

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: Arabic

UN Library Talks Geneva - "The Power of Languages in Diplomacy" - a discussion between experts in linguistics and interpretation and a diplomat.

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Thank you...

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished presence,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss with you briefly the role of the Arabic language in cultural diplomacy and promoting inter-cultural dialogue.

Every year the United Nations celebrates the Arabic language on the 18th of December in the World Arabic Language day. To promote cultural dialogue and understanding the UN has not shied away from rightly acknowledging the influential role which the Arabic language has played in spreading knowledge and scholarship in medieval times and reviving interest in philosophy, science and the arts. In his most recent visit to Cairo in February, the UN Secretary General also paid tribute to the role of the Arab world and the Arabic language in advancing human knowledge and understanding of all fields of study. Similar to the world renowned scholars and philosophers of Europe, the contributions which Arabic speaking scholars and scientists, such as Avicenna, Ibn Battuta and Edward Said, made, truly changed the world for centuries.

But in order to understand the role of the Arabic language, allow me to share with you first a few facts about it:

According to the United Nations Organization Library, over 200 million people in 22 different countries use Arabic as their first & official language. This wide range makes Arabic the 6th most widely spoken language in the world.

On the 18th of December 1973, Arabic became one of the six official languages of the United Nations (along with Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian). Similar to the other official languages of the UN, there are several different varieties or dialects of Arabic spoken in different communities, however there is one version of Arabic which all speakers understand easily, that is the Modern Standard Arabic.

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The importance of cultural diplomacy:

According to experts, language is one the most important instruments of soft power. Joseph Nye defined soft power as the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction and compared it with hard power, to achieve aims & objectives. Soft power is the basis of what we call cultural or public diplomacy, the ability to attract both the hearts and minds to increase visibility on the global stage and gain political and economic influence without the use of force. We may describe it as the fourth pillar of diplomacy alongside political, economic, and now, science diplomacy. It is therefore clear to see that learning and loving a language and its culture is an important soft power tool.

The role of Arabic in UN cultural diplomacy:

What then is the role of Arabic in international cultural diplomacy and particularly in the UN?

Personally, I can identify a number of influences: the first is the number and variety of Arabic speaking communities around the world. We tend rightly to associate Arabic with the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab World, however there are significant Arabic speaking communities in countries like Tanzania, Uganda and Nigeria and the horn of Africa in addition to the presence of Arabic speaking communities in the US, Europe, and in Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. Additionally, Arabic studies are booming in universities where non-native speakers of Arabic are learning to speak the language, understand and appreciate Arab culture.

This body of speakers and students of Arabic provides a pool for many UN operations, especially in “hardship posts” in the Middle East and Africa. These include Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Libya, Yemen, South Sudan and Iraq. The UN Department of Field Services (DFS) is employing speakers of Arabic to work in these areas as civil and political affairs officers.

Let me cite an example:

The UN Peace Operations Arabic speakers Campaign Guide describes the jobs of Civil Affairs and Political Affairs officers as the following:

Civil Affairs officers “support conflict resolution, inter-communal dialogue, and institution-building at the local level. They work hand-in-hand with civil society organizations, women's groups, religious leaders, local administration, and with vulnerable groups who are affected by conflict. They are on the frontlines in promoting good governance and accountability to support peace-building and development.”

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Political officers "are the "eyes and ears" of the Mission. They identify trends, weigh options in terms of political risks and opportunities, and build relationships with a wide variety of actors in order to build consensus around the missions' mandates. They are responsible for drafting regular reports on the Mission's progress to the Security Council, for briefing the diplomatic community, and for engaging with Government officials and other stakeholders to make progress on peace agreements and state-building. Political Affairs Officers often have a background in diplomacy, electoral or constitutional affairs, law, public policy, Government, or civil society."

Naturally, these are important 'hands on' jobs, which not only help supporting people in some of the world's crisis points, but also help in offering a gateway to a career in the UN and increasing the linguistic diversity of the organization. The help that Arabic speakers can offer through the UN is an excellent example of how the UN uses soft power to build support for the international community and international peace- building.

Building Empathy and co-operation through the use of Arabic

An obvious reason for the UN to employ more speakers of Arabic on the ground is to identify with those you communicate with by sharing a common language. As the linguist and culture expert, Richard Lewis describes it, "Language is our first and most basic cultural tool for interpreting the nature of the universe." If I can speak to you in your mother tongue I don't just facilitate communication. I can create a common bond of shared values. I can create empathy between myself and those I am here to help, and that in turn builds recognition and appreciation of the UN's work.

This is another reason why the UN has been keen to recruit more speakers of Arabic, especially gender, who can work closely with mothers and children in the field. In 2016, the UN requested applications from speakers of Arabic to support its field development services in a number of countries where Arabic is used as a first language or as a common language of communication. I found it interesting that they were especially interested in people with prior experience in hardship areas and with experiences in other "hardship focused" agencies such as WFP, UNHCR, OCHA UNDP, UNICEF and IOM, as well as volunteer experience with refugees and dealing with natural disasters or working in conflict zones.

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The aesthetic appeal of Arabic:

I have focused on the value of Arabic in United Nations operations on the ground, particularly in conflict zones or hardship areas however Arabic also has its own aesthetic value that draws people to the language and its culture. In his study of nation brand, Simon Anholt makes clear that art, architecture and literature along with music are important intercultural messengers and influence cultural diplomacy through soft power.

In their book on "Cross-cultural Communication: Theory and practice", Brian Hurn and Barry Tomalin quote a former British Council Director General as saying "A visit by the Royal Ballet can be more effective than twenty trade missions", as a way of using cultural diplomacy to increase trade. Speakers of Arabic all over the world respond positively to the rich sound, eloquence and rhetoric of the language especially as expressed through the voices of Oum Kalthoum and Fayrouz. This too acts as culture bridge; - influential, almost unnoticed, but an important soft tool to win hearts and minds in the hands of international leaders and diplomats using Arabic in international communication.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Arabic is a practical tool of communication in hardship zones where the UN is active in peacekeeping and community support missions. Arabic is also an important instrument in the exercise of soft power, of which cultural diplomacy is a part. It operates both implicitly through art and literature and explicitly as a means of communication and expression of a common identity and a common set of values. The more this is promoted both among Arabic speaking nations and beyond, the more openness to interchange and dialogue and in due course to international partnership and cross-regional co-operation will result. Thank you.

References:

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