



NATO photo_62582

NATO Headquarters, Brussels, in the snow, 02 December 2010.

LANGUAGE AND INTEROPERABILITY IN NATO: THE BUREAU FOR INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE CO-ORDINATION (BILC)

by Rick Monaghan

Introduction

The complexity of mounting operations in a multinational context is enormous. Experience in Libya has underlined some of the more obvious problems – coordination of supply chains, compatibility of refuelling systems, and coherence in gathering and communicating intelligence, as examples. But challenges to effective interoperability have existed within NATO from the start. In theory, communications ought to be seamless, and all systems, hard and soft, should be compatible. But in operations, the seemingly irrelevant kinks and crevices become threats to both internal security and the security of non-combatants. At the basic level of language, establishing and maintaining a shared communication system is fundamental. After more than a half-century in being, and given the new memberships and affiliations in the Alliance, NATO is still wrestling with the issue of language itself. This is not surprising, given that language is the most complex of human behaviours. However, there has been steady progress and increasingly positive results after years of coordinated effort and commitment.

Multinational exercises in the 1950s brought language standards to the fore. NATO started flexing its muscles with a series of international exercises to demonstrate its capacity to respond to Soviet aggression in north-western and south-eastern Europe. Exercise *Rainbow* (1950) involved the US, UK, and France, and was followed by *Holdfast* (1952) with the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, France, and the US participating. *Mainbrace* (1952), conceived by Eisenhower, identified some significant gaps in the joint language of command and led to identification of a need for standards in gunnery, refuelling, and supply at sea. In 1957, an ambitiously-massive series of exercises and simulations stretched in a 8000 kilometre arc from northern Norway to south-western Turkey, and it involved the US, UK, Canada, France, the Netherlands, and Norway in *Strike Back*. This naval exercise comprised 200 ships, over 600 aircraft, and 75,000 personnel in the North Atlantic. *Deep Water* saw the landing of 10,000 US Marines at

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Gallipoli, and *Counter Punch* tested air operations and air defence operations in central Europe. There were dozens of exercises conducted by NATO forces throughout the decade. At the time, the stakes were high. Both antagonists had nuclear capability, other nations were developing that capability, and the ideological war was erupting in the discrete conflicts of Korea and south-east Asia, while both super powers jockeyed for power and influence in the Middle East and Africa. Concerted and joint international exercises were seen as preparation for the inevitable operations that loomed in an uncertain future, and the lessons learned from these exercises initiated a rigorous development of standards in all aspects of military engagement and collaboration.

Today, those exercises continue; the pace has not slackened, but more of these exercises are now conducted virtually and demanding different communication strategies and skills. While threats from stable states have diminished considerably, NATO operations continue to demand a high level of commitment to standardizing materiel, equipment, command structures, rapid and precise communication, and collaborative training and education. NATO forces contribute substantially to UN operations, and KFOR, ISAF, *Unified Protector* are daily reminders of NATO's own operational tempo.

In 2012, the future of NATO is as challenging as it has been for decades. Defence allocations have declined dramatically, and continue to decrease in Europe and North America. In 2011, former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called for a much greater commitment from European partners with respect to their own defence.

Looking ahead, to avoid the very real possibility of collective military irrelevance, member nations must examine new approaches to boosting combat capabilities – in procurement, in training, in logistics, in sustainment. While it is clear NATO members should do more to pool military assets, such 'Smart Defense' initiatives are not a panacea. In the final analysis, there is no substitute for nations providing the resources necessary to have the military capability the Alliance needs when faced with a security challenge. Ultimately, nations must be responsible for their fair share of the common defense.¹



NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, 20 October 2012

NATO photo _90663

“In 2012, the future of NATO is as challenging as it has been for decades”

In the summer of 2011, the Secretary-General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, reminded the international community of the constant need for readiness in the face of destabilizing influences, and the Chicago Summit of May 2012 emphasized the immediate need for a shift to Smart Defense.² Of interest to those hundreds of managers and educators engaged in language education and training throughout the Alliance as they watched their concerted efforts threatened by budgetary restrictions, the Chicago Summit referred specifically to an expansion of education and training: “We will expand education and training of our personnel, complementing in this way essential national efforts.”³

By 2013, it is expected that the Alliance's Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) will have taken on the responsibility for all training and education within NATO.⁴

An integral component of enhanced interoperability is the standardization of language training, education, and assessment on the one hand, and accurate Standardized Language Profiles in NATO units on the other. The key contributor in this enterprise is the little understood Bureau for International Language Coordination (BILC). This short history of BILC will look at the early years and the efforts to set linguistic standards, the expansion of BILC following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the challenges facing the organization on the next decade.



