghanistan. (A heritage speaker is someone who was raised abroad, but learned Dari or Pashto from his or her family.) I have never met a non-native or non-heritage Dari or Pashto interpreter (this is not to say that they don’t exist, but I suspect that there are very few, if at all). For instance, I know no interpreters who have no family connection to Afghanistan, learned Dari in college, and who are now working in Afghanistan.

In addition to those native interpreters who now are American citizens (deployed to Afghanistan much like a soldier), this staff of interpreters is augmented by local Afghans. These are usually young men who primarily work with maneuver units as combat interpreters. These young men have varying levels of education and no formal instruction as interpreters. In my experience, interpretation from (especially) the locally employed Afghan interpreters consists of very little direct translation and much personal opinion. While quality of interpretation varies from interpreter to interpreter, absent even low-level linguistic competence among a wider group of US personnel, we will never know the difference.

What if the interpreter doesn’t even try to be objective?

All of this assumes that the local or contract interpreter is trying to accurately interpret, and has no ulterior motives to leave out important translations or observations. More likely (especially among interpreters with no formal training or standard of interpretation), personal bias will shape how they perceive a conversation, and this will be reflected in their interpretation, even without a conscious effort on their part.

While I have grouped native and heritage speakers together, I believe that heritage speakers - Americans who were raised speaking not only English, but also Dari and Pashto - are our most valuable asset when it comes to interpretation. The fact that they were raised in America means that they understand American cultural norms and perspectives, but are also able to move within Afghan circles with relative ease. Unfortunately, heritage speakers represent a very small portion of the interpreters I have met.

Native interpreters include both those Afghan nationals employed locally and Afghan-Americans, many of whom left Afghanistan in 1978-1979. Senior Afghan-American interpreters

provide invaluable cultural insight and professional interpretation. Some returned shortly after the “fall” of the Taliban in 2002, and therefore have seven years of experience in-country since this pivotal event. Others returned to Afghanistan just recently. I met one Iranian interpreter who told me that he was frustrated by the expectation that he understand Pashto (which he didn’t), and that he found nuances of Eastern Persian (Dari) somewhat confusing.

Absent from either of these groups are trained American Interpreters, military members, and civilians. These people would serve as a bridge between American leadership and the Afghan civilians. While they don’t have the years of cultural experience like native speakers, or aren’t as culturally savvy as heritage speakers, they could combine their skill sets (lawyers, engineers, police officers, linguist, etc...) with Afghanistan-specific language training to make sure that American interests are being represented – even after they are translated.

We need balance in the ranks of interpreters – experienced and educated natives to provide unique cultural insights, heritage speakers to bridge the cultural divide, and linguistically gifted Americans to serve as a check-and balance to a very one-sided body of interpreters currently operating in Afghanistan.

Both a Civilian and a Military Problem

During my six months in Kabul, I was fortunate to have the chance to attend a session of the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of parliament in Afghanistan, with a political officer from US Embassy, Kabul. The political officer was accompanied by an Afghan interpreter. We sat in a chamber just above the main assembly room. As the members spoke, the interpreter told the political officer what was going on, and offered brief “gists” of what was being said. In the car back to base, I asked if the political officer had time to keep up with Dari, and the political officer replied that there just was not enough time. Having personally worked in Afghanistan, where short-fused taskers are the norm, I understood and empathized with the political officer.

In fact, most members of the Embassy never receive any language training before deploying. According to US Embassy personnel with whom I spoke, only those Foreign Service Officers who agreed to stay for two years (one extra year) received language training prior to coming – usually for around four months. For political officers, language training was a requirement prior to deployment (regardless of tour-length), but according to Embassy personnel, that requirement was often waived. Interestingly, waivers are often granted in an effort to expedite the deployment of personnel to Kabul, despite the fact that it takes concurrence from a very high level to do so.

Working closely with the Embassy, I was impressed with the access that many members had to local nationals (the Embassy employing many locals to work within its compound), but I was again surprised and a bit dismayed at the lack of language ability among Foreign Service Officers, even at US Embassy, Kabul.

A Few More Real-World Examples of Language Competence and COIN

One of my favorite methods to engage the Afghan population was by greeting people on the street when conducting ground-movements between bases. I would smile and say, “Salam Alaykum,” or “Peace be with you.” By doing so, I immediately knew what a passerby’s intentions were. Once, a four-year old boy smiled and reached out with a henna-stained hand. Another time, I greeted a young man, who grinned and shook my hand – no, squeezed my hand

as hard as he could. It was a challenge, and I knew where he stood in regards to OEF within seven seconds of meeting him.

One of the most meaningful conversations I had in Afghanistan was when I first tried to swear. Vulgarity is one of the hardest aspects of language to learn. It is incredibly nuanced and takes a lifetime to learn to use appropriately. But when I swore around a group of Afghans, they reacted first with astonishment, and then laughter. The oldest member of the group commented, “How rude,” but thereafter, spoke to me not as an Afghan to an American soldier, but as a father to a son. Through an interpreter, you never get the whole conversation. A successful counterinsurgency campaign requires that we have access to those nuances of conversation that cannot be translated. We need a whole army of people operating in Afghanistan who have access to those nuanced moments. Presently, our efforts are producing only hundreds.

The Bottom Line

We need to train military and civilian non-native and non-heritage personnel in both Dari and Pashto. The syllabus should be 75% core language, and 25% supporting language (75% Dari/25% Pashto, or vice-versa). This is a non-standard approach to language training. The Western model suggests that we teach a student just Dari or just Pashto. This is substantiated by the requirement to be able to converse in both Dari and Pashto for contract interpreters and my personal experience attempting to learn just Dari (even in Kabul). We need to develop an intensive three or four month program of *total* immersion – a “little Kabul” and “little Kandahar” of sorts, stateside. This immersion course should teach combat interpreters – linguists who have a basic and fundamental knowledge of their target and supporting language and can communicate things like, “Were the Taliban here last night?” and “Where is the weapons cache?” This program should be modeled on Middlebury College’s intensive summer language program, the most intensive and impressive course of immersion in the world. This would help to augment the dedicated, but undertrained and undereducated body of combat interpreters that we are currently utilizing.

In addition to an immersion course, we need to double or triple the number of linguists being produced by the already in-place courses in Dari and Pashto stateside, and need to add the 25% supporting language module. We are not preparing linguists for the linguistic realities present in Afghanistan today. Adding a quarter Dari and a quarter Pashto will help to round-out our linguists, and will lay a foundation of linguistic knowledge that, over time, will allow them to progress to a level closer to the interpreters we are currently using in-theater.

We need an aggressive in-country program which provides both initial training for the troops already in-country, and sustainment and enhancement training for those linguists who have already received training. My arrival in Kabul, hoping to learn Dari, but then having to learn and then teach it on my own, emphasizes this point.

Finally, the stateside programs need to be staffed by personnel just returning from Afghanistan. It does us no good to teach our military and civilian personnel Dari from Iranian defectors from the pre-Shah era. We need instructors who spoke Dari on the street in Kabul yesterday, teaching Dari to our forces back home tomorrow.

Last Thoughts

If we are to be successful in Afghanistan, we need to truly understand what is going on – to gain “ground truth.” I submit that we will never gain such “ground truth” if we do not speak the local language. Success in Afghanistan must be measured over many years, regardless of publicized timelines. Certainly, there is time to create a cadre of people who are linguistically ready to operate in Afghanistan. If we fail to do so, we will continue to get our information from either native or heritage speakers, most of whom are doing respectable and laudable work daily in Afghanistan, but in whose hands alone we ought not place such enormous responsibility.

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