

The Interpreter as an Agent

SECRET

The assignment of an interpreter with slightly ulterior motives for selected international visits yields a net gain.

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The rather obvious time-honored practice of using interpreters assigned to international exchange delegations as intelligence agents (or, conversely, of getting intelligence personnel assigned as interpreters) has both advantages and disadvantages. If the interpreter makes the most of his intelligence mission, however, and observes some common-sense rules of behavior, there can be a net advantage both in the direct yield of information from such an assignment and in the improvement of an asset in the person of the interpreter. The advantage in immediate information is likely to be limited; the improvement of personal assets can be considerable.

In discussing these advantages we shall assume that the interpreter can be given adequate intelligence training and briefing (or that the intelligence officer is competent as an interpreter, and not compromised). We shall ignore the technical aspects of the interpreter's art and the occupational diseases, nervous indigestion and undernourishment, contracted in his attempts to gulp food while translating banquet conversations. We shall examine his domestic and foreign assignments separately: the advantages and disadvantages of assignment at home and abroad often coincide, but there are also important differences.

Gains on Home Ground

Let us look first at the domestic assignment, where the interpreter is on his own native soil, attached to a group of foreign visitors or delegates. As the communications link between the visitors and their strange surroundings, he possesses a strong psychological advantage in his available option to confine himself strictly to the business portions of the trip, leaving the visitors to fend for themselves in their spare time. Even if they have their own interpreter along, there are a number of matters--shopping, local customs, the availability of services--in which it would be convenient for them to have his help.

Recognizing their dependence on his cooperation for the smooth progress of their visit, they will usually do their best to establish, if not a cordial friendship, at least a good working relationship. A great deal depends on the interpreter himself, of course, but normal friendly overtures on his part will usually be met at least half way by the visitors. Just by being relaxed and perhaps willing to do a small extra favor here and there, he can become accepted as an indispensable member of their family group. An excellent way to break down reserve and promote a free exchange of ideas is to invite the group to his home. (It does not pay for him to be so obliging that he becomes a valet, and it is advisable to establish this principle early in the game.)

Continued friendly gestures are likely to result in time in the establishment of a genuine rapport, with its attendant benefits. If the interpreter is knowledgeable in the field of the official discussions which he is interpreting, he can clarify in private discussions with the visitors some of the ambiguous or contradictory statements made during the official talks. Without appearing too curious or asking too many questions of intelligence purport (he should be particularly circumspect at the outset of a trip, when his bona fides is subject to greatest suspicion), he will sometimes be able to get definitive statements in private which are lacking in the confusion and interruptions of official discussions. It is here that he may bring to bear his training or natural bent for elicitation, whether for official purposes or for his own education.

At the same time the interpreter himself is the target of numerous questions which reveal both intelligence and personal interests on the part of his charges. Their intelligence questions may indicate gaps in

their own service's information, and their personal ones are more broadly useful in showing the preconceived picture of this country that the visitors have brought with them. Although they often realize that their questions betray a lack of sophistication, they are willing to sacrifice dignity to satisfy their burning curiosity. Honest, natural answers, despite the apparent rudeness of some of the questions ("How much do you make? How much are you in debt?"), strengthen the interpreter's position and may lead to even more revealing questions. If the visitors are from a controlled society the very opportunity to put certain kinds of questions is a luxury they cannot afford at home. And when one of them is alone with the interpreter he often shows eagerness to ask questions of a kind not brought up in group discussions.

In all these discussions the interpreter is gaining knowledge which no academic training can give him. First, he is given a glimpse of his own country through the warped glass of foreign misconceptions and propaganda. The image will not be fully that which hostile propagandists have sought to fix, but it will show where they have succeeded and where they have failed. Second, he learns how to get ideas across to these representatives of another culture, learns where he must explain at length and where he can make a telling point in just a few words. Finally, as a sort of synthesis of his experience, he can arrive at some conclusions concerning the visitors' inner thought processes, often quite alien to his own.

In addition to gaining these insights, the interpreter makes what may prove to be useful contacts in future assignments. How potentially useful depends on the spirit in which he parts company with the visitors, but anything short of outright hostility is likely to make them of some value.

Drawbacks and Limitations

The chief disadvantages of domestic assignment for the agent-interpreter lie in the shallowness of his cover. Visitors from Communist countries, in particular, start with a strong presumption that any interpreter is at least working hand in glove with local intelligence or security groups if he is not actually a member of one. The barrier thus

imposed in the initial stages of a trip may break down as rapport is established, but there always remains a lurking suspicion that the interpreter is not what he seems, and the visitors are always on guard against the slightest hint of prying or propaganda. Furthermore, they collect a large file of biographic information on him in the course of their association, material which is certainly delivered to their own security forces. Matching this up with some earlier trace they may have of him may blow his organizational connections.

Another limiting factor is that foreign delegations, particularly from Bloc countries, are drawn from the elite and so not typical of the peoples they represent. The impressions the interpreter receives concerning their beliefs and feelings may not be applicable to their countrymen at home. Though the delegation members may not be as orthodox abroad as on their home ground, where conformity is obligatory, they have a more compelling stake in the regime than the average citizen.