The Canadian Press, AP, 2559951 by Lionel Cironneau

Berliners celebrate as East Germans flood through the partially-dismantled Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz, 12 November 1989.

BILC is an association of representatives from nations and NATO bodies that co-ordinates language policy, programs, standards, management, and assessment within the Alliance. It has been active since its inception almost a half-century ago in sharing best practices in language education and training among its members and in advising NATO on ways and means of standardizing language practices to improve effectiveness and efficiency in operations and staffing. From 1978 to 2011, BILC was associated with NATO's Joint Services Sub-Group (JSSG), but the reorganization of the NATO Training Group (NTG) in 2011 put an end to that arrangement. BILC is now an advisory body attached directly to Joint Force Trainer (JFT) at SACT Headquarters in Norfolk, Virginia.

BILC Early Years

Eltham Palace is located just south of Greenwich on the road from London to Kent. From 1944 until 1992, it was occupied by British Army educational units. The Institute of Army Education was designated by the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) Memorandum 15/06/7, dated 26 July 1966, as the home of the Secretariat of a new language advisory body comprised of NATO members. The formation of the Bureau for International Language Co-ordination (BILC) as "... an international body committed to fostering common interests in

language training" was a response to a need recognized several years earlier for a co-ordination of efforts. The name itself was proposed at a previous conference at Mannheim, Germany, "... after multi-lateral private discussion, as a neutral, self-explanatory title with an easily remembered and pronounceable abbreviation."⁵ I suspect that the name was coined over several pints and the proposed acronym, with its less-than-reassuring homonym, initially drew beery guffaws. Nevertheless, the name and the organization have withstood the test of time.

Eltham Palace was the home of BILC from 1967 to until 1973. From 1962 through 1966, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) recognized the need to help each other in language training. The numbers of language teachers and managers is quite small, relative to national defence resources, and the constant design and redesign of language learning materials, approaches to teaching and learning, and even awareness of rapidly changing concepts of what language *is* and how it *is learned* require more resources than any single nation can support. Collaboration broadened expertise and experience, and reduced duplicated effort, as well as costs for research and development. The United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) and SHAPE hosted conferences which focused upon language training in 1962, 1963, and 1964, and two more conferences were hosted at Eltham Palace in 1965 and 1966. It was agreed by the delegates to the 1966 conference that a formal body to coordinate military language training efforts in the community of NATO be established. SHAPE was seen by some as the ideal sponsor of a language training advisory body, but the UK MoD stepped in when SHAPE demurred at the additional toll on its limited resources.⁶ The responsibilities of the new body were to publish an annual bulletin, convene an annual conference, and encourage members to share reports on research and development with respect to language education and management. Today's BILC⁷ continues to fulfill that core intention.

Five nations agreed to participate in 1966,⁸ and they were followed quickly by three more in 1967.⁹ The first two BILC conferences were held at Eltham Palace in January and December 1967. In 1981, the Secretariat of BILC passed from the UK to Germany. Current membership, excluding observer nations and NATO bodies, with their year of joining, is as follows:

- 1966: founding members are France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- 1967: Belgium, Canada, Netherlands
- 1975: SHAPE and IMS/NATO (non-voting members)
- 1978: Portugal
- 1983: Turkey
- 1984: Denmark and Greece
- 1985: Spain
- 1993: Norway



Language issues were the least of the embryonic NATO alliance's problems in early-postwar Europe – Berlin Airlift, June 1948-May 1949.

The 1960s witnessed a new Europe emerging, simultaneous with the Cold War, the Berlin Blockade, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the dismantling of Empire, and nuclear proliferation. The Cuban Missile Crisis brought focus upon the North Atlantic as a whole, and the need for interoperability of forces became more than a topic of debate. It became urgent that fluency in the languages of friends and enemies, English, French, German and Russian, be addressed by training establishments. In the words of one British delegate, "...the British reputation for shouting more loudly to assist the foreigner to understand, which had been so surprisingly effective in the past, suddenly appeared to raise a few problems."¹⁰ Lessons were learned from massive joint exercises through the 1950s, and a shift in focus from formal instruction in syntax and morphology to actually using a shared operational language was under way. It was somewhat of a relief for training establishments that the language of training for exercises and operations defaulted to English when the French withdrew from NATO military structures in 1966.¹¹ To be sure, it was a different NATO then than the one that presently exists.

