

LANGUAGE SKILLS IN UN PEACE OPERATIONS - A NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This paper analyses the current state of knowledge on the role of language in UN peace operations. Through a narrative literature review, this study reveals the trends and gaps in research on language skills in peace operations following the introduction of the Brahimi Report in 2000. The paper highlights some common challenges faced by national military staff from several countries across three continents when their native language differs from English and French, suggesting that adequate language training prior to deployment remains of secondary importance to the individual states. Therefore, it is recommended that national government and military decision makers increase their efforts in this area, given that the protection of civilians is a core objective of every mandate and considering the significant role of peace operations in the current security environment.

Keywords: *peace operations, language skills, peacekeeping, local population, language barrier*

1. INTRODUCTION

Approximately 120 countries provide military, police and other civilian staff to UN-led peace operations in 2025 (United Nations 2025). They all aim to fulfil the given operation's mandate, serving international peace and security. While the multinational character and diversity help legitimize the deployment of peace operations, these same features lead to some challenges in a constantly evolving security context (Cross 2021). Challenges such as language barriers may create significant misunderstanding and miscommunication between the various nations involved on the ground (Bove & Ruggeri 2016, p. 687) and contribute to poor communication between the military staff, civilian peacekeepers, international organizational, local authorities and NGOs, negatively affecting the mission's success (Tresch & Picciano 2007, p. 17). The lack of knowledge of the local language can also make it hard to counter misinformation or disinformation spread by hostile actors, particularly in remote parts of the host country (CIOL, n.d.).

Undoubtedly, language skills have always been of major importance for those deployed in peace operations. Knowing how to communicate with others, whether they are military or civilians, is crucial for the success of every peace operation. For example, by analysing two focus groups of Argentinian military officers serving in UNFICYP between 1993 and 2016, Castillo (2017) found that due to the lack of knowledge of English, communication problems did occur in both the daily interaction with other peacekeepers and in different contexts, such as logistic and financial-related matters. In addition, Ugoji (2017) argues that language shapes ideas, perceptions, and perspectives, and thus, it has an important role in both bringing war and conflict resolution. Also, in a post-conflict context, using the local language(s) of the host country helps build trust among the local population and contributes to creating the necessary circumstances for achieving sustainable development (Müller, 2023).

Language-related challenges do not apply only to UN peacekeeping. Regional organizations with a mandate to conduct peace operations, such as NATO and the EU, also face similar difficulties. Furthermore, language barriers affect both male and female peacekeepers, especially given the complexity of the mandate in many contemporary peace operations. Concerning this, Pouye and Maksum (2024) argue that due to Indonesia's efforts to unify its national language, the country has found it challenging to promote foreign languages, such as French, critical for deploying peacekeeping personnel in French-speaking countries, as the case of some Indonesian female police officers reveals.

Having the necessary language skills is also crucial because, otherwise, the deployed personnel will rely on the availability and trustworthiness of local interpreters. In these cases, however, messages and meanings may be intentionally or unintentionally distorted through the translator's interpretations (Odoi 2005, p. 7). All these complications underscore the need for increased attention and effort in acquiring the necessary language skills among military and civil personnel prior to their deployment in peace operations.

Based on above-mentioned the following research questions are posed:

1. Although the main positive aspects of both the language of the operation and local language proficiency are recognized, does this continue to be a major challenge to achieving the peace operation mandate?
2. What are the main contemporary challenges to acquiring the necessary language skills prior to deployment in peace operations?
3. Is there an obvious shortage of peacekeepers due to a lack of knowledge of the language of the operation or that of the host country?