The last disadvantage to be noted depends in large part on the capabilities and limitations of the interpreter himself. It lies in the difficulty of retaining facts and figures in one's head while performing the complicated task of translation. It is possible to store in one's mind only a limited number of figures before the whole delicate structure of memory disintegrates into a jumble of confused statistics which are of no use to anyone. While it is permissible to take notes during long speeches where it is obviously impossible to remember everything said between pauses, this device is not appropriate for short conversations. If the interpreter is caught frantically scribbling notes immediately after a visitor has casually let drop the annual production of some electronic gadget, his usefulness to intelligence has largely evaporated. Furthermore, he has pinpointed an area of intelligence interest. A dash to the toilet after some particularly significant slip on the part of a visitor can sometimes provide privacy for note taking, but too frequent use of this dodge excites embarrassing commiseration or, more often, suspicion.

On the Opponent's Home Field

The foreign assignment differs in many respects from the domestic. On

the profit side, in addition to getting the same positive intelligence take as the domestic interpreter, the interpreter abroad can be an observer, reporting on things which have nothing to do with his linguistic job. If he has had proper training, such observations can be quite valuable. Furthermore, he can acquire a feeling for the country and a sense of what intelligence activities can be undertaken and what cannot. He may, for example, attempt photography in areas on the borderline of legitimacy just to test reaction, or take a stroll before going to bed in order to check surveillance patterns. If he is an area specialist, the trip provides an education which no amount of book learning could give. He confirms certain of his preconceptions while discarding others, and he returns with a far more solid grasp on his specialty than he had previously. The confidence thus gained from firsthand experience is a very valuable asset if he is to be involved in operations against the country in the future.

On the negative side we find all the disadvantages noted in the domestic assignment: the interpreter accompanying a delegation abroad is, if anything, under sharper scrutiny as a probable agent, and should be prepared for a more or less clandestine search of his baggage; his memory is still strained to hold on to useful data; his official foreign contacts are the most loyal stalwarts of the regime; his digestion deteriorates. In addition, he finds himself a prisoner of his cover profession. Whereas the foreign delegation's dependence on him during his domestic assignment led to enlightening discussions, his own party's need for his help, not only on official matters but on everything that requires communication during every waking hour, now obliges him to spend all of his time with his own countrymen. He becomes a communications machine, unable to introduce any of his own ideas or queries into the conversations. Contacts are pretty well limited to those which the hosts have thoughtfully provided for about eighteen out of every twenty-four hours, and a delegation of six-foot Americans accompanied by watchful hosts is not the sort of group which a dissident member of a closed society is likely to approach in order to unload his true feelings about the regime.

Finally, even the diffident admissions of ignorance implicit in questions put to the interpreter on his own home ground are lacking when he goes abroad. Particularly in Communist countries the officials he contacts need to show that they have not been contaminated by his ideology; each tries to out-party-line the rest, less as an effort (usually counter-productive) to influence the visiting delegation than as a demonstration

of his own orthodoxy for the benefit of his comrades. This compulsion precludes any serious discussion about either the hosts' or the visitors' country. During such exhibitions of chest-beating the interpreter is put on his mettle to hold his temper and restrain himself from active participation in the conversation.

Criteria and Other Considerations

From the foregoing we may conclude that the principal intelligence value of the domestic assignment lies in the psychological field--exploration of mental attitudes, blind spots, thought processes, strength and weakness of beliefs--whereas the value of the foreign assignment derives from first-hand experience in the country and from the collection of observable operational and positive intelligence. It is perhaps unnecessary to warn that the interpreter can not fulfill the classic agent roles of recruiting spy nets, agitating for revolution, or personally stealing the master war plans. He will pay his way by less dramatic acts.

Here are some of the factors that should be taken into consideration in recruiting an interpreter for an intelligence mission or utilizing an existing intelligence asset in interpreter capacity. First, it must be borne in mind that almost any interpreter will be the target of intense scrutiny by the opposition, particularly in Bloc countries. The prevailing political climate today, however, is such that the interpreter's official position as part of a delegation protects him from arbitrary arrest, except perhaps in Communist China. The rest of the Bloc is so committed to East-West exchanges that it would not jeopardize the program for one rather insignificant intelligence fish.

Second, the interpreter should not be the only briefed member of the delegation going abroad. As we have shown, the interpreter has his hands full with his official duties and has little opportunity for taking notes. The official delegate, however, has good opportunities and excellent cover for taking notes. In addition, being presumably an expert in the field of the discussions, he can recognize significant material better than the interpreter.

Third, the size of the delegation is an extremely important factor affecting the usefulness of both domestic and: foreign interpreter

assignments. A delegation of more than six or seven people imposes such a burden on the interpreter that he has no time for an intelligence mission. He is kept continually busy rounding up strays, making travel reservations, getting people settled in hotels, and generally playing nurse-maid. The best possible delegation would consist of one very lazy man who neither demanded nor rejected the presence of the interpreter.

Finally, the itinerary itself must be considered. On domestic assignments the most important thing is a relaxed schedule which will give the visitors enough spare time to observe their surroundings and ask questions about non-official matters. On the foreign assignment perhaps the most important consideration is the previous accessibility of the areas to be visited. If the area is completely off the beaten track or had previously been closed to foreigners, there is excellent reason to employ a trained observer as interpreter. Even the standard tourist trips, however, may provide useful information if the interpreter is alert.

This paper has been oriented primarily towards the interpreter-agent question as it obtains in visits to or from the Soviet Bloc, but many of the same factors are valid for neutralist or uncommitted areas. With the steady increase in cultural and professional exchanges among most countries of the world, opportunities for placing interpreters have also expanded. The expansion is not only making more experience and training available but is affording better cover for interpreters with intelligence objectives. Perhaps more of them should be given such objectives, despite the drawbacks we have noted.

Posted: May 08, 2007 07:23 AM