From the outset, the responsibilities of BILC were straightforward: the publication of the *BILC Bulletin* to disseminate "information on developments in the field of language training,"¹² and organizing an annual conference. Each nation was to submit an occasional report on its language training organization, instructional techniques, and its production of language learning materials.

Unremarkably, each nation was applying its own standards and all used different learning materials (textbooks, workbooks, audio-tapes, and handouts) yet similar methodologies. At this point, these consisted of teacher-centred instruction supplemented by language labs – the approach was labelled audio-lingual and audio-visual. Canada, adapting to the newly-minted bilingual policy of the federal government, was the exception in that it was in the process of customizing imported learning materials and methodologies. It had purchased French learning material, *Voix et image de France (VIF or the méthode de Saint-Cloud)*, and was redeveloping those materials for the *laboratoire de langues*, while



SHAPE Headquarters, Casteau, Belgium

exploring another methodology developed in Canada (*Langue française internationale* or *LFI*) and a range of other materials, none of which alone could quite meet the needs of its clientele.¹⁴ In Canada, the English language materials and their embedded teaching methods were purchased from Harvard.¹⁵ The British training establishments were using their own rudimentary texts (phrase books developed by the British Army of the Rhine), the French had developed a sound academic curriculum (*VIF*), and the Americans were ‘ahead of the pack’ in establishing standards of assessment, as well as learning materials. By 1966, the English Language School had been subsumed by the Defence Language Institute, and had produced some 50 texts in *The American Language* series, complemented by about six hundred audio tapes.¹⁶ The American experience in assessment, from yet another branch of the US government, informed NATO language standards proposed by BILC over the course of the decade between 1966 and 1976. Today, STANAG 6001 *Language Proficiency Levels* is in its fourth iteration.

The *BILC Bulletin* was edited by the staff at Eltham Palace, but published by the *Übersetzerdienst der Bundeswehr* in Mannheim, and subsequently, by the *Bundessprachenamt*. This easy collaboration between

and among national authorities is a hallmark of BILC. The hefty volumes have been replaced in recent years by CDs initially, and now flash drives, but almost all are available on-line at the BILC website.¹⁷ The shift in technology has also led to the temporary demise of the *BILC Bulletin*. It is now an annual scholarly publication, and the annual report is morphing into a database of language training and education opportunities for the Alliance.

Advances in methodology and the development of learning materials are chronicled in the *Bulletin*. The move from the audio-lingual approach (lots of drill) to the communicative approach (lots of collaborative talking and listening) was gradual, but the latter approach, complemented by traditional formal teaching for written language, has become embedded in most NATO military language education and training centres. Each new learning technology challenges prevailing methodology and initiates a new iteration of program design and implementation. Current work being conducted by the Defense Language Institute Foreign

“With the standing up of the Partners for Peace (PfP) programs and subsequent agreements and initiatives, the active membership of BILC doubled over a relatively short period.”

Language Center in Monterey, California is reducing training time through new learning techniques and more effective program management, improving retention rates, and improving the maintenance of acquired skills. Canada is conducting research in the use of virtual environments to encourage learning and maintaining proficiency. Other education and training establishments will incorporate lessons learned by the US Defense Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) and other military establishments as they develop their own responses to national and international language requirements and expectations.



Eltham Palace

English Heritage Photo Library, Image Reference #5136379, by Damian Grady

Expansion 1989 onward

The dismantling of the Warsaw Pact ushered in a series of requests to join both NATO and the European Union (EU). Criteria for joining NATO are formal and strict, and to include developing programs to teach and assess English language for international operations and staffing. With the standing up of the Partners for Peace (PfP) programs and subsequent agreements and initiatives, the active membership of BILC doubled over a relatively short period. New NATO nations joined as full members as soon as they could, but had begun working with BILC well beforehand. Twelve nations have joined NATO since 1999:

- 1999 - Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland
- 2004 - Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia
- 2009 - Albania, Croatia

