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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Report on evaluation of the translation process  
in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General transmits herewith the comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the evaluation of the translation process in the United Nations system (A/35/294).

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination

INTRODUCTION

1. As noted by the Inspectors in the introduction to their report, this study was intended as a first attempt at a system-wide evaluation of an administrative process. Translation was selected because of its crucial role in the work of the organizations and in view of growing concern about the increasing quantity and the decreasing quality of the documentation involved. The basic aim was to examine the effectiveness, productivity and operating problems of the various services, to consider their objectives and the results obtained and, if necessary, to propose changes in policies and methods.

2. The Inspectors indicate that the very generalized objectives of the translation services and the lack of impact and feedback data on the results did not permit a systematic and objective analysis of the relevance and effectiveness on a system-wide basis. They state at the same time that available data suggests that the translation services are doing a satisfactory job in providing an essential service, but that considerable opportunities exist to improve translation operations and for the organizations to assess carefully the performance of their translation services on a continuing basis. There follows the joint response by the appropriate organizations of the United Nations system to the recommendations made by the Inspectors in this regard.

General comments

3. In spite of having reservations on certain of the conclusions reached, the organizations are unanimous in commending the report for its positive and constructive approach, for its acknowledgement of the importance and complexity of the activities involved and for the endeavours made to find ways and means of increasing output and efficiency and of providing translators, whose task is often an unrewarding one, with greater job satisfaction and better prospects for career development.

Comments on recommendations made

Document quality control and management (Recommendation 1)

4. The Inspectors point out that the translation services have many problems with the quality of documents submitted for translation - poor and careless drafting, illegible texts, poor referencing, tardy submissions and excessive length. Although it is recognized that these failings hamper prompt and high-quality translation and diminish the effectiveness of over-all organizational communication with others, document control units in many organizations are not strong enough to enforce quality standards. The value of the workload forecasting is reduced by the inability of operating departments to adhere to projected time schedules and document volume, but several organizations have had some success with quota systems to set document submission limits and make departments aware of the considerable cost of their documentation and translation demands.

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5. In this regard, the Inspectors recommend the following courses of action:

(a) Organizations should reinforce the authority of their documents control units so that these units can effectively control the quality of documents submitted for translation. Action should be taken to ensure that substantive departments are aware of the need to maintain high standards for documents. Documents control units as well as translators should be reinforced in their authority to return documents to substantive departments when quality standards are not met;

(b) Organizations should re-examine their planning and decision-making procedures to make certain that they are designed to make effective use of the scarce and costly translation resources. Consideration should be given to more effective use of workload forecasts and quota systems.

6. All organizations agree that there is a need for greater discipline in the scheduling, preparation and submission of documents and are prepared to give serious consideration to the recommendations made to the extent they may be appropriate in their particular circumstances. Some organizations, such as the United Nations, already have strong and well-staffed documents control units which seek strict compliance with a body of rules which have been established with a view to controlling and limiting documentation, for improving its quality and for organizing the work. However, as pointed out by the Inspectors, such control units can identify documents that are late, illegible or too long, but cannot control such problems as poor or careless drafting. Even where professional pre-editing units have been established, there is a limit to what can be done to improve substance, grammar, form and style in cases where documents have to be processed in a rush because of late submission.

7. Some organizations, such as FAO and UNESCO, have already introduced quota systems. The United Nations tried out such a system in earlier years but permitted it to lapse, mainly because it was found to be unworkable in a situation where the nature and volume of documentation is determined largely by the Member States rather than by the Secretariat. In the circumstances, the various units involved proceed on the basis of relative priorities, accumulating a backlog of less urgent work to be undertaken as and when its capacity permits. Indeed, rather than the reintroduction of a quota system, some thought is being given to basing annual publication programmes strictly on the residual capacity to process the items involved after the parliamentary documentation has been attended to. This will inevitably require Member States, and to some extent the Secretariat, to indicate their priorities, and perhaps to abandon the rest.

8. For all these reasons, the particular quota system envisaged by the Inspectors is not considered feasible in United Nations circumstances. In particular, its suggested system of penalties and rewards, involving the transfer of funds among appropriation lines and even sections of the budget, would be very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the Financial Regulations. On the other hand, provisions such as the 32-page rule are tantamount to quotas and provide bench-marks for limiting documentation.

Language training centres (Recommendation 2)

9. The Inspectors note that some actions have recently been undertaken by certain organizations, particularly the United Nations, to support or finance language staff training centres. They consider, in view of the tight supply of translators world wide and the serious recruitment difficulties which the organizations face, that such support could be important as a means of increasing the future supply of translators in the case of certain languages. It is recommended, therefore, that the organizations should seek out further opportunities to support or finance language staff training centres on a regional or local basis to train translators with a view to their recruitment into the United Nations system.