2. METHODS

This paper aims to highlights the state of knowledge of the importance of language skills in peace operations, to identify gaps in this regard, and to provide directions for future research and policy making concerning the participation in peace operations. Due to the multinational character of the peace operations, a narrative literature review is chosen as a research method to achieve the paper's aims. Although it is often seen as less important than the systematic literature review due to the former's suggested selection bias (Collins & Fauser 2005) and the latter's more structured methodology (Bui & Deakin 2021), a narrative literature review may be of great value. This is particularly true when looking for a link between many studies on various topics (Baumeister & Leary 1997), or when a broader scope of the literature is needed to address the expanding knowledge and concepts (Collins & Fauser 2005). Also, the narrative literature review provides flexibility as it does not include a rigorous selection criterion and does not focus on quantitative methods (Bourhis 2017).

To ensure a certain degree of rigor, the narrative literature review encompasses peer-reviewed research, concerning the conduct of UN-led peace operations. All other types of operations remain outside the scope of this study, regardless of whether they are considered or labelled as peace operations by the actors conducting them or other stakeholders. Although language barriers have been recognized as challenges in peace operations led by NATO and the EU, research on these are considered here due to the much lower number of members in these two organizations and the strongly political motivation behind some of the most notorious of their operations. Peace missions conducted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe also fall outside of the present paper's scope due to the lack of armed personnel in them and the extensive use of locally recruited staff.

Google Scholar was used as the primary database for the search for publications in English concerning the importance of language in peace operations. As this issue has been touched on, although not thoroughly, in thousands of publications, certain eligibility criteria were used to narrow the search. These included the following combinations of keywords to be found in the title: *language* and *peace operations*, *language* and *peacekeeping*, *language* and *peace missions*, and *language* and *peacekeepers*. Also, the narrative literature review was narrowed to the period 2001 – 30 July 2025, that is, after the introduction of the Brahimi Report in 2000.

3. RESULTS

By looking for both *language* and *peace* as keywords in the title, a total of 660 papers were shown in Google Scholar. When the search was narrowed to the keywords *language(s)* and *peacekeeping*, a total of 14 results appeared. The number of publications was similar or lower when the keywords used were

language(s) and peace operation(s) – 12, language(s) and peace missions – 2, and language and peacekeepers – 3. After reviewing all 31 publications and following the criteria set, a total of 5 peer-reviewed publications were selected as relevant to the topic and thus included in the narrative literature review (Table 1). The rest were removed from the final list as not relevant to the topic, due to their repetition in the search results, or because they were grey literature.

Table 1. Selected papers focusing on the role of language skills in UN-led peace operations

Author(s), year, title	Findings and important considerations	Strengths (S) and limitations (L)
Abd Razak et al. (2018). <i>Language, Communication and Intercultural Understanding in Peacekeeping Operations.</i>	- The authors discuss the use of language, communication, and intercultural understanding among Malaysian peacekeepers deployed in the UN-led peace operations in the Congo and Somalia, respectively, ONUC and UNOSOM, with the aim of studying how these three dimensions are closely interrelated. - The Malaysian Peacekeepers counted largely on interpreters to interact in Congo, including with the local population. - There were language barriers with some of the other contingents, namely with those from Morocco and Tunisia.	- The research demonstrates that language barriers depend on the multinational actors in peacekeeping (S). - The publication depicts the participation of the Malaysian military personnel mainly in a very positive light and partly historically with the aim to present it to “the young generations in Malaysia” (L). - The study is limited to the Malaysian military staff only (L).
Nanivska et al. (2022). <i>The value of future officers' foreign language training for participating in international peacekeeping operations.</i>	- The article focuses on the need for foreign language training for the officers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) to enable them to participate in peacekeeping operations. - A survey conducted among UAF officers showed that foreign language training was urgently needed in the Ukrainian higher military educational institutions. - Less than 50% of cadets in the Military Institute and the Ground Forces Academy demonstrated the necessary level of translation and grammatical transformation skills.	- The study is based on tests at the STANAG 6001 proficiency level 2, including various questions concerning phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic English, as well as likely scenarios in a peacekeeping context (S) - The authors focus predominantly on the language training of the (future) UAF officers (L). - The study is limited to the UAF (L).
Pouye, M., & Maksum, A. (2024). <i>Language Skills and Successful Mission of UN Peacekeepers: A Case Study of Acehese Policewomen.</i>	- The paper focuses on the linguistic challenges that Indonesian female peacekeeping police personnel encountered while deployed in peacekeeping missions in French-speaking countries, more precisely in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in the period 2020-2021. - The data used in the publication were collected through online questionnaires via Zoom meetings. - The authors highlight the need for French language training to be established in the	- The research focuses on the preparation for participation in peacekeeping operations, highlighting some serious challenges, which many countries usually avoid discussing (S). - The author pays particular attention to all four basic skills concerning language, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They are analysed throughout the article, underscoring their importance in the peacekeeping context (S).