With the goal of standardizing practice, in 1994, BILC initiated Professional Seminars for NATO and PfP nations, covering themes such as *Co-operation in Language Training with Emphasis on Testing and Proficiency Testing; Designing and Instructing Military Language Materials for Special Purposes; Language Training for Multinational Peace Support Operations and Testing Issues; Management of Language Programs; Task-Based Approaches in Language for Operational Purposes (LOP) and Performance Based Testing; Languages: The Key to Interoperability; and On the Threshold of a Decade of PfP: Lessons Learned in Language Training*. In Canada, as Force Compression took hold in the mid-1990s, excess capacity was quickly taken up by Associate Deputy Minister-Policy (ADM[Pol]) to provide English language education and training programs, and eventually teacher training, to PfP nations. Since then, we have seen about 5000 graduates of these programs return to their home countries, or to international postings.

Under the current terms of reference (dated 2012, but currently under review), PfP nations, Mediterranean Dialogue nations, nations from the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Global Partners (Australia in particular) and NATO bodies attend as observers, and, although welcome to contribute to the discussions of the Steering Committee, they are excluded from voting. All, however, are quite active in the business of standardizing language education, training, and assessment for general linguistic proficiency, as well as for specialized uses, and they regularly contribute papers and presentations at conferences, professional seminars, and workshops. All are equally concerned with governance and management of language programs.

Linguistics 101

The challenge of assessing linguistic proficiency arose early in the *Bulletin*, and it remains a challenge. With the expansion of NATO and partners, the issue of language assessment became urgent and challenging. What is to be measured, how, why, and by whom? A little background may be helpful to our readers at this juncture.

Languages are complex communicative behaviours that bind communities. A language is a matrix of conventions developed over time. A language community can be quite small, such as some of the First Nations languages in North America or elsewhere in the world that are dying out, or massive, such as English, which appears to be growing daily. They are unique expressions of communities and cultures, but they exhibit general characteristics. Primarily, language is spoken or signed. Writing is a technological innovation that attempts to freeze expression into an artefact. (If you do not consider writing or reading to be a technological innovation, try writing something without an instrument of some sort.) Spoken language consists of **phonemes**, conventions of noises that are understood by others in the community, and shaped by the movement of breath through throat and mouth and nasal passages, and stopped or impeded by muscle and bone, what are referred to as the points of articulation (tongue, teeth, vocal chords, hard and soft palate, and glottis). Depending upon where you are in the world, English has

about 45 phonemes, 20 of which are vowels. Think of the distinction between the central Canadian pronunciation of *route*, and the central-US or general-Australian pronunciation of the same word to recognize that there is a range of conventional noises associated with meaning. French phonemes differ from English phonemes; an English speaker will often have difficulty hearing distinctions in sounds (and thus cannot replicate those sounds) that a French speaker recognizes immediately. With respect to Finnish, the length of the medial vowel sound will distinguish between two vastly different meanings of the word *thule* (*fire* and *ice*); most English speakers cannot even hear the distinction because they are not accustomed to listening for it. **Morphemes** are the smallest units of speech and they change (*morph*) internally, or by the addition or removal of infixes, prefixes, and suffixes to indicate number, gender, tense, voice, mood, or function in an utterance. The [s] or [z] morpheme added to English words usually indicates either plurality of a nominal or the third-person singular form of a verb. The **syntax** of a language is the arrangement of elements to make sense. In English, one marches words along in an expected order to express the relationships between them. Modifiers usually precede the words they modify, and noun phrases normally precede verbs of which they are the subjects. In French, the order is similar but different, in that modifiers often *follow* rather than *precede* the words they modify, and verb placement is less rigid. The **lexis** of a language is the word-hoard from which speakers draw upon. It can be quite narrowly defined by a community that seeks to distinguish itself from the larger mass – such as teens or sociologists – or it can comprise a wealth of expressions understood by most speakers. A word is often associated with other words or concepts or has a ritual meaning that becomes a part of the **semantics**, or symbolic dimension of a language. The phrase ‘Henderson’s goal’ calls up a particular meaning for Canadians of a certain age that is lost on English speakers of different cultures and different age ranges. **Tonics**, or the tones of a language, usually referred to as ‘suprasegmentals,’ alter meaning as well. Finally, language is defined by its **graphics**, the conventional representation of the sounds or meanings with which speakers are familiar and expect to hear. The spelling of English appears chaotic if one is not aware that printing, which virtually froze the convention of spelling, was introduced to London just as the dialects that were recognized as English were undergoing another radical shift in pronunciation. We are thus left with frozen forms like *knight*, or *brought*, or *dough* that defy logic unless one realizes that the old spelling accurately represented the sounds of the words for the merchant class of London in the middle to the end of the 15th Century. The **construct** of a language is analysed through the lenses of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and lexis and graphics, but the *use* of a language is analysed through many other lenses: psycholinguistics (the broad field of psychological and neurobiological analyses of how language is acquired and used), and sociolinguistics (which, broadly speaking, analyses how language effects social distinctions), are the dominant approaches to decoding language skills for evaluative purposes, while cognitive sciences and management of language policy inform language program design and delivery. This side-trip into the terminology of language analysis serves as an introduction to the subject of language assessment.