10. Subject to the availability of funds, the organizations would, in principle, favour any arrangement which would improve their prospects for the recruitment of trained personnel to meet their particular needs. As noted by the Inspectors, the United Nations already supports programmes for the training of interpreters and translators in Moscow, Peking and Addis Ababa and it has been demonstrated that candidates of good quality can be provided by these means for employment by the United Nations and other organizations in the system. The Inspectors' comments on the recruitment and training of language staff received considerable attention at the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications, held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris from 1 to 5 September 1980, and it was agreed that the matter would be pursued at its next meeting on the basis of a special report to be prepared jointly by UNESCO and the United Nations. It was also agreed that contacts would be established with universities and professional associations to explore the possibilities of co-operation between them and the United Nations as regards the training of translators and interpreters where such arrangements did not already exist.

Incentives for additional languages (Recommendation 3)

11. The Inspectors note that in some organizations staff in the Professional category and in the General Service category receive additional pay for additional language skills, but language staff do not. Since the Inspectors believe that the development and use of additional language capabilities of translators should be encouraged, they recommend that financial incentives which the organizations offer to staff to learn additional languages should be made equally available to language staff.

12. There would appear to be very little support for this proposal. Although in some organizations, including FAO and the United Nations, language allowances are paid within certain limits to staff in the General Service category, only the United Nations offers financial incentives to certain staff in the Professional category as well. By virtue of his or her appointment every United Nations staff member is required to work in one of the working languages of the Secretariat i.e. English and French, except that in the Economic Commission for Europe staff may also work in Russian and at the Economic Commission for Latin America, in Spanish. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 2480 B (XXIII) of 21 December 1968, a staff member in the Professional category and above who works in one of these official languages and passes a proficiency test in a second

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working language is entitled to salary increments at shorter intervals (every 10 months instead of 12 or every 20 months instead of 24 in the case of staff members at level D-1, step 4 and above). The main exception to this rule is that it does not apply to staff in posts with special language requirements, up to and including the Senior Officer (P-5) level, notably interpreters, translators and official records editors who normally qualify for appointment only if they are proficient in at least three languages. Equal treatment with other staff in the Professional category would mean that, at most, consideration could be given to the granting of accelerated increments in the case of proficiency in a fourth official language. It might be more appropriate, as suggested by ICAO, to consider language skills, including proficiency in languages other than the official languages, as an integral part of a language staff member's qualifications and as one of the factors which determine his or her value and usefulness to an organization, to be acknowledged as much as possible by such measures as grading and promotion.

Greater use of contractual translation (Recommendation 4)

13. The Inspectors propose that the organizations should carefully compare the costs they incur for regular staff, temporary assistance and contractual translation, define the proportion of translation work which could be performed by contract without sacrificing basic quality, and shift some translation work towards the more economical contracting method accordingly. In addition, through a mechanism such as the ACC interagency group, the organizations' contract translation officers should analyse and exchange information on world-wide freelance and contractual translation markets to determine where and how most favourable rates can be obtained, and to consider how the pool of good contract translators can be expanded.

14. Although all the organizations have found it necessary to have recourse to external translation to varying degrees, it is generally agreed that there is a limit to the usefulness of this procedure, a limit which a number of them had already reached. External translators are not always available when required and the quality of their work is usually lower than that produced by regular staff. In fact, although contractual translation is more economical in a number of ways, it is less so than assumed by the Inspectors because extensive revision by regular staff is almost invariably required. Nevertheless, the United Nations is currently taking a renewed interest in contractual translation not only for reasons of economy, but because it offers the only prospect of reducing the backlog which has continued to accumulate in respect of the Organization's publication programme in view of the need to give precedence to documentation for meetings. Since documents in the latter category are normally subject to tight deadlines, they are seldom suitable for outside translation. Even in the case of material of lesser priority which can be placed outside there is the need to ensure that the work is of acceptable quality and its experience has often been as discouraging as that of other organizations in this regard. The United Nations is nevertheless engaged in a renewed effort to locate and develop dependable sources of outside expertise and would be interested in any assistance and advice other organizations in the system could offer in this regard.

Productivity analysis (Recommendation 5)

15. The Inspectors have included in their report comparative statistics provided to them by the organizations of (a) internal translation costs, (b) contractual translation costs and (c) average output per day per translator and per reviser, all in respect of the year 1978. The Inspectors consider that this information provides a basis for a careful analysis of the factors which determine productivity in the individual organizations. They also feel that, in conjunction with the efforts of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications to develop a uniform costing system to calculate the full costs of services delivered, the figures offer an excellent opportunity to compare techniques and methods which enhance productivity and facilitate their use by other organizations. To this end, the Inspectors recommend that the organizations, through the interagency meetings on language arrangements, documentation and publications, and with the assistance of the unit proposed under Recommendation 11, should undertake a study of comparative productivity figures, using the data in this report as a starting-point. Such a study should focus on (a) an analysis and explanation of the factors underlying productivity differences among the organizations; (b) identification, on a continuing basis, of particularly successful techniques and innovations for improved productivity; and (c) transmittal and use of such techniques to improve translation productivity and cost-effectiveness.

