

Effectively Working With Military Linguists: Vital Intercultural Intermediaries

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Armed Forces & Society

1-23

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DOI: 10.1177/0095327X16632333

afs.sagepub.com



Abstract

This article examines the relationship between advisors and linguists in the contemporary military advising mission and applies an emergent postmodern military culture theoretical framework. This project's multimethod collected data from Iraq, documents, and interviews. The study reveals an intriguing and nuanced story about the deployment of advisors and linguists in the advising mission. This article defines the military advising mission including the major actors. The article then introduces the postmodern military culture theoretical framework and method. The findings report many themes including linguist selection and hiring processes, the importance of advisor–linguist relationships, the relevance of linguists' backgrounds, linguists as full advisory team members, and the building blocks of successful advising sessions. Effective advisors work with linguists to deploy a Swiss Army knife of cultural tools including peacekeeper diplomat, warrior, subject matter expert, innovator, and others to accomplish the mission, which divulge broader changes indicative of an emergent postmodern military and culture.

Keywords

linguists, military advisors, military advising mission, postmodern military culture, cross-cultural competence

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Introduction

Since 9/11, millions of U.S. and coalition military service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and they frequently worked with linguists to communicate with various foreign people. Myriad operations required soldiers to employ and draw on the skills of linguists, including working and talking with foreign military troops, police officers, government officials, and indigenous members of the population. One mission that definitively required the use of linguists constituted the military advising mission, in which military advisor teams provided foreign counterparts (security forces) consultation, professional advice, and recommendations. The vast majority of U.S. advisors required linguists to communicate and build rapport with their foreign counterparts and to avoid miscommunications and misunderstandings—which helped soldiers and linguists to stay alive in combat and accomplish their mission. This article examines the relationship between advisors and linguists in the contemporary military advising mission from the advisor's viewpoint and applies an emergent postmodern military culture theoretical framework. This article draws on a study of the U.S. military advising mission to report findings about how military advisors build relationships and work effectively with linguists, which constitutes a critically important aspect of the military advising mission. This article represents a direct complement to a previous *Armed Forces & Society* piece that discusses the importance of advisors building relationships with foreign counterparts (Hajjar, 2014b),¹ and it also builds on former *Armed Forces & Society* publications about emergent postmodern military culture (Hajjar, 2014a) and cross-cultural competence (Hajjar, 2010). This piece defines the military advising mission, forwards the postmodern military culture theoretical framework, explains the method, discusses several findings about advisors and linguists, explicates theoretical implications, and concludes.

What Is the Military Advising Mission?

The essence of the military advising mission constitutes military members providing consultation, advice, mentorship, coaching, and other related activities to foreign counterparts to enhance their capabilities and professionalism. Advising missions range from large-scale operations during combat conditions, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11, to much smaller peacetime advisory efforts in numerous locations worldwide. Although advising is not a new role for the U.S. military (particularly for the Special Forces; Ramsey, 2006; Stoker, 2008), the employment of many thousands of mainstream advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan represented a monumental adaptation in the conventional armed forces—even though history reveals many of these changes entailed the mainstream military relearning how to advise successfully (Hajjar, 2014c). Advising relationships can take the form of different kinds of structures, but at their core, they involve three principal actors (see Figure 1—the Military Advising Triad). The first actor constitutes the foreign security force member in the advising relationship who bears the title of counterpart.

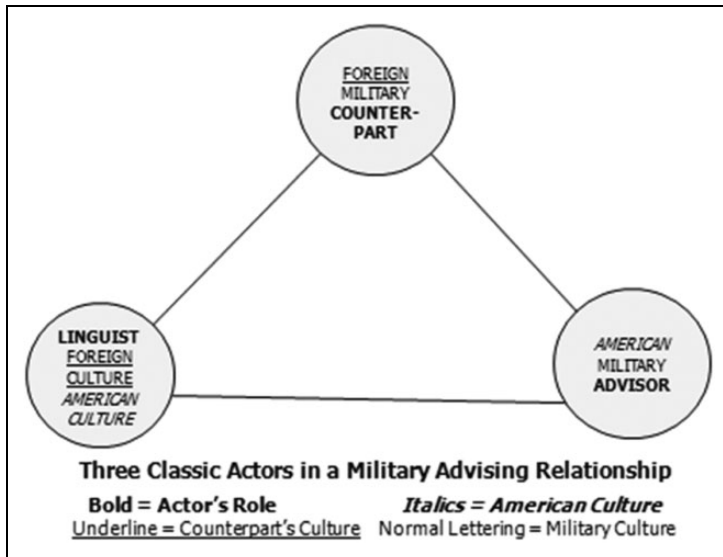


Figure 1. The military advising triad: One example of an advising relationship. The bolded lettering in the spheres indicates the roles played by the different actors in the triad. The underlined letters indicate that linguists typically share the national or regional culture of the counterpart. The italicized letters indicate that advisors and some linguists share U.S. culture (although some local national linguists do not share U.S. culture). The normal lettering indicates the shared military culture between counterparts and advisors, albeit there are important differences in their national and military cultures.

Counterparts receive suggestions, tutelage, information, resources, and associated support from the advisor. The second actor is the military advisor who provides the counterpart with tutorship, teaching, advice, recommendations, and other forms of assistance intended to develop the counterpart's competence and performance.² A third actor plays a vital yet sometimes subdued role in the advising relationship, and this person bears the title of linguist.³ The linguist, employed by the U.S. military, possesses sufficient cross-cultural competence and language skills (e.g., English and the counterpart's language) to facilitate effective communication and relationship building between the advisor and the counterpart (Hajjar, 2010). An advisor and linguist work together to provide assistance, suggestions, and consultation to increase the foreign counterpart's proficiency and professionalism. This piece devotes substantial attention to the advisor–linguist relationship from an advisor's viewpoint and discusses how this relationship impacts the military advising mission.

Who Are Linguists?

To further amplify the linguist role, this section answers some relevant questions about linguists, including:

- Who are linguists?
- How does the U.S. military categorize its linguists?
- What kinds of people typically fill linguist positions?
- What tasks comprise the work of linguists?

To begin to answer these questions, we begin with a passage from current U.S. military doctrine.