	academy in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, where qualified teachers in French are very difficult to be found.	Only two Indonesian policewomen participated in the data collection as respondents (L).
Ruiz Rosendo, L., & Persaud, M. C. (2019). <i>On the frontline: Mediating across languages and cultures in peacekeeping operations.</i>	- The authors investigate the place of interpreters in peacekeeping operations and how they are perceived by the military staff. - The authors argue that interpreters working in peacekeeping operations should receive the necessary training, while the uniformed personnel should be trained on how to work with interpreters from different cultures. - The data were collected through online surveys targeted at UNPROFOR, IFOR/SFOR (carried out in 2014), and EUFOR Althea (2014-2015).	The paper deals largely with the role of interpreters in peacekeeping operations led by various international organization, mentioning only partly the importance of language skills among the peacekeeping personnel (L).
Castillo, S. E. (2017). <i>The English language in the military: A study of peacekeepers. In Authenticity in ELT:</i>	- The author explores the role of the English language in peacekeeping operations by analysing different focus groups of Argentinian officers and Non-Commissioned Officers in UNFICYP between 1993 and 2016. - The lack of necessary English language skills among the Argentine military staff in UNFICYP is seen as a barrier in the communication within multinational structures and context, as well as between officers and non-commissioned officers. - Most of the respondents (19 of 21) confirmed daily communication problems due to the lack of knowledge of this language, including because of the use of idioms and various pronunciation by some English-speaking contingents. - The author argues that in the case of the Argentinian peacekeepers in UNFICYP, the lack of English language proficiency negatively affected the acquisition of critical cultural awareness.	- The study encompasses the Argentinian participation in UNFICYP within a relatively long period: 1993-2016 (S). - Various context situations are presented to make clearer the need for English language proficiency in peacekeeping (S) - The study is focused only on the Argentinian peacekeepers in UNFICYP (L).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Key similarities and differences

As evidenced by the information in Table 1, all five studies demonstrate the importance of language skills, either in English or French, in a peacekeeping context, regardless of whether the country provides military or police staff. This concerns not only the communication with international personnel from other countries, but also the interactions with the local population. This is true when it comes to peacekeeping operations deployed in Africa and Europe. It is noteworthy that two of the studied countries, namely Indonesia and Malaysia, have for years been among the top contributors of personnel to the UN-led peacekeeping operations. Argentina has also had a stable presence in UN-led operations for many years. The same can also be said about Ukraine, but since the Russian invasion in February

2022, the country has rapidly withdrawn its troops and civilian personnel from the UN peacekeeping operations to help in the fight against the Russian Federation.

Yet, the language challenges in peace operations have persisted through all these years. This issue has been acknowledged for a long time (e.g. Diehl 1988, p. 497; Broer & Emery 1998, pp. 374-376; Smith & Dee 2006, p. 444; Bakonyi et al. 2023) and has found its place in several UN documents. For instance, the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (the Brahimi report), noted that in peacekeeping operations there had been cases in which countries provide personnel who cannot speak the mission language (United Nations 2000, p. 18), while the UN staff is obliged to respect “the local norms, culture and practices”, and thus is expected to learn the local language as much as possible (Ibid, p. 45). Fifteen years later, the Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, also known as the HIPPO report, highlighted that local community actors and civil society representatives had had difficulties interacting with the UN personnel, who apparently lacked training in dealing with traumatized people, apart from communication challenges due to language barriers (United Nations 2015, p. 78). In 2018, through its initiative Action for Peacekeeping (A4P), the UN Secretary-General urged the Member States to develop a set of mutually agreed principles and commitments to make peacekeeping operations more suitable to the future requirements in the field, including through the provision of the necessary language skills of their military and civilian staff (United Nations 2018).