16. There is general agreement among the organizations that the interagency meetings on language arrangements, documentation and publications provide an indispensable forum for the comparison of experience and the search for solutions to common problems. Among these problems has been the difficulty of producing truly comparable productivity figures, mainly because the determining factors tend to vary from one organization to another. For the same reason it might be more profitable if the identification of techniques for increased productivity and cost-effectiveness were to be undertaken within individual organizations in the first instance. While the results should be shared among the organizations as a matter of course, it is questionable whether much will be achieved by attempting to produce a formal interagency study on the subject at this stage.

Computer-supported management information systems (Recommendation 6)

17. The Inspectors point out that the organizations currently have manual-clerical information systems, either modest or very cumbersome, with which to manage translation processes. These do not provide the readily available, timely and detailed information which a computer-assisted management system could produce. A few organizations have recently explored the possibilities of developing such systems, which could be quite cost-effective in eliminating manual processing costs and duplication, streamlining job scheduling and workload and flow planning, providing needed cost and productivity data for management decision-making, and supporting management analysis to enhance over-all translation process efficiency and effectiveness in ways not now possible. The Inspectors recommend, therefore, that the organizations, in the framework of the ACC interagency group and the Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems (IOB), should designate a lead agency which, with the assistance of the unit proposed under Recommendation 11, would assess the benefits and costs of using a computer to improve translation management systems and, if found feasible, devise a system which could be applied, after adaptation, by other agencies.

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18. There is no objection to this proposal although a number of organizations wish to place on record that any decision to introduce new computerized schemes will have to be preceded by a thorough cost-benefit analysis in their particular circumstances. It was also considered in some quarters that although the information might prove interesting, it might not be of general application. The United Nations notes that it has started a pilot project with a view to the possible introduction of a computer-assisted management system for all operations related to translation.

Reconsideration of précis-writing procedures (Recommendation 7)

19. The Inspectors note that précis-writing by translators is a significant activity in several organizations, but is considered an inappropriate translation function by others. They also draw attention to the fact that the translation services are already overburdened by heavy workloads, especially during conference periods when précis-writing occurs. They recommend, therefore, that the organizations using translators as précis-writers should reassess the value and costs of this activity, the need for summary records, the possibility of assigning permanent staff from outside the language service temporarily to précis-writing, and the effects on translation workloads and outputs when translation resources are diverted to this function, and take appropriate corrective action.

20. The production of summary records requires precisely the skills possessed by translators - a knowledge of the languages in which statements are delivered, an ability to reflect them accurately in another language and proficiency in writing clear and logical prose. It also requires sound judgement as to what should be included or omitted, as well as training and experience. In the United Nations, at least, it is difficult to see how anyone other than a linguist with précis-writing training could produce summary records of the requisite standard of accuracy, comprehensiveness and political awareness expected by delegations. It is also very unlikely that non-language departments would be prepared to release the necessary staff, especially for extended periods and at short notice. Moreover, as pointed out by a number of organizations, the use of translators for précis-writing introduces an element of variety and interest which increases job satisfaction.

Adequacy of physical facilities (Recommendation 8)

21. The Inspectors note that in several organizations translation work is hampered because the translators lack sufficient quiet, privacy and light to perform their work effectively. They recommend, therefore, that the organizations should assess the physical facilities provided to their translators and take whatever action is possible to ensure that the translators have individual rooms, however small, with sufficient quiet and light for their work.

22. Although all organizations agree with this recommendation, and a few of them, such as ICAO and UPU, are in the fortunate position of already being in compliance with it, others indicate that to provide every translator with a windowed office might be very difficult if not impossible in cases where general over-crowding of their own premises and the rising cost or unavailability of outside accommodation is a prevailing problem.

Review of translated texts by revisers (Recommendation 9)

23. The Inspectors point out that the traditional translation process calls for the review of translated text by revisers. However, some organizations have recently delegated responsibility to senior translators for producing final translations which are not revised - self-revision. Almost all organizations are receptive to the idea of gradually increasing the number of documents that are self-revised. The Inspectors feel that this trend should be encouraged. If in the future self-revision becomes an accepted practice for many documents, there would be significant economies and the grading pattern for language staff could be altered, thus enhancing career prospects. The Inspectors, therefore, propose measures under which self-revision would be increased over a period of six to eight years, resulting in a major improvement in the grading pattern for language staff and substantial over-all economies. These measures include safeguards to protect the quality of self-revised translations and suggestions that certain categories of documents would continue to be revised. Accordingly, the Inspectors recommend that each organization should take steps suited to its own policies and structure to increase gradually the number of documents that are self-revised and adjust the number and grade of language staff accordingly, as proposed in paragraphs 92 to 102 of their report.