LINGUIST SUPPORT CATEGORIES:

When possible, interpreters [linguists] should be U.S. military personnel or category II or III linguists. [Linguists] fall into three categories.

Category I linguists usually are hired locally and require vetting. They do not have a security clearance. They are the most abundant resource pool; however, their skill level is limited. Category I linguists should be used for basic interpretation for activities such as patrols, base entrance coverage . . . and civil-military operations.

Category II linguists are U.S. citizens with a secret clearance. Often they possess good oral and written communication skills. They should be managed carefully due to limited availability.

Category III linguists are U.S. citizens with a top secret clearance. They are a scarce commodity and often retained at division and higher levels of command. They have excellent oral and written communications skills.

Some private companies provide linguist support through contracts. The required statement of work or contract should define the linguist's requirements and the unit's responsibilities. (U.S. Army Field Manual, 2006, p. C-1)

As this passage indicates, civilian contractor linguists, who form the bulk of the U.S. military's inventory of linguists, fall into three basic categories: I, II, and III. The greater the linguists' skill set and security clearance level, the higher the category of a given linguist. For the purpose of this study, the words linguist, translator, cultural advisor, interpreter, and "terp" (a common term used in the U.S. military's ranks) are synonyms: They all mean the actor in an advising relationship, employed by the U.S. military, who possesses sufficient cross-cultural competence including language skills to enable an advisor to communicate effectively with a counterpart and conduct the advising mission.

This study concentrates mainly on Category 1 and Category 2 civilian contractor linguists. Although a small number of active duty military linguists exist—the "09L" military occupational specialty—my study did not collect data about them, with the exception of some field notes and ethnographic observations from Iraq in 2009–2010 where my unit had one Arabic 09L U.S. Army linguist. The interview data mainly talk about Category 1 linguists, meaning the advisors that I interviewed typically worked with local national linguists in Iraq or Afghanistan, albeit there were a few exceptions. The survey data I collected in Iraq in 2010 when I served in an advising unit concentrate exclusively on Category 2 linguists. The Category 2 linguists in my unit in Iraq were born and raised in Arabic-speaking countries (including Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and Morocco) who immigrated to the United States

sometime between their late teenage years through their 30s, and then became U.S. citizens. These linguists acquired at least a secret-level security clearance, and some of them possessed bachelor's or advanced degrees and other specializations (e.g., computer programmers; engineers). Thus, this article's findings stem from a balance of cases of Category 1 and Category 2 linguists.

This passage comes from a monograph for advisors, and it forwards a linguist ideal type.

The perfect interpreter is impossible to find. Who is an ideal interpreter? It would be someone who can accurately and quickly translate nuanced meaning, be thoroughly versed in both countries' history, literature, culture, and politics, as well as in the technical subjects under discussion, and yet not allow his personality to shade the interpretation. This paragon does not exist. In the real world, the interpreter is more likely a local citizen who left his country decades in the past and has only returned on a contract, or someone whose parents are from the country in question and who learned the language from his family while growing up in America, or a local citizen who studied English in school. None of these is likely to be a formally trained interpreter, and, at best, the advisor will be provided translation which will only be approximately correct. Facts, figures, and details will often be mistranslated, and nuances of meaning may be totally lost. If the interpreter is from a different religious or ethnic group than the official [counterpart], there may be mistrust and bias on both sides. If the interpreter is seen as having abandoned his native country for a better life in America, there may be resentment against him. At worst, the interpreter will have such heavy emotional baggage, prejudice, or personal political motivation that conversations will be twisted in a way not intended by either advisor or official [counterpart], leading to distrust and mission failure. All of this adds immeasurably to the advisor's burden. Dealing with interpreters is a skill which a surprisingly large number of ... advisors [soldiers] completely lack, but not having this skill is like not knowing how to fire your weapon. (Metrinko, 2008, p. 41–42)

This account contributes to many patterns in the data set regarding linguists. First, it points out that “a large number of advisors completely lack” the right “skills” to work well with linguists, yet establishing trust with linguists and working as an effective advisor–linguist team to build relationships with counterparts present crucial advisory skills on par with other life-saving skills in combat, such as “knowing how to fire your weapon.” Given cultural misunderstandings and affronts to counterparts create problems in advising relationships and in some cases can result in counterparts attacking U.S. advisors and troops, working well with linguists indeed constitutes a life preserving skill set in wartime contexts.

Second, the passage depicts an ideal type for a linguist; the nonexistent linguist “paragon” would perfectly perform multiple complex tasks. These data illustrate the finding that linguists require skills and cross-cultural competence that extend beyond adequate linguistic expertise. Linguists require culture-specific competence (e.g., relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and open-mindedness about U.S. and

foreign cultures), and ideally possess relevant military subject matter expertise (Hajjar, 2010). Since perfect linguists do not exist “in the real world,” advisors must realize that even when working with the best linguists, some information will get lost in translation; thus, taking painstaking efforts to minimize this eventuality also presents an important task.

Furthermore, this passage discusses the impact of linguists serving on civilian business “contracts.” Some linguists’ contractual occupational and for-profit orientations may contrast with the more balanced professional, institutional, and occupational motives of their military advisor supervisors and soldier teammates (Kelty & Segal, 2007; Moskos & Wood, 1988). Finally, the account supports the theme that advisors need to create smooth relationships between linguists and counterparts and must consider that linguists’ and counterparts’ ethnicity, dialect, sex, age, religion, political ideology, education, flexibility, and other factors will influence the counterpart–linguist relationship, which in turn impacts the quality of the advisor–counterpart relationship. This section reviewed the different categories of linguists, their sources of employment (mainly contracts), linguists’ cultural backgrounds, and details about the linguist role, all of which contribute to an understanding of military linguists.

An Overarching Framework for Emergent Postmodern Military Culture

This article applies a previously established theoretical framework revealing the emergence of a postmodern military and organizational culture (see Figure 2; Hajjar, 2014a). This framework reveals that contemporary military culture possesses tremendous complexity, fragmentation, contradiction and harmony, traditional and current features, and multiple overlapping spheres of influence including professional and bureaucratic (Sookermany, 2012), institutional and occupational (Moskos & Wood, 1988), warrior and peacekeeper–diplomat (Perez, 2012), leadership and followership, multirole versatility, cross-cultural competence, power and influence, diplomacy, ambassadorship, and other cultural tools (Swidler, 2001). This article further builds and amplifies the case for an emergent postmodern military and culture, and the findings section will explain how advisor–linguist teams illuminate and enrich different cultural spheres within this design during the conduct of the military advising mission. The contemporary advising mission presents an ideal case to examine, given the substantial role of linguists and advisors in the mission.

