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U.S. Embassy

Tripoli, Libya



Keynote Address at the 5th Annual Translation Conference

The Academy of Graduate Studies – Janzoor, Libya **November 18th, 2009**

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very pleased to be here with you today.

First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Saleh Ibrahim and the Academy of Graduate Studies for inviting me to speak at the 5th Annual Translation Conference here in Tripoli.

This Academy and its professors have played a significant role in American and Libyan relations over the last ten years – and I believe it is fitting that I am speaking at a translation conference today.

A group of Libyan academics from this very institute began the exchange of dialogue between the Washington and Tripoli – a true work of translation between two worlds that had been cut off from one another for three decades.

It is an honor to be addressing so many distinguished Libyan and international academics and scholars from the Academy, from Al-Fateh University, Garyounis University, October 7th University, and many others.

My presence here today and our continuing cooperation and partnership with academic institutions throughout Libya are symbols of the renewed commitment that the United States has made to building a new relationship with the Muslim and Arab worlds based on the language of mutual respect and understanding.

Through academic forums such as this, we are fulfilling part of the greater vision that President Obama laid out in Cairo. For it was at Cairo University, one of the oldest institutes of higher learning in the world, that in June 2009 he called for a greater exchange of cultural, educational, and academic ideas and programs among nations throughout the globe.

In a word, he called for a better translation of the universal values that America believes in.

And that is what we are here to discuss today: translation.

A translation of languages, of cultures, and of people that is at the core of the US-Libyan relationship.



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To be quite honest, I at first hesitated at the idea of speaking at a conference of this nature for fear that I would not have anything additional to contribute to the linguistic and academic discussion surrounding translation.

However, I realized that translation is a tool which the Embassy and I use every day to further the diplomatic goals of the United States.

While preparing for this conference, I came across a few very interesting references that capture the essence of the art of translation. The connectedness of diplomacy and translation is perhaps best captured by the quotation of the famous English playwright Anthony Burgess when he said,

“Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.”

One could very much describe the art of diplomacy in the same manner – successful diplomacy lies in the proper translation of one culture to another.

My favorite description of translation comes from the Spanish Master himself, Miguel Cervantes when he wrote that,

“Translation is the other side of the tapestry.” (La traducción es el otro lado de la tapiz)

You see, translation is what gives art its beauty, poetry its meaning, and music its significance.

Likewise, diplomacy gives meaning to the words and actions of nations in a way that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers.

Translation and diplomacy are inseparable threads of the same tapestry.

The use of translation throughout the history of diplomacy, particularly in relation to written correspondence between governments and nations, provides unique insight into the world of international relations.

Historians and linguists have taken turns pointing to the various reasons for the use of one vernacular over another. One often hears the argument that one language is more suitable or flexible and therefore better equipped to the art of diplomacy.

However, history shows that the idea of language itself is not immune to geopolitics. A careful study of the history of language and diplomacy reveals that it is not a language’s syntax or conjugation that leads to the domination or preference of one language over another, but rather the political and economic influence of the nation-state to which that language belongs.



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In fact it was at a conference in Malta very similar to this one that Ambassador Stanko Nick highlighted that, over the last twenty centuries, the following languages have been used as diplomatic vernacular: Chinese, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Italian, Dutch, German, French, and English. This wide range of languages demonstrates that linguistic and semantic reasons are not decisive in determining a diplomatic *lingua-franca*.¹

There is no question that over the last several centuries, contact – both direct and indirect – between peoples and nations has increased dramatically. The world has become smaller, giving way to the “global village.”

And the need to assert one’s beliefs and positions in one’s own language has become greater and greater.

All of this has led to an increased awareness of the significance of language – both in words and in actions – and the diplomacy that translates their meaning from one culture to the next.

Of course, the greatest amount of evidence for this lies in Europe where for centuries Latin dominated as the common written language of courts and diplomacy.

Professor Dietrich Kappeler summarized this well when he traced the primacy of diplomatic European correspondence from Latin to English.

Latin eventually gave way to the use of French in the 18th and 19th centuries and reached such a point of dominance that even diplomatic correspondence exchanged between the United Kingdom and the United States remained in French well into the 20th century.

The dominance of English continued to expand throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries and English has undoubtedly become the leading language not only of diplomacy, but of business, trade, and the Internet.²

However, we have witnessed a further phenomenon: *The Democratization of the English Language*. Thanks to the work of translators, linguists, and polyglots such as you, the proprietorship of the English language has been broken, no longer belonging to just one Nation or group of nations.

¹ (“Use of Language in Diplomacy,” *Language and Diplomacy*, Malta: DiploProjects, 2001); <http://www.diplomacy.edu/language/Translation/default.htm>

² (“*Texts in Diplomacy*,” *Language and Diplomacy*, Malta: DiploProjects, 2001); <http://www.diplomacy.edu/language/Translation/default.htm>



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However, it is interesting to see that even as the world undoubtedly has become more an English-speaking world, peoples' awareness as to the importance of language and translation has also increased.

For example:

The United Nations was formed in 1948 having five official languages: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and eventually added a sixth: Arabic.

The European Union was established based on the principle of language equality and every document is translated into all twelve official languages.

The culmination of the importance of language and translation within a more and more globalized world was the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights signed in Barcelona under the auspices of the UNESCO.

Today in Libya, due to the expansive international business and foreign investment that has come into the country over the last 5 years, you are able to hear Arabic, English, French, Italian, Chinese, and even Portuguese on the streets and in the marketplaces and in the classrooms.

The increase in languages within a country as well as the ability of one's citizens to communicate across a variety of cultures and languages, in my estimation, is a sign of tremendous progress.

Based on the high caliber of students I have met in Libya and the quality of instruction, I am confident that Libya is making great strides in the right direction.

I wish you all the best as you continue this discussion of the essential art of translation. And I look forward to deepening the partnership between the United States and the Libya's highly-esteemed institutes of higher education.

And, it is my hope that next year, at the 6th Annual Conference on Translation, we will have the honor of welcoming and sponsoring several experts from the United States.

Thank you