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Abolite
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2 March 1956

ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUCTION

To: Members of the staff of the United Nations

Subject: LINGUISTIC STANDARDS FOR STAFF OF THE UNITED
NATIONS SECRETARIAT

1. The purpose of this circular is to explain to what extent staff members are expected to learn languages other than their own and to remove doubts as to the standards which may be prescribed for them by reviewing bodies. It is not possible to state in detail the requirements for any particular post, but it is hoped to lay down certain guiding lines to help staff members.

General principles

2. In an international organization using five official languages (Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) it is desirable for members of the staff generally to have some knowledge and ability in languages other than their own mother tongues. Even where such knowledge does not have any immediate practical application in every day work, it can be an asset to a career international civil servant: and it has a deeper importance as a demonstration that within the Organization the staff accept the international idea and that individuals are willing to make an effort to communicate across the boundaries of nationality and language. It not only helps with the formal business of communication but fosters an understanding of the ways of thought of other peoples and cultures and so makes co-operation easier. Moreover, in the interest of such co-operation it is important that those who naturally speak one of the working languages^{*/} should not seem to take for granted that there is no need to speak any other.

3. Nevertheless, a knowledge of languages, though important, is only one of the kinds of knowledge which may increase a staff member's usefulness to the

*/ The working languages of the United Nations are French and English, with the addition of Spanish for the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and its functional committees.

Organization and it may well happen that a staff member will do more good, both for the Organization and himself, by acquiring or improving some other skill.

Level of linguistic knowledge

4. For practical purposes, three levels of linguistic knowledge may be distinguished:

- (i) A really advanced knowledge of the written and spoken language.
- (ii) A "working knowledge", sufficient to permit a speaker to take part in ordinary conversations, to attend meetings, understand what is said there and to make his own contribution, to write about official matters from one office to another within the Organization, in a language which, while not necessarily perfect, avoids the grosser grammatical and syntactical errors and is readily comprehensible. This level of knowledge is that which the examination for the language allowance and the language diploma aims to establish.
- (iii) A slighter knowledge sufficient for discovering the gist of a letter or for receiving a visitor to the Organization and helping him to find the person, office or information he is seeking.

Professional category and above

5. Staff members in the Professional category and above will increasingly be expected to have an advanced knowledge (as defined in paragraph 4 (i) above) of one working language and, if that language is his mother tongue, to have in addition at least a working knowledge (as defined in paragraph 4 (ii) above) of another official language. Even where the staff member's mother tongue is not one of the working languages it will still be considered an advantage if he has some knowledge of an official language other than that in which he works. Moreover, in certain fields of work, a knowledge of some non-official language may be as important as a knowledge of an official language. Such knowledge cannot be a general requirement but may be among the factors increasing the staff member's effectiveness in a certain post.
6. It would be unrealistic to expect that present staff of long service should in all cases conform to standards of the kind outlined above; but these

standards will in future be strictly applied to all staff on probation, in order to receive permanent appointments they will have to show that they have reached the linguistic standard envisaged or are making substantial and continuing efforts towards it. Linguistic proficiency (or the lack of it) will always come into consideration in relation to proposals for the assignment, transfer, promotion etc. of staff members, although its importance in relation to other factors must necessarily vary with the circumstances.

General Service Category

7. Many members of the General Service category work in posts requiring a knowledge of only one language. Nevertheless, in many parts of the Secretariat there is a need for people having a knowledge of more than one and those who do not have such knowledge may find themselves at a disadvantage. This is particularly the case in the senior and principal levels and linguistic knowledge will be increasingly important in promotion to those levels, though no hard and fast rule can be laid down since the need for languages will vary with the kind of work any individual is called on to do.

8. In short, the fact that a staff member in the General Service category reads or speaks two or more of the official languages will be held to add to that staff member's usefulness and will be important in many cases of assignment to mission service, promotion or transfer. The fact that a staff member has learned or is learning another language will always be counted in the staff member's favour. On the other hand, it is not the intention of this circular to set forth conditions which in effect change the terms under which any staff member of the General Service category was appointed. If, for example, a new staff member is appointed to a post and does the work satisfactorily, there will be no question of refusing a permanent appointment because the staff member has not attempted to learn another language, unless the post is one requiring linguistic knowledge.

By direction of the Secretary-General

J.A.C. Robertson