Findings From the Overall Study: The Swiss Army Knife of Advisory Skills

This section summarizes the overall project’s major findings and sets the stage for a main concentration on the importance of military advisor–linguist relationships. An informant uses the metaphor of a “Swiss Army knife,” which serves as a fitting symbol for the cultural toolkit deployed by contemporary advisors to conduct their mission. Switzerland’s reputation for neutrality and peace makes the combination of the word “Swiss” (peacekeeper–diplomat) with the words “Army knife” (warrior)

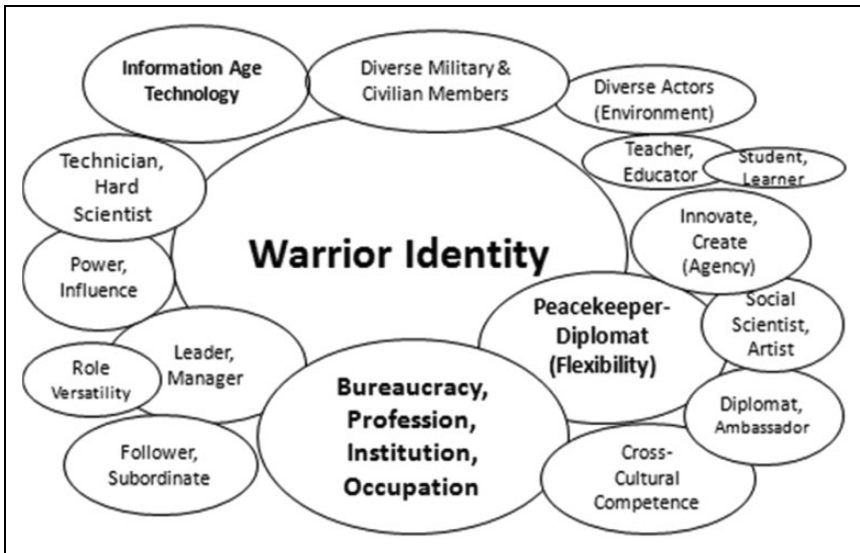


Figure 2. Postmodern military culture.

extremely suitable for this article's conceptual design and argument. A sledgehammer would symbolize the military's historic combat warrior identity, which evolved to include smaller hammers, scalpels, other kinds of knife blades, and new tools needed for different kinds of combat missions of varying intensities. The contemporary Swiss Army knife also includes emerging peacekeeper-diplomat, information age technology, soft and hard leader skills, expertise, and other tools required to perform a full spectrum of noncombat and combat operations. Advisors and linguists draw from their Swiss Army knives to traverse numerous complexities, balancing acts, dangers, and ambiguities that characterize the advising tightrope.

Although this article primarily discusses the study's finding about the invaluable role of advisor-linguist partnerships in the advising mission, a brief synopsis of the project's other major findings provides a necessary broader context. One main finding includes the significance of advisors effectively building relationships with foreign counterparts. Two other larger intertwined findings disclosed advising as an unconventional and second-tier mission, given the task's unusual in-depth cross-cultural requirements and the mission's lower status compared to traditional command roles and combat functions. As the mainstream military adapted to conduct the unconventional advising mission in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11, many advisors practiced tremendous creativity and agency by stretching boundaries (and in turn causing ripples of cultural change) in the conventional military to spend sufficient time with, operate alongside, and at times live on counterpart bases. Another major finding constitutes the ambiguities and challenges linked to defining advisory success, including the folly of solely trying to employ precise objective measures of success.

Subjective measures for advisory achievements manifested, such as facilitating counterpart autonomy and establishing enduring advisor–counterpart relationships and friendships (Sookermany, 2012).⁴ Finally, an amalgamation of other patterns emerged, including the role of information age technology, the importance of relevant subject matter expertise, providing various “goodies” (e.g., equipment, shared intelligence, etc.) to counterparts, considerations for deploying woman advisors, and the need to successfully interact with various actors in the advising environment.

Method

Given that a fuller explanation of the method appears in a previous *Armed Forces & Society* article about the contemporary advising mission, this section will provide a summary and add some details that pertain to this specific paper (Hajjar, 2014b).⁵ This study stems from a multimethod comprised of three major subparts: (1) data collected in Iraq, particularly a survey ($N = 23$ subjects, including 16 advisors and 7 linguists); (2) an in-depth analysis of global advising documents ($N = 20$) including journal articles, monographs, military doctrine, and book chapters; and (3) in-depth semistructured interviews ($N = 11$ informants, including 10 advisors and 1 linguist). The initial analysis of the Iraq data yielded initial categories, conceptual clusters, and trends, which expanded in complexity during the reiterative analytical processes that occurred throughout the project. Although triangulation of the results from these three distinct data sources strengthened the findings’ validity, generalizability typically does not constitute the main purpose of qualitative studies including this one (Autesserre, 2014). Rather, this study sought to make relevant exploratory claims and assertions about military advisors and linguists primarily within a post-9/11 context in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it also provides some insights bearing historical and regional variation. Further, although the study captures germane insights directly from linguists, its main source constitutes military advisors; thus, the findings provide an advisor-centric vantage into the world of advisor–linguist relationships, and how military advisors and linguists perform the advising mission.