Assessment

The first challenge faced by the membership of BILC was defining for themselves what they meant by an appropriate level of language for operational purposes.¹⁸ What was appropriate, how could it be defined, and, more importantly, how could it be accurately and appropriately measured? Could the same definitions be applied to all languages; could the same measurement tools be used? In the case of the language of military operations, where lives of combatants and onlookers are at stake, what level of precision needs to be applied to ensure accurate and meaningful ratings of military members assigned to tasks? What is the real cost of unclear policy and poorly worded direction?

During the 1960s and 1970s, both Canada and the US had been wrestling with language standards and had some concrete recommendations to make to BILC. The Canadian Public Service had been obliged to define adequate proficiency in both English and French, and to develop reliable assessment instruments that had immediate impact upon careers, and were thus liable to legal challenge. Meanwhile, the US had been developing definitions of linguistic proficiency and assessment instruments for foreign languages. Both nations provided BILC with the groundwork that was further developed into the first edition of STANAG 6001 issued in 1978. Martha Herzog from DLIFLC chronicled the process in the Conference Proceedings of the 1999 BILC meeting held in the Netherlands.¹⁹

But once a standard has been set, the problems of how to interpret and apply that standard come into play. The level descriptors that constitute STANAG 6001 are guidelines for national language training and testing units. They identify the components of language (outlined earlier) that are simultaneously targets for training and assessment baselines, but they do so in the context of communication. In the sample descriptor below, you will note that there is no specific military reference. The descriptor, and tests that derive from it, are designed to identify general language proficiency – the ability to communicate over a broad range of subjects in different circumstances, with different audiences. It is a series of ‘can-do’ statements that identify, not only what a candidate *can* do, but will likely be able to *continue* to do.

There are six proficiency levels:

- Level 0 - No proficiency
- Level 1 - Survival
- Level 2 - Functional
- Level 3 - Professional
- Level 4 - Expert
- Level 5 - Highly-articulate native

The levels are used to identify language training and assessment requirements of troop contributing nations for

NATO operations, and for staffing international headquarters. They are also used to identify minimal language standards set by NATO’s International Staff for nations wishing to contribute to NATO operations, or to engage themselves with NATO in other capacities. BILC teams are regularly invited to advise nations on the management and design of military language programs in order to meet NATO language requirements defined by the International Staff, or by the International Military Staff.

The levels apply to four skill sets:

- Skill L [CP in French] Listening
- Skill S [EO in French] Speaking
- Skill R [CE in French] Reading
- Skill W [EE in French] Writing

Scores are reported numerically in that order. Therefore, a level of 3232 identifies the holder as having a Professional proficiency in Listening and Reading (the receptive skills), and a Functional proficiency in Speaking and Writing (the active skills).

The excerpt that follows is the STANAG 6001 level descriptor for Speaking, one of the four skill sets, at the Professional proficiency level (Level 3):

Able to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics. Can discuss particular interests and special fields of competence with considerable ease.

“During the 1960s and 1970s, both Canada and the US had been wrestling with language standards and had some concrete recommendations to make to BILC.”

Can use the language to perform such common professional tasks as answering objections, clarifying points, justifying decisions, responding to challenges, supporting opinion, stating and defending policy. Can demonstrate language competence when conducting meetings, delivering briefings or other extended and elaborate monologues, hypothesising, and dealing with unfamiliar subjects and situations. Can reliably elicit information

and informed opinion from native speakers. Can convey abstract concepts in discussions of such topics as economics, culture, science, technology, philosophy as well as his/her professional field. Produces extended discourse and conveys meaning correctly and effectively. Use of structural devices is flexible and elaborate. Speaks readily and in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Without searching for words or phrases, can use the language clearly and relatively naturally to elaborate on concepts freely and make ideas easily understandable to native speakers. May not fully understand some cultural references, proverbs, and allusions, as well as implications of nuances and idioms, but can easily repair the conversation. Pronunciation may be obviously foreign. Errors may occur in low frequency or highly complex structures characteristic of a formal style of speech.