24. On the one hand, there is the need to ensure the accuracy and quality of translation - perhaps with more attention for some categories of documentation than for others. On the other hand, both in the interests of rational management and in job satisfaction for the translators, there is the need to avoid "unnecessary" revision. The difficulty, recognized by the Inspectors, is in finding the practical working definition of what constitutes "unnecessary" revision. The answer can be arrived at only on the basis of accumulated experience. The Inspectors also indicate that steps taken in this direction should be those suited to the particular situation in each organization. The organizations, generally speaking, are prepared to pursue the concept of self-revision within this framework. In the case of the United Nations, the size of its translation services and the pressing need for improved career prospects for the staff are leading to more immediate proposals in which the approach recommended by the Inspectors will play a part. These proposals are being presented separately to the General Assembly at its current session.

Reference units (Recommendation 10)

25. The Inspectors point out that the size and extent of activity of reference units varies among organizations. Many organizations feel that the units should be strengthened. However, strengthening the units within the translation services is not an adequate answer because referencing responsibility belongs more properly to the originating units. If this were firmly enforced, central referencing units would still be necessary but increases in their cost could be avoided and a gradual cost reduction should be possible. The Inspectors recommend, therefore, that submitting departments should be directed to include necessary references when documents are submitted for translation. When this is not done, documents control units or translation services should be authorized to return the documents to the submitting departments for proper referencing.

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26. All organizations agree that the primary responsibility for careful referencing belongs to the originating unit and most of them have issued administrative instructions to this effect. The general experience has been that compliance with the rules is poor and that constant reminders are needed. Some organizations such as the United Nations take a strict approach whenever time permits and return the manuscripts to the submitting department for the necessary further work. Although the general conclusion is that central referencing units will still be necessary, they fully support the approach taken by the Inspectors in this regard.

Common computerized terminology and research unit (Recommendation 11)

27. The Inspectors point out that good multilingual terminology vocabularies allow translators to translate complex texts much more rapidly and accurately. At present almost every organization has its own central terminology unit, or units for each language section, and almost all organizations are using manual card indexes. Some have experimented with computer-assisted systems. The organizations agree that terminology within and between the organizations needs to be better co-ordinated and that a common, computerized terminology bank could greatly improve terminology work and reduce the duplication that now exists. The interagency working group had considered the possibilities of such a unit for several years, but the pilot project which was to be carried out in 1979 by United Nations Headquarters had been delayed, and several organizations were now moving ahead with their own computerized terminology systems. The Inspectors believe that a common unit could have considerable value in increasing productivity, reducing costs and eliminating duplication, and in providing research and advice on rapidly changing translation technology. They recommend, therefore, that the interagency group should give a high priority to developing and establishing a central, computer-assisted multilingual terminology unit, financed by the organizations from funds made available through reduction of their own individual terminology unit costs. In addition to preparing and/or distributing multilingual terminology lists, the unit should develop and encourage the use of innovative techniques and computerized aids for improving translation work, as indicated in paragraph 116 of the report.

28. There is general agreement among the organizations that a central computerized multilingual terminology unit would have advantages. The FAO points out, however, that, in view of the investment of resources which would be required to establish and maintain such a system successfully, any moves in this direction should be undertaken with considerable caution and only after very careful consideration of the cost benefits. That organization considers that for the present it would be preferable to set less ambitious objectives: the continued exchange of terminological material and information on problems, methods and procedures, and the furtherance of better co-ordination of terminology work among the organizations to avoid duplication and discrepancies in the terms selected. UNESCO points out that even if a central unit were established there would still be a need for small terminology units in each major organization in order to service translation units adequately and to provide appropriate inputs to the central unit, taking into account that such inputs require close contact with specialists in the various subjects which can only be established on the spot.

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Assessment of the results and impact of administrative processes (Recommendation 12)

29. The Inspectors point out that currently there are almost no firm data on the results and impact of translation activities. Translation is very important to fulfil the organizations' communication and information functions, involves high costs, has considerable potential for more sophisticated operational approaches, and is under pressure from mounting workloads. Thus, translation is an example of a basic support process of the organizations which deserves more attention on a periodic (rather than crisis) basis from top-level secretariat management and executive and governing bodies in order to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the process and whether its results are meeting organizational expectations.

30. In this context, the Inspectors recommend that the organizations should consider the need for in-depth reviews or evaluations on a periodic basis of major administrative or support services such as translation. Such studies should not simply assess input costs incurred or work-load problems, but should consider possibilities to increase effectiveness through new management approaches and also the specific nature and usefulness of the outputs and results of the processes.

31. All organizations agree, in principle, that this recommendation is a sound one.

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