Effectively Working With Military Linguists: Vital Intercultural Intermediaries

This article examines the relationship between advisors and linguists in the contemporary military advising mission from the advisor’s viewpoint and applies an emergent postmodern military theoretical framework. Since a very small handful of advisors either speak their counterpart’s language or work with counterparts who speak English fluently, this study reveals that the overwhelming majority of advisors utilize linguists. Advisors require a repertoire of cultural tools to effectively lead and build rapport with their linguist teammates, and linguists require a variety of special cross-cultural skills to bond with advisors and help build bridges that connect advisor–linguist teams to counterparts. Myriad conditions, including the phase of a campaign, diverse backgrounds of the actors involved in advising sessions, different

places and organizations, the military subject matter of a given advising session, military member and civilian contractor cultural orientations, and other circumstances influence advisors to draw on warrior, peacekeeper-diplomat, leader, creativity, and other tools from their Swiss Army knives to work well with linguists. This findings section reports numerous interrelated patterns regarding advisor–linguist relationships and interactions in the advising mission, including advisors selecting and hiring linguists, the importance of advisors building strong relationships with linguists, the relevance of linguists’ cultural backgrounds and language skills, linguists as full advisory team members (but not in a lead role), and the building blocks of successful advising sessions. The following subsections draw on the most vivid and representative data from the study to explain how linguists fill the role of vital intercultural intermediaries in the mission, and how advisors work effectively with linguists as a prerequisite to building relationships with counterparts to ultimately succeed in the advising mission.

Selecting and Hiring Linguists: Personal and Systematized Processes

The study shows that different conditions determine how advisors select and hire linguists. In mature campaigns, such as the latter phases of Iraq and Afghanistan, advisors typically enter units that already have linguists. In immature campaigns, some advisors reported handpicking linguist candidates “off the street.” The findings reveal advisors draw on warrior, peacekeeper-diplomat, military–civilian, creativity, and other tools from their Swiss Army knives, as they select and hire suitable linguists.

The following case involves a National Guard officer, Peter, who reflects on working with linguists in his three Afghanistan military advisor experiences that spanned from 2003 to 2010.

The first person you need to build trust with is your linguist. He’s your primary guy. If he’s not someone you can trust then you need to get rid of him and **get someone you can trust and build a relationship with**. My first year [2003–2004] we basically raised ‘em. There wasn’t any real system on hiring guys. I hired a guy off the street. Literally. He’s like I wanna be a translator. I said OK, can you read? Read this. Can you talk? Let’s talk a bit. I hired him right there. And I went down to the little thing [contractor company] and said this guy is working for us now. By ‘06 to ‘07 we had formalized the system, and you got whatever linguist they gave ya. Some of ‘em were OK, and some of ‘em weren’t. But **in the first tour we could hire, fire at will, right on the spot**. (Peter, interview, 2012; Age 48, three military advising tours in Afghanistan)

In this passage, the informant’s comments about “building trust with your linguist” as the “primary guy” links to a strong pattern in the data set about the importance of advisors building solid “relationships” with linguists. An intriguing aspect of Peter’s story involves the conditions in Afghanistan in 2003–2004 where “there wasn’t any real system on hiring” linguists, where he “could hire and fire” linguists

“at will, right on the spot.” His creation of a personal testing system for linguist candidates, where he spontaneously checked interested Afghan’s “reading” and “talking” skills, contributes to a minor trend in the data set. The linguist selection and hiring “system formalized” by his 2006–2007 Afghanistan tour, where he “got whatever linguist” his unit gave him, and in the established system, he experienced mixed levels of linguist proficiency. This microstory provides a valuable insight about the modern versus postmodern military debate. On the one hand, a routinized linguist selection system indicates a modernist enterprise. On the other hand, we get a sense that Peter preferred the autonomous agency associated with handpicking his linguists—using subjectivity and spontaneity while accomplishing this task. We can further deduce that perhaps linguists who are personally selected by the advisors they work for might bring greater loyalty and motivation toward their work compared to linguists hired by contractor companies and then assigned to units and advisors. This deduction stretches beyond the intended scope of this study, but it merits mentioning. The larger issue in Peter’s account constitutes the underlying tension between modernist and postmodernist orientations, and ultimately, it provides a fine example of emergent postmodern military culture and organization.

When I asked Peter about whether he harbored security concerns when he handpicked linguists off the street, not necessarily knowing if these linguist candidates secretly supported enemy groups, he responded with the following thoughts.

I think in ‘03 to ‘04 the atmosphere was totally different. Everywhere you went in Afghanistan **if you were an American you were a rock star**. We could fire and hire interpreters at will. We hired a couple off the street. How did I know he [a linguist he hired] wasn’t battin’ for the other side? His arm had been broken at the elbow by the Taliban. He was escorting his female cousin from one house to the other, and they thought that was inappropriate and they beat him up. **He hated the Taliban with a passion**. (Peter, interview, 2012; Age 48, three military advising tours in Afghanistan)

When the informant discussed whether he worried about any covert enemy associations in the linguists he “hired off the street,” he provided a twofold response. First, Peter felt that since in 2003–2004, “everywhere you went in Afghanistan if you were an American you were a rock star,” the risk of his linguists having hostile ties was low. Second, he talked about one of his linguists who “hated the Taliban with a passion,” because the Taliban “beat him up” and “broke his arm at the elbow.” Despite Peter’s confidence about the loyalty of the linguists he handpicked during his first deployment in 2003–2004, his lack of acknowledgment of any dangers in hiring linguists off the street reinforces the pattern of advisors creatively accomplishing the advising mission while accepting risks—especially in combat environments. This theme of accepting dangers while innovating to perform the advising mission provides evidence for advisors who apply warrior tools (assertiveness/initiative; bravery). Additionally, linguists also draw on warrior tools (bravery) by accepting the risks of war, including potential targeting by enemy groups for

working for United States or coalition forces. Additionally, service members draw on peacekeeper-diplomat tools (culture-specific competence in picking suitable linguists), cultural self-awareness, agency and the creation of new tools on the job (such as devising a linguist candidate “test”), skills to cross the civilian–military spheres (working with civilian contractor linguists), teaching tools (teaching civilian linguists about the military), and other cultural tools from their Swiss Army knives to help them to select appropriate linguists.⁶ Finally, the finding that advisors subjectively and creatively decide to accept risks to test and select their own linguists supports the assertion that postmodern fragmentation emanates at the individual soldier or microlevel in the military (Morgan, 2003; Sookermany, 2012).

The Importance of Building Strong Advisor–Linguist Relationships

The following military advisors reflect on their experiences with linguists, and they provide some vivid examples of the overarching finding that strong advisor–linguist relationships benefit the mission.