However, occasional errors in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary are not serious enough to distort meaning, and rarely disturb the native speaker.

At this level of proficiency, conventional phonology, morphology, and syntax are not considered of paramount importance. This descriptor could apply aptly to the language of many competent native speakers. Higher level skills of organizing thought and argument, ease of expression, and a broad scope of discourse is much more important than pronunciation. Although an accent and occasional lapses may be apparent (phonology and morphology, and perhaps syntax and lexis), it does not detract from the high quality of expressive confidence (a psycholinguistic dimension) and cultural awareness (sociolinguistic dimension).

Compare the above with an excerpt from Speaking at the Survival level (Level 1):

Can typically satisfy simple, predictable, personal and accommodation needs; meet minimum courtesy, introduction, and identification requirements; exchange greetings; elicit and provide predictable, skeletal biographical information; communicate about simple routine tasks in the workplace; ask for goods, services, and assistance; request information and clarification; express satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and confirmation. Topics include basic needs such as ordering meals, obtaining lodging and transportation, shopping. Native speakers used to speaking with non-natives must often strain, request repetition, and use real-world knowledge to understand this speaker.

“Higher level skills of organizing thought and argument, ease of expression, and a broad scope of discourse is much more important than pronunciation.”

overall score indicates an individual’s level of proficiency. Assessment is conducted nationally. As much as possible, nations separate *teaching staff* from *assessment staff* to avoid negative test ‘washback,’ that is, the practice of ‘teaching to the test.’ Based upon the assessment results assigned by nations, members are assigned to international staff or operations. Occasionally, the discrepancy between national scores and the required linguistic proficiency leaves something to be desired. The gap in effectiveness in interoperability was analysed in detail by NATO’s Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre in Naples, which identified language as a major shortfall in 2010. This shortfall includes not only non-English speakers using English on operations, but the persistent use of non-standard English by native speakers in an international setting. This situation has not changed noticeably in the interim. Another analysis conducted by BILC members in 2010 indicated that part of the problem was the inaccurate Standardized Language Profiles (SLP) attached to NATO positions. As SLPs become unattainable, nations do their best to fill positions with members who are barely qualified, and the inflation of requirement is met by the consequent inflation of profiles in a rising spiral of real costs.



BILC Seminar, 2011

Photo courtesy of the author/NATO

At this level, the weaknesses in conventional phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis and semantics are apparent, as are psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic appropriateness. Proficiency is minimal.

Sub-Levels between 1 and 3 are 1+, 2, and 2+. ²⁰ Trained and experienced oral interaction raters *can*, and regularly *do*, discriminate among these levels with consistent accuracy. Results of assessments by untrained or inexperienced raters, on the other hand, are inconsistent and unpredictable. ²¹

Listening skills, reading comprehension, and writing skills have parallel level descriptors. In combination, the

What is being done to encourage standardized interpretation and application of the standard? To meet the demands for standardized assessment in an expanded NATO, raters are trained at a central school in Garmisch Partenkirchen, Germany, to apply STANAG 6001 norms. ²² The Language Testing Seminar is a two-week seminar developed by BILC, offered several times a year, aimed at developing competency in the development and administration of language proficiency tests based upon STANAG 6001 Edition 4. The Advanced Language Training Seminar is a three week course for experienced testers. It covers program management as well as more in-depth elaboration of the purposes and means of conducting assessment.

To provide tools for local authorities to correct ‘rater drift’ (inconsistencies) within nations, in 2003, BILC initiated a project called the Benchmark Advisory Test (BAT).²³ Initially a one-skill benchmark to allow nations and NATO bodies to align their results of reading assessments with an objective norm, the BAT was expanded through services (complemented by BILC engagement) contracted by Allied Command Transformation to provide benchmarks in all four linguistic skills. The BAT has been used by several nations to align national test results to STANAG 6001 norms.

