

[New UN Day honours unsung heroes who ensure diplomats are 'on the same page'](#)

29 September 2017 – Recognizing the unsung heroes behind international diplomacy, the United Nations is celebrating – for the first time – International Translation Day, paying tribute to the work of the language professionals who play a vital role in facilitating dialogue and understanding among peoples and nations.

The simultaneous issuance of UN documents in the six official languages of Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish is made possible by UN translators who, transpose content from the original texts into their main language.

Katherine Durnin, head of the UN English translation service, explained to UN News how her work ensures that Member States are using the correct texts during their discussions, thereby contributing to the overarching goals of the Organization.

“We ensure that when they are debating any subject, they all understand the same message, enabling their discussion to move forward in the language they know,” Ms. Durnin said.

“In that way, they can reach the proper agreement because with the translations they are all on the same page,” she added.

In declaring the [International Day](#) earlier this year, the General Assembly affirmed that “professional translation, as a trade and an art, plays an important role in upholding the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, bringing nations together, facilitating dialogue, understanding and cooperation, contributing to development and strengthening world peace and security.”

Ms. Durnin noted that this recognition has lifted morale “amongst translators, interpreters, editors... anyone who works on documentation.”

“We play a behind-the-scenes role and we understand that,” she stated. “The idea of being a translator is that someone doesn’t actually know that the text they are looking at is a translation; we are supposed to be invisible.”

“But,” she added with a smile “it is great to have that recognition now and then. Once a year, now we can pat ourselves on the back before we recede back into the background.”



Katherine Durnin, head of the UN English translation service. Photo: Elizabeth Scaffidi

Ms. Durnin also admitted that it is nice to be acknowledged outside of the profession, saying “we ourselves understand the difficulty of the work that we do, but it is great to have that recognition across the UN in general.”

Professional translation also includes interpreters, verbatim reporters and terminologists.

Translators handle a range of documents that cover every topic on the UN’s global agenda – with new issues arising every day. They not only command multiple languages, but are also well versed in the proper way to go about translating them – indispensable in a political climate.

“We spend a lot of time doing research, becoming sort of experts in the areas that we are translating from,” said Ms. Durnin. “A lot of the behind-the-scenes work that we do involves clarifying, understanding the message and understanding the meaning that was intended,” she explained, adding that they often have to do research or go directly to the experts for explanations.

“It is very exacting, difficult work to do,” she stated, adding that interpreters have to understand and clearly express what the speaker intends to say during meetings – in real time.

Translation at the UN

The UN is one of the world’s largest employers of language professionals. Several hundred such staff work in UN offices in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, or at the UN regional commissions in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Beirut, Geneva and Santiago.

Translators are only one type of “language professionals” employed at the UN. They also include: interpreters; editors; verbatim reporters; terminologists; reference assistants; and copy preparers/proofreaders/production editors.

Some of the first UN translators had no official training, but instead spoke multiple languages at home. Over the years that has changed, and to be hired now as a UN translator one must meet several criteria, including educational requirements and passing a language exam.

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Fortunately, more universities are training translators with the UN in mind. A number of them have signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN to ensure that their curriculums cover the different areas needed by the Organization.

“That has really helped to create a pipeline of new young well-trained translators, who even as they are graduating, already have a good grounding in the type of work we need for the United Nations,” Ms. Durnin said.

Asked about modern-day apps and software programmes that offer instant translations, her response was enthusiastic: “I think they’re wonderful!”

She credited them with bringing people on holiday together, "to communicate with the locals," making travellers "so much more aware of the beauty of communicating with other people."

However, she pointed out, while they do well with small segments of texts, they will not replace a professional translator, who will provide "the full complete message in proper English."

Ms. Durnin confirmed the use of computer-assisted translation at the UN, but only to help with efficiency.

"Human language is always going to be more complex than something that machines can deal with," she noted. "If you want to have an agreement between countries on nuclear non-proliferation, I don't think you want to leave it up to a machine."