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and here [in Saudi Arabia], the relationship with the linguist is absolutely critical. As important as your relationship is with your counterpart, your relationship with your linguist or ‘terp is equally as important. Khalid in Afghanistan would remind me of things that happened the day before, things that my counterparts said or things I said, which would help me continue on a particular line of effort with my counterpart. (Martin, interview, 2012; Age 40, advisor tours in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in Saudi Arabia during the interview)

You had to develop a relationship not only with your counterpart but you had to develop a relationship with your ‘terps. The perception of the ‘terps [by some soldiers] . . . is that he’s just a mouthpiece. Well if you’re in tune with your ‘terp and they trust you, they will tell you [valuable information]. They will interpret not only what’s being said but they’ll interpret the emotions behind it. **I’ve worked with ones [linguists] that were extremely adept at identifying somebody was hiding something,** and in English they would say something very veiled [to me] while the guy [counterpart] was on the phone or getting coffee or tea for us. That would let me know this guy [counterpart] is hiding something, or this guy doesn’t wanna admit or take responsibility. That would help me as an advisor to [not] push the issue. I watched some of my friends that didn’t have that kind of relationship [with] their ‘terps, and they kept pressing the issue and then the counterpart didn’t wanna talk to them for a couple days. (Jason, interview, 2012; Age 40, military advisor and deputy advisor team leader in Iraq)

Building a relationship with your interpreter is equally as important, if not more important than the relationships you’re gonna generate with your advisee [counterpart]. I’ll use a hockey analogy because I’m Canadian. The more you play with your line mates, you know you can blindly pass the puck off into the corner and your teammate will be there to get it because you’ve developed a relationship where you know that’s where he’s going to be. Magically it all happens. That’s how professionals play. They

play based on instinct and reaction, not set drills. (Cade, interview, 2012; Age 42, Canadian advisor with five advising tours including three in Afghanistan)

These passages discuss the significance of the advisor–linguist relationship, putting it on par with the advisor–counterpart relationship. Martin discusses his linguist, “Khalid,” who reminded Martin about “things that happened the day before,” such as “things that my counterpart said or things I said.” The helpful reminders enabled Martin to “continue on a particular line of effort” over time, which benefited the advising mission. Jason talks about the human aspect of the advisor–linguist relationship, noting that some soldiers’ perceptions of linguists as mere “mouthpieces” create weak advisor–linguist bonds, which can detrimentally impact the advising mission. For example, Jason talks about some of his U.S. advisor “friends” who “didn’t have that kind of (strong) relationship (with their linguists)” and who would subsequently miss cues from linguists during meetings with counterparts and would sometimes “press” certain “issues” with counterparts too far and then would experience negative outcomes such as “counterparts [who] didn’t wanna talk to them for a couple days.” Contrarily, Jason talked about the value of being “in tune” with a linguist to perceive hints and advice to sidestep minefields during advising sessions, maintain positive relationships, and advance the mission. Thus, Jason’s productive relationship with his linguist enabled him to reap the benefits of his linguist’s culture-specific competence (e.g., ability to read a counterpart’s body language and nuanced meanings), which helped the mission. Cade uses a hockey analogy to show how a well-developed advisor–linguist relationship leads to “instinctive” anticipations of each other’s actions that yield “magical” results for the mission. The data illuminate that advisors apply peacekeeper-diplomat tools, including culture-specific competence, flexibility, listening skills, and diplomacy to establish personal and productive relationships with linguists. Contemporary advisors cultivate nuanced and personal relationships with linguists (subjectively created), which provide insight into a postmodern development that differs from the modernist, more formalized, by-the-book, and superficial superior-subordinate relations (objectively managed; Sookermany, 2012). The findings reveal that stronger advisor–linguist relationships enhanced advising mission outcomes.

The Relevance of Linguists’ Cultural Backgrounds, Language Skills, and Dialects

This section discusses how linguists’ cultural backgrounds, language skills, dialects, and potential biases impact the advising mission. The findings indicate that advisors need to carefully assess these linguist factors to set the conditions for advisory success. The data explored in this subsection provide examples of this overall finding. In the first case, Don, an advisor and advisory team leader in Afghanistan provides numerous germane insights regarding the importance of linguists.

I call my linguists by two names. First I call him my brother. And then I call him my bridge. It would be difficult to over-stress how important they are, good ones. In my position we interact with the head [Afghan counterpart] policeman, the [Afghan] district governor, the provincial governor, the provincial chief of police, the general officers in RC [Regional Command]-South. **So I've gotta have a guy that's extremely proficient in both Dari and Pashto.** Usually what that means is a Pashtun from Kabul who had a good education. Otherwise you get a guy who's very, very good in Dari, but he learned his Pashto while he was working down in the south, or you get a guy who grew up in the south, and so he only learned Dari from his last couple years in school. His English doesn't have to be perfect, but he has to be able to communicate concepts to you in English. One of the things my interpreter and I have been working on a lot is improving his grammar, so he sounds more educated. But he does a phenomenal job at communicating to me exactly what the guy [counterpart] is trying to say. (Don, interview, 2012; Age 42, three advising tours, military advisor and advisor team leader in Afghanistan)

Don creates a powerful metaphor in his twofold “brother” and “bridge” descriptions, whereby bonds between advisors and linguists (“my brother”—socio-emotional component) create effectual cultural bridges or links to counterparts (bridge—instrumental component). Indeed, advisors must draw on cross-cultural competence, empathy, perspective taking, and other interpersonal skills to build a personalized relationship (brother) relationship with linguists. This positive relationship benefits the advising mission, given the linguist serves as the cross-cultural bridge that connects an advisor to a counterpart. Don further explains that he requires a trilingual and bicultural linguist (Dari, Pashto, and English) because he frequently meets with high-level Afghan government officials, military “generals,” and “police chiefs” (Jongh, 1991). He also works with his linguist to help improve his “English grammar,” so his linguist “sounds more educated,” which implies this will help build his linguist's credibility in meetings with higher status and presumably well-educated people who understand English (e.g., United States, coalition, and Afghan officials). Don demonstrates his acquired culture-specific competence (knowledge) through his description of an ideal type of Afghan linguist: “a Pashtun from Kabul who had a good education,” which constitutes a background that trumps other experiences, such as Afghans who grew up in different regions and who may possess inferior language and other skills.

An Iraqi-descent linguist who spent 5 years in Iraq as a linguist wrote this response to a survey about some problems he observed when non-Iraqi linguists worked with Iraqi counterparts.