4.2. Similarities with other research and opinion papers discussing the importance of language skills in UN peace operations

Although the list of studies in Table 1 is rather short due to the selection criteria, many other research papers discuss the role of language proficiency in UN-led peace operations partially. In fact, many scholars have reached findings similar to those in the above-mentioned studies. For example, Jelušić (2007, p. 37) argues that some of the language barriers that national contingents have experienced in peace operations are partly due to the general lack of analysis of the social challenges in peace operations, which is, in turn, because of the very limited public interest in problems experienced by the military.

Some scholars link the importance of language proficiency to one of the core tasks of virtually all peacekeeping operation mandates, specifically the protection of civilians (POC) (e.g. Hunt 2025). Concerning this, the military are not only actors in the field where the importance of the local language knowledge is underestimated, as evidenced by the research findings of Pouye and Maksum (2024). Hunt (2025) further examines the relationship between peacekeeping police staff and language proficiency. He argues that although UN police (UNPOL) has played a crucial role in mandates that focus on the POC, the lack of sufficient language skills among many UNPOL officers persists, which means that they have to rely on translators affecting in this way the UNPOL’s community orientation and engagement, including the way they gather and analyse information about possible threats (Ibid, p. 7). Moreover, in-depth knowledge of the host country’s language is regarded as essential for police personnel in peace missions, as their responsibilities require direct communication with the local population, while relying entirely on interpreters may make the former less efficient in achieving the mission mandate’s goals (Azimi 1996).

4.3. Identified gaps

Two of the research questions posed at the beginning are answered by the papers selected in Table 1. However, the third question, that is, whether the lack of language skills affects the number of peacekeepers provided by UN Member States, remains unanswered. Therefore, some answers to this question might be found in simple numbers, more specifically, in the number of peacekeeping personnel provided by individual states.

Based on the studies listed in Table 1, some gaps in the current state of research should be noted. All selected papers highlight the importance of language proficiency in peacekeeping settings, yet they do not analyse the role of the state thoroughly, as participation in peace operations is, in the majority of cases, part of both a country’s foreign and defence policies. Concerning this, most peace operations are conducted in developing countries in Africa and Eastern Asia, where European colonial regimes ruled in the not-so-distant past. Therefore, not surprisingly, in these countries the use of European languages,

mainly English and French, is widespread, which suggests that many countries contributing military and civilian staff to UN-led peace operations might indeed encounter challenges in recruiting personnel with adequate language skills prior to their deployment. Typical examples in this light of thinking are the countries from Eastern Europe. In fact, as Table 2 reveals, most of them participate in UN-led operations in a rather symbolic way.

Table 2. UN Peacekeeping uniformed personnel provided from countries from Eastern Europe as of 30.09.2025

Country	Number of personnel	Share of the total personnel
Albania	4	0,00660%
Bulgaria	0	0,00000%
Croatia	10	0,01651%
Czech Republic	10	0,01651%
Estonia	2	0,00330%
Latvia	5	0,00825%
Lithuania	0	0,00000%
Montenegro	3	0,01485%
North Macedonia	4	0,00660%
Poland	201	0,33187%
Romania	34	0,05614%
Serbia	266	0,43919%
Slovakia	225	0,37149%
Slovenia	11	0,01816%
Total staff from Eastern Europe	775	1,27959%
Total EU Member States from Eastern Europe	498	0,82224%
Total UN uniformed personnel	60 566	100%

Source: United Nations, 2025

Eastern European countries, as indicated in Table 2, contribute a total of 775 personnel, which constitutes approximately 1.3% of all peacekeepers deployed in United Nations-led peace operations (United Nations 2025). This share is reduced by nearly one third when considering only the European Union member states from the region. There are also significant differences between these countries. For example, Poland has been for years following a national policy aimed at building crucial military capacity, including in terms of conducting peace operations, while against this background Bulgaria has been predominantly passive.