In addition to the Professional Seminars, Language Testing Seminars, and Advanced Testing Seminars, since 2009, more localized seminars are held by neighbouring nations to address specific and common concerns in assessment and learning. The most recent was held in Copenhagen in September 2012, where workshops dealing with providing learning opportunities for developing listening skills and assessing those skills were hosted by the Danish Ministry of Defence. Others have been hosted in the Balkans (Zagreb and Sarajevo) and the Baltic (Stockholm). These intensive workshops encourage common understanding and procedures.

Throughout its close to 50-year history, BILC has continued to fulfill its goals: to host meetings, publish research and findings; encourage multi-lateral and bi-lateral collaboration, and advise members (and now *partners*) on management and governance of language programs. BILC has no budget of its own, but does rely on Allied Command Transformation, the International Staff, and other bodies to provide subsidies to encourage participation of Partners for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and concerned nations. Attendance at the annual Conference numbers around a hundred language professionals from ‘twenty-plus’ nations and NATO bodies such as SHAPE and IS each spring, graciously hosted by different nations, and supported by voluntary national contributions. Professional Seminars are equally well attended. The LTS and ALTS are fully booked well in advance, and the locally-hosted seminars dealing with individual issues have been successful in pulling together regional professionals who could not normally attend the professional development activities of the larger international meetings. BILC continues to sponsor the NATO standard for languages, STANAG 6001 Edition 4, provides regular training opportunities for assessors and designers of assessment tools, provides advice on program design, management, and governance through assistance visits to nations requesting its aid, and provides liaison on language issues to the International staff at their request, as well as formally to ACT. Collaboration among members and partners has allowed the unprecedented rapid development of effective programs in Dari and Pashtu, as well as quick development and distribution of phrasebooks in lesser known languages.

For Canada, BILC provided a sounding board for language program development in the 1980s, a program to which the nation still doggedly adheres, continuing professional

development of testing personnel, ready access to resources for training, education, and assessment that we could not afford on our own, and a Canadian reputation as an honest and expert broker in an area of enquiry, language, that is highly sensitive, and, as Canadians are particularly aware, very political.

The Secretariat of BILC, its executive arm, is currently held by Canada and led by staff from the Canadian Defence Academy in support of CDA’s mission and vision statements, “... to lead Canadian Forces professional development, uphold the profession of arms and champion lifelong learning

to enable operational success,” and to be “... a world leader in military professionalism, leadership and professional development, critical to the operational effectiveness of the Canadian Forces.” The three previous Secretariats have been held by the UK, Germany, and the US. Two current Associate Secretaries from the US (from the previous Secretariat) are located in Garmisch Partenkirchen in

the Partner Language Training Center Europe (PLTCE) at the George Marshall Center. They are responsible for assistance visits and the training of testers.²⁴ Over the past five years, the Secretariat has been witness to a shift in focus of BILC from assessment and the classroom itself to educational systems in general. The passion and professionalism of the contributors to BILC is a hallmark of the organization. Over the next few years, the role of BILC is expected to become more strategic as well as operational. The move from JSSG to ACT demands a much more rapid response time than in the past, especially as ACT is now in the process of reorganizing language education policy to better reflect the principles of Smart Defence. There is little choice: resources are dying up yet demand is increasing, but many nations are still delivering teacher-centred, subject-centred curricula that are wasteful and increasingly irrelevant to new generations of learners. Some potential for strategic changes to come in order to ensure that STANAG 6001 Edition 4 is interpreted and applied consistently across nations and NATO bodies is an analysis of SLPs in NATO headquarters, on-line verification tests of profiles before postings to international HQs, and official recognition and endorsement of courses of study that have a proven track record of success. These steps alone, by encouraging closer adherence to standards, would improve interoperability in short order. Although the gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan seemed to mark a lull in international conflict for NATO, experience has taught us that crises arrive unexpectedly from volatile areas. Interoperability is not a dead issue. BILC will be intimately involved in resolving the continuing issue of language shortfalls in interoperability by providing the advice of a broad spectrum of language professionals working collaboratively in a military environment, and by communicating among ourselves the ways and means of opening opportunities to learn and maintain common language proficiency across nations. BILC’s original mandate, to inform and advise, has never been so crucial.

“For Canada, BILC provided a sounding board for language program development in the 1980s...”