We have a problem with the Iraqi dialect. Non Iraqis Linguist cannot do the job properly. If you ask me to go and do this job [in] Algeria I will refuse [because] I don't know their dialect. Yes they speak Arabic, and we both can read a newspaper and understand it, but we cannot relate to each other through a conversation. This is an

example. If you can only see all the mistakes or the disgrace that been brought upon the people. Some I witnessed. (Nabil, 2010 [unpublished survey data]; Age 68, linguist in Iraq for 5 years)

Nabil communicated his concerns about “all the mistakes” and the “disgrace” that “non-Iraqi linguists brought upon the people (Iraqi counterparts)” during his experiences as a linguist. He further explains how just because two different ethnic groups (e.g., “Algerians” and “Iraqis”) speak Arabic, they still “cannot relate to each other” in “conversations.” In late 2009, I recall spending time at the specific Iraqi base where Nabil worked, and recall an incident where our U.S. advisory organization had to fire and replace a young brand new Egyptian linguist due to reports that the linguist made comments deemed as inappropriate, arrogant, and disrespectful by some Iraqi counterparts. However, the affront seemed short-lived given that soon after that event the Iraqi counterpart general officer in-charge of the Iraqi base told the U.S. advisors that he would accept the reinstatement of that Egyptian linguist (nonetheless, our U.S. advisory unit did not let that linguist work there again). This incident may have influenced Nabil’s comments, but given his 5 years of experience as a linguist in Iraq, he likely observed other communication issues stemming from the application of “non-Iraqi” linguists. The major point from this narrative constitutes the finding that advisors must gauge how their linguists relate to their counterparts, especially if the linguist has a different ethnic background or dialect than the counterpart. This finding further underscores the subjective and personalized approach advisors require when working with linguists: perceiving subtleties of linguist-counterpart interactions constitutes another important facet of the mission and reveals another postmodern manifestation in the mission and organization. As advisors develop and apply cultural tools to assess the impact of their linguists’ cultural backgrounds, language abilities, dialects, potential narrow-mindedness or biases, and other idiosyncrasies, they do so to help build strong relationships with counterparts to ultimately forward the mission.

Linguists as Full Advisory Team Members (But Not in the Lead Role)

This section explores the balancing act of working with linguists, whereby advisors seek to draw on linguists’ talents as “full team members” (a subject’s words) while preventing linguists from overstepping their bounds, role, and authority. Accomplishing the balancing act of working well with linguists and making them feel like well-respected and full team members who in turn bring forth substantial motivation toward the mission, but yet not letting linguists dominate or wield too much influence during advising sessions or back at the office sometimes presents a tricky, challenging, and sophisticated task that contemporary military advisors must negotiate.

The following data provide different angles and explanations regarding the delicate task of effectively bonding with, leading, and working with linguists, which vividly highlight this finding.

Ricky [a linguist] was acting very weird . . . and he was **obstinate**, which really ticked me off. His **ego and attitude were about to get him fired**. I had to be a little draconian on him a few times, handing him his “arse!” **He actually thought he was an advisor**. (Michelle, 2010 [unpublished field notes]; Age 40, U.S. military advisor in Iraq)

As translators [linguists]: we should also be considered advisors. (Habeeb, 2010 [unpublished survey data]; Age 66, Iraqi-descent linguist in Iraq, data from 2010 survey in Iraq)

Use translators [linguists] as a full team member—they will catch things/body language [in counterparts] that you do not. They have a natural feel for the conversation they are translating. While you may fixate on words, they should have a better understanding of the gist of the conversation. Discuss with your linguist after the engagement their observations/impressions. **They will pick up on things you will have no idea occurred**. (Bill, 2010 [unpublished survey data]; Age 47, U.S. military advisor and advisor team leader in Iraq, data from 2010 survey in Iraq)

Insist that your interpreters translate exactly what you mean. Do not allow them to add anything extra or usurp your authority to [avoid] **complications about who is really in charge**. Once your language skills improve, do not be afraid to correct the interpreter if he is not translating exactly what you meant. (Air Land Sea Application Center, 2009)

This group of data reveals the complexities of the balancing act involved in the process of advisors working well with linguists. As the Iraqi linguist, Habeeb, states, “we should also be considered advisors.” Indeed, insofar as linguists advise their U.S. advisors, help their advisors to acquire culture-specific competence, and work to support their advisors and influence counterparts, Habeeb’s insight fits a linguist’s role—linguists advise their U.S. advisors. However, I think Habeeb means that linguists should also be considered as actual military advisors to counterparts.

Michelle reported her linguist, Ricky, also “actually thought he was an advisor.” Michelle reported that Ricky’s strong “ego” and “obstinate attitude were about to get him fired.” Due to Ricky’s attitude where he tried to push with too much influence to become the boss in advising sessions, Michelle felt compelled to take “draconian” actions and occasionally “hand” the linguist his “arse.” Michelle, a career U.S. Air Force officer, might have experienced excessive assertiveness and stubbornness from her linguist because she replaced a higher ranking male U.S. military officer; her male linguist of Middle-Eastern descent might have had trouble adjusting to working for a woman boss of slightly lower rank (one rank lower). Another relevant condition that may have contributed to Michelle’s case includes the possibility that her linguist experienced some burnout, given that linguist had spent

several years in Iraq away from his family. Thus, an examination of Michelle's specific conditions yields relevant insights about the need for advisors to quickly ascertain sufficient situational awareness, and apply appropriate cultural tools to rectify any unprofessional or out-of-bounds conduct by linguists. In Michelle's case, we can deduce she used leadership tools to reestablish boundaries, roles, and a proper relationship with her linguist. The short U.S. military doctrinal passage (the last narrative in the data set above) supports Michelle's account when it states advisors should avoid "complications about who is really in charge" between linguists and advisors.

Based on the study, Bill's comments best capture the essence of how an advisor effectively traverses the balancing act of building a solid relationship with a linguist. Advisors who succeed in helping their linguists feel like full team members (but not in charge) receive the benefits of the linguist's talents and insights. The linguists "will catch things/body language" and other relevant "things you will have no idea occurred" during engagements with counterparts. Unlike advisors, linguists "have a natural feel for the conversation they are translating," and while advisors might "fixate on words," linguists comprehend the bigger picture meanings or the "gist of the conversation." Bill's concept of building a feeling of "full team membership" in his linguists motivates them to draw on all of their talents to achieve the mission.