These trends are more impressive, when compared to some countries from Asia or Africa. For comparison, the share of personnel from Nepal, which provides the largest number (6,031) of peacekeepers for UN peacekeeping as of September 30, 2025, amounts to approximately 9.96% or more than 10 times the combined share of the countries listed in Table 2. Behind these numbers lie primarily political reasons, determining the active participation of Nepal, as well as the more passive participation of the Eastern European countries. In both cases, however, the language barrier remains a major

challenge to the effective role of the personnel provided, and thus to the achievement of the respective operation's mandate objectives.

The more active participation of the above-mentioned Eastern European countries in peace operations led by regional organizations, specifically, in the Balkan region, may be explained predominantly by political reasons, defined by the proximity of the given theatre of action, as well as due to trade and historical reasons. In fact, according to data from October 2025, the number of armed personnel provided by some of them in the NATO KFOR operation only is as follows: Albania – 256, Bulgaria – 157, Croatia – 152, Czech Republic – 41, Latvia – 142, Lithuania – 44, Montenegro – 2, North Macedonia – 70, Romania – 198, Slovakia – 42, Slovenia – 114 (NATO KFOR, 2025). In addition to political factors, similarities in the languages spoken should not be underestimated. Actually, the role of language in peace operations has been examined in several research papers from the region, however, these studies are published in the respective official language rather than in English and are therefore not considered in this paper.

5. CONCLUSION

The relationship between language proficiency and peace operations is generally extensive. However, when the focus is narrowed entirely on language barriers in UN-led peacekeeping operations, the peer-reviewed literature is rather short. What is more, it is primarily limited to UN operations in Africa, due both to the multitude of local languages and to the fact that many of the host countries have been colonized by the Great Britain, France, or another European country at some point in their history.

Certain gaps in this paper should also be mentioned. Some of its limitations come from the narrowed scope of the narrative literature review, as it excludes the place of language in peace operations led by NATO, the EU, the OSCE, and the African Union. Another limitation is related to the lack of peer-reviewed research in English on the language barriers-peacekeeping topic in many countries, such as, for example, those from Eastern Europe, which translates to less comprehended conclusions drawn. At the same time, some of these same Eastern European countries prioritise their participation in peace operations conducted by NATO and the EU, especially after their accession to both regional organizations. Yet, some Asian countries, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, provide a significant share of UN peacekeeping personnel, based on certain political and economic reasons, as well as on purely military reasoning, which mainly concern the operational readiness of the personnel they provide. However, the role of language continues to be underestimated, with a large proportion of personnel in peacekeeping operations not speaking the local language, nor the language of the operation itself, which ultimately hinders the achievement of the mandate's objectives.

However, with the constant shortage of resources, including human resources, language training for personnel remains rather an issue of secondary importance. Approaches to promote language training for military and civilian personnel before their deployment in the field should not be only a priority for the UN or regional security organizations conducting peacekeeping operations, but also a national priority, helping to develop the capacity of the contributing country. This could be addressed in future research, especially regarding mixed migration to Europe and the role of peace operations as a deterrent. Future research may also focus on how international organizations conducting peace operations can positively influence the recruitment process at the national level. This will inevitably be seen as a controversial matter, likely as an interference in internal matters, but it will help achieve the operation's mandate, thus helping all actors involved, including capacity building among individual nations, providing military and civilian personnel.

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