The BILC Conference 13-18 May 2012, Prague

NOTES

1. <http://www.defence.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581> Accessed 7 September 2012.
2. "Smart Defence is at the heart of this new approach. The development and deployment of defence capabilities is first and foremost a national responsibility. But as technology grows more expensive, and defence budgets are under pressure, there are key capabilities which many Allies can only obtain if they work together to develop and acquire them. We therefore welcome the decisions of Allies to take forward specific multinational projects, including for better protection of our forces, better surveillance and better training. These projects will deliver improved operational effectiveness, economies of scale, and closer connections between our forces. They will also provide experience for more such Smart Defence projects in future. But Smart Defence is more than this. It represents a changed outlook, the opportunity for a renewed culture of cooperation in which multinational collaboration is given new prominence as an effective and efficient option for developing critical capabilities." Rasmussen, "NATO after Libya: The Atlantic Alliance in Austere Times," in *Foreign Affairs*. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67915/anders-fogh-rasmussen/nato-after-libya>. Accessed 25 September 2012.
3. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-C3E6796F-71B30D8E/natolive/official_texts_87594.htm?mode=pressrelease. Accessed 31 May 2012.
4. Morton Svindall, "Education and Training: A Harmonized Landscape," in *Transformation* at <http://www.act.nato.int/transformer-2012-01/the-transformer-issue-2012-01>. Accessed 3 October 2012.
5. Damien Bedding, "The origins of BILC up to 1981," asks the question "Why BILC? I quote: '... was proposed at the recent language conference at Mannheim, after multi-lateral private discussions, as a neutral, self-explanatory title with an easily remembered, and pronounceable abbreviation.'" *BB* 1999, p. 9 20.
6. *BB* 1973, p. 11.
7. The BILC website is in the process of migration from CDA to ACT NATO. A link can be found at www.bilc.forces.gc.ca. The mission and vision statements approved in 2010 parallel the original intentions expressed in the memorandum of 1966.
8. The United Kingdom, Federal Republic of Germany, United States, France, and Italy.
9. Belgium, Canada, and the Netherlands. Canada had announced its intention to join in 1966, but only did so formally at the January 1967 conference at Eltham Palace.
10. Damien Bedding, "The Origins of BILC up to 1981," *BB* 1999, p. 1.
11. *BB* 1999, p. 19. SHAPE moved from Paris to Mons, and NATO Headquarters moved to Brussels.
12. Bedding, *Ibid*.
13. Cliff Rose, *BB* 1999, pp. 25-33, provides a summary.
14. "L'enseignement des langues dans la fonction publique du Canada," *BB* 1967, pp. 14 -15. « *Malgré la valeur indéniable de ces deux méthodes, il est évident que, dans leur forme actuelle, ne VIF ni LFI ne répondent entièrement aux besoins de nos étudiants. C'est pourquoi une équipe de chercheurs et de spécialistes travaillent actuellement à combler les lacunes de ces méthodes.* » Clearly, funding was not an issue.
15. *Ibid*.
16. *BB* 1966, p. 53.
17. The files were scattered over the years, but conference proceedings from 1967 to 1999 were digitized by Dr Christopher Hüllen and given to the Canadian Secretariat to mount on the website that had been transferred from DLIFLC to CDA in 2009. There are a few gaps, but these are being filled as materials are resurrected from dusty files and digitized.
18. An excellent primer on language assessment is Bachman and Palmer's *Language Testing in Practice* from the Oxford University Press (2004).
19. Herzog, "An Overview of the United States Government Language Proficiency Scale" *BB* 1999, p. 89, at http://www.bilc.forces.gc.ca/conf/2010/BILC%20Reports%20Archives/1999_BILC%20Report.pdf
20. Within BILC, and in some quarters of NATO, the need to assess level 4 proficiency is seen as too complex and too infrequently required to apply, but the descriptors for the four skill sets are contained in STANAG 6001 Edition 4. A BILC Study Group is attempting to resolve the quandary.
21. Julie Dubeau, *An Exploratory Study of OPI Ratings across NATO Countries Using the NATO STANAG 6001 Scale*, at <http://www.bilc.forces.gc.ca/rp-pt/doc/OPIraterSTUDY.pdf> Accessed 8 November 2011.
22. The course is described at <http://www.bilc.forces.gc.ca/lt-el/index-eng.asp> Accessed 8 Nov 2011.
23. The BAT is described in more detail at <http://www.bilc.forces.gc.ca/lt-el/index-eng.asp> Accessed 8 November 2011.
24. <http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/en/nav-college/nav-col-ptlce.html> Accessed 25 September 2012.