This section explains how U.S. advisors deploy numerous cultural tools from their Swiss Army knives to build productive relationships with their linguists and to inspire a full team member (but not in charge) spirit in their linguist teammates. When some linguists overstep their bounds (e.g., dominating advising sessions; not following advisors' guidance) and do not respond to softer diplomatic requests for behavior changes, advisors apply harder command tools to redirect linguists. The study reveals that advisors' peacekeeper-diplomat tools, including culture-specific competence, diplomacy, flexibility, learning, mentoring, following, and creativity, as well as applicable cross-cultural leadership tools, enable U.S. advisors to effectively motivate linguists and maintain the right balance in the relationship with their linguist brothers (and sisters) who serve as key cultural bridges in the mission. The finding further amplifies the need for contemporary advisors to take a more subjective, personalized, individualized, and nuanced approach toward working with linguist colleagues, which bears a postmodern aura that differs from the rigidity, objectivity, and formality linked to organizational relationships of the modern era (Morgan, 2003; Sookermany, 2012). Furthermore, as advisors learn these skills based on their situated experiences, they learn by doing the mission and many benefit from working in communities of practice (e.g., specific advisory teams and units around the globe; Sookermany, 2011).

The Building Blocks of Successful Advising Sessions

This section reports advisor-linguist dynamics that constitute the building blocks to effective advising sessions. This includes preparatory actions and how to navigate

actual meetings with counterparts. In the first passage, a linguist talks about how advisors' military subject matter expertise, linguists' cross-cultural communication skills, and rehearsals coalesce to benefit the mission.

They're [counterparts] extremely impressed with [subject matter expertise]. If you show them that you know your stuff, that is significant. If you show in any way that you're incompetent, then that would [negatively] impact the situation. Now being an expert, they [advisors] have to communicate successfully [with counterparts]. If you have the translator whose going to translate what you do, **this requires tremendous preparation. You can't just grab a translator and say, 'you gotta translate for me.'** Things don't work out like that because words don't translate word-for-word, or sentences, or applied definitions and meanings of things. (Steve, interview, 2012; Age 57, linguist, two tours in Iraq)

In this narrative, Steve underscores the significance of cross-cultural communications, so that advisors can effectively share their expertise with counterparts. Further, advisors must avoid transmitting any potentially harmful impressions of "incompetence." Wise utilization of linguists to communicate expertise to counterparts requires "tremendous preparation." Advisors who try to "grab" linguists and ask them to translate complicated information without preparation fail to realize "things don't work out like that" because "words don't translate word-for-word, or sentences, or applied definitions and meanings of things." Steve's insights contribute to a trend in the study regarding the need for advisors to rehearse for advising sessions with linguists, so linguists can effectively communicate subject matter expertise and other pertinent suggestions to counterparts.

In the next passage, Martin discusses how he prepared for advising sessions with linguists, which made the engagements more productive, despite their fluid nature.

Prior to any meetings with my counterpart I would always pull my 'terp aside and say, 'this is what I want to talk about today.' **Kinda give him a quick once over of the topics I want to talk about,** that way he is prepared to address those issues in the meeting. He's not scrambling for words at the last minute, which he ends up doing anyway because of the way the meetings and the conversations go. But I try to prep him beforehand. That way he knows what I want to talk about and kinda can stay on topic. **So workin' with your interpreter [in advance with rehearsals] is absolutely critical.** (Martin, interview, 2012; Age 40, military advisor tours in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia)

The subject explains that "prior to any meeting with my counterpart I would pull my 'terp aside" to review "the topics I want to talk about" so "he's not scrambling around for words at the last minute." Despite this preparation, Martin admits the fluid, dynamic, and distinctive nature of "conversations" with counterparts often cause linguists to "scramble for words anyway," but he still determined that preparing in advance with linguists enhanced the advising process—which supports this

trend in the data set. This study found that when advisors take time to rehearse and prepare with linguists before meeting with counterparts, this practice benefits the mission.

The following illuminating case discusses the mechanics of how advisors and linguists work well together during meetings with foreign counterparts, drawn principally from an advisor's vantage.

Common mistakes [in meetings with counterparts] are to subject the interpreter to **long, rambling philosophical perorations** which no one could easily understand; to assume that the interpreter can memorize long paragraphs; to assume that the interpreter can understand obscure metaphors, regional American dialect, professional **jargon, slang, and acronyms**; and to assume that the interpreter intends to translate everything rather than simply giving a synopsis. The only way to avoid these pitfalls is to **speak slowly, clearly, and succinctly, to rehearse** key points in advance with the interpreter, and to check the interpreter's accuracy with figures and other data. Even then, however, **no translation will be completely correct**. The advisor can improve his message by avoiding military jargon and abbreviations. '**Military-speak**' can be so heavily laden with acronyms and special vocabulary that it is even incomprehensible to American civilians. (Metrinko, 2008, p. 42)

Advisors require self-awareness of the "military-speak" and "acronyms" they may regularly use in dialogues with military colleagues and must recognize that using such "jargon" with linguists may hinder communications. The narrative states that "speaking slowly, clearly, and succinctly," and not using long "paragraphs" or "philosophical perorations" in conversations with counterparts will help linguists make effective translations. Further, the account reinforces the small trend in the data set that some of the intended communication will get lost in interpretation because "no translation will be completely correct." Finally, the suggestion that advisors should conduct "rehearsals" with their linguists prior to meetings with counterparts emanates. These findings reveal some of the common building blocks that advisors and linguists use to do well in meetings with counterparts. These findings reveal the subjective, nuanced, personalized, messy, and fluid processes of learning how to best accomplish the advising mission, which divulge some post-modern qualities (Sookermany, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article examined the relationship between advisors and linguists in the contemporary military advising mission from the advisor's viewpoint and applied an emergent postmodern military culture theoretical framework to enhance understanding of that relationship. The findings reveal that effectively working with linguists presents an essential task for advisors, and many supporting subthemes emerged in the study. Since a very small handful of U.S. advisors either speak their

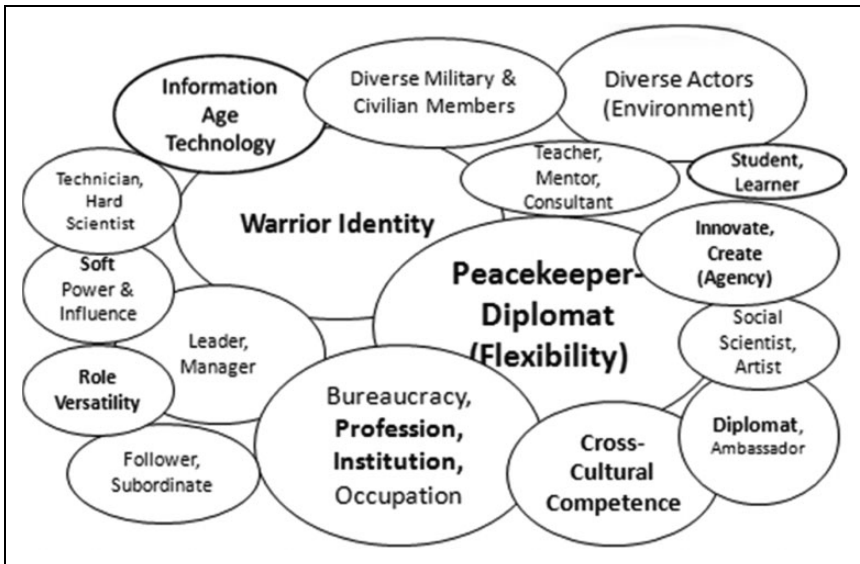


Figure 3. Military advisors' cultural toolkit.

counterpart's language or work with counterparts who speak English fluently, the study finds that an overwhelming majority of contemporary advisors utilize linguists. Myriad conditions, including the phase of a campaign, different cultural backgrounds of the actors involved in advising relationships, different regions and organizations, the applicable military topic, military–civilian cultural orientations, advisors' personal preferences, and other factors influence how advisors form relationships and work with linguists. Advisors draw on a repertoire of cultural tools to effectively select, assess, lead, bond with, teach, mentor, and deploy linguists as full advisory team members. Advisors draw on cultural tools to cross the civilian–military and U.S.-foreign cultural divides between linguists and advisors to bond with their new brothers and then travel across the cultural bridges that linguists build to connect with foreign counterparts. An interrogation of the data explain how linguists serve as vital intercultural intermediaries between advisors and counterparts in the contemporary advising mission, and linguists also play essential roles in other military missions in which soldiers must successfully communicate with foreign partners and people.

Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study reinforce previous arguments for the emergence of a postmodern military and culture (Figure 2), and a contemporary military advisory toolkit (see Figure 3) (Hajjar, 2014a, 2014b). This particular study adds to this series of articles by enriching the case for an emergent postmodern military and culture by

discussing findings about advisor–linguist relationships, which illuminate unique and applicable qualities of the contemporary advising mission. Current combat advisors serve as lethal warriors and also peacekeeper-diplomats who evince cultural and interpersonal savvy. Military advisors build nuanced and personalized relationships with linguists as a prerequisite to establishing rapport with foreign counterparts and advancing the mission. Instead of rigidly conforming to the orderly, objective, formal, hierarchical (senior-subordinate), and generic features that commonly characterize relationships in the modern and late modern military, current advisor–linguist relationships reveal substantial ambiguity, subjectivity, informality, flatness, tensions and contradictions, and more custom-made interactions and relations indicative of a postmodern military. Spontaneity, creativity, individualized decision-making (sometimes in contradiction to stated doctrine or regulations), and situated, contextualized on the job learning often occurring in communities of practice (such as units comprised of advisors and linguists) permeate this study’s core findings and support the argument for a nascent postmodern U.S. military and culture. Beyond the case of military advising, the growing set of contemporary military missions (e.g., a range of peace-oriented operations, infrastructure building, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, etc.) often requiring the effective employment of linguists and sophisticated cross-cultural orientations produce changes in the organization’s culture, which moves the United States and other advanced military’s modernist cultures toward emergent postmodern military culture and form (Sookernany, 2012).⁷

Future Research

This section forwards recommendations for future research about contemporary military advisors and linguists. Military advisors’ viewpoints in the advising mission in the post-9/11 campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly take center stage in this study’s findings; thus, future research should seek to more deeply explore linguists’ vantages and their employment in different missions around the world to learn more about the nuances of the linguists’ role in various contexts. These fresh perspectives would corroborate or contradict and expand the findings reported in this article about the role of military linguists, and how soldiers and linguists interact to accomplish various tasks. Further, studies of active duty military linguists (e.g., 09L in the U.S. Army) would also provide useful insights. A systematic examination of international armed forces’ lessons learned about linguists would also constitute worthwhile research. These proposals for future studies would not only enhance our understanding of contemporary military linguists but would also sharpen comprehension of the nascent postmodern military and its culture.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the blind reviewers and editorial staff for their beneficial reviews and feedback, which enhanced this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. See Remi M. Hajjar (2014b). This paper draws heavily from many sections of this article as a framework to forward the findings about linguists.
2. This project reveals that active duty U.S. military members, military reservists, National Guardsmen, government civilians (from numerous organizations), and civilian contractors all serve as contemporary U.S. military advisors.
3. The vast majority of cases in this study involve linguists. A very small number of reported cases ensued where the advisor did not utilize a linguist because the foreign counterpart spoke English sufficiently.
4. The findings about the importance of subjectivity in defining advisory success and the folly of overemphasizing objective or precise measures of effectiveness links to Sooker-many's (2012) discussion of similar assessment processes in the contextualist perspective, which breaks with universalist notions that demand absolutes, rules, and total objectivity.
5. The findings section uses a series of data quotes to highlight the major subthemes and patterns. The source of data is marked at the end of each data quote entry as survey, interview, field notes, or document data.
6. This study also reveals the need for advisors to consider their own cultural backgrounds (e.g., unique English accents) when trying to find a suitable linguist; advisors sometimes overlook this point.
7. Sookermany (2012) discusses how contemporary militaries transform toward a postmodern form by incorporating a constructionist perspective that includes more intricate and flexible soldier skill sets, which supports this project's argument for the rise of sophisticated cultural tools in emergent postmodern western armed forces.

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