

Multilingualism in action - spotlight on the
European Parliament

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, may I say how delighted I was to be invited to be the keynote speaker at this, the ITI's 21st birthday conference. Delighted...but also a little apprehensive about accepting, since I received the invitation within just days of taking up my post as Director General of Translation and Publishing in the European Parliament! But whilst I am new to the world of translation - though I can assure you I've had to learn a lot, and fast, over the past three months! - I am, as you may have seen from my bibliography, no stranger to the world of interpreting, having worked first in the private sector, and then started my career in Parliament in its interpretation service when Spain acceded. So I decided to throw caution to the winds.....and acceptedand I'd like to thank the members of the Council for their invitation.

Of course, you don't have to work in the translation or the interpreting services in the European Parliament to see multilingualism in action - with Members and staff from 27 countries working together on a daily basis multilingualism is simply a reality of daily life in our institution whichever service you work in. And, interestingly, bearing in mind the potential chaos that might be generated when people with no fewer than 23 official languages between them - not to mention languages like Catalan which are not official languages of the EU but are nonetheless the mother tongue of either Members or staff - have to work together, the work of Parliament is never organized according to language considerations! Parliamentary activity is organized according to the responsibilities of its various committees, reports are allocated to individual

rapporteurs appointed on the basis of their political affiliation.....so a Portuguese rapporteur may well be assisted by a German speaking administrator who will draft in English so that other Members or staff - of any one of the 27 nationalities - can access the text without waiting for it to be translated.....and they in turn might propose some changes.....

But miraculously, it doesn't create chaos! Multilingualism does work in practice!

Of course, as professional linguists, you are probably recoiling in horror at the very idea of several people contributing to the drafting of a document in a language which is not the mother tongue of a single one of them! And of course this can create a huge challenge for our translators, who find themselves having to translate texts created in this way.... but that's just part of the reality that is multilingualism in action!

But while multilingualism is simply a fact of life for those of us working in the European Parliament, it isn't of course for most of the citizens of the European Union, yourselves included. And you don't have to be anti-European to wonder whether its really efficient to be conducting business in all these languagesnot to mention the cost of it all!

So why do we have multilingualism? A political whim...??? a practical necessity...???

Multilingualism wasn't there right at the beginning! The Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, signed in Paris on 18 April 1951, was drawn up in one single language - French. France kept the original, the other five signatory

states received a certified copyof the French version. Even though they were of course free to have the text translated into their own languages (at their expense!), only the French text could be considered authentic ie as having the force of law.

But the situation swiftly changed! When the Treaty of Rome was signed on 25 March 1957, it was drawn up in a single original in the Dutch, French, German, and Italian languages, all four texts being equally authentic.

Article 177 of the Treaty conferred on the Council the task of deciding on the rules governing the languages of the European institutions (with the exception of the Court of Justice). The fact that this is one of the rare cases in which the Council is empowered to act alone, without consultation of any of the other institutions, and with all decisions being taken unanimously, is indicative of the importance attached already fifty years ago to the question of languages.

And very first EC Regulation, Regulation No 1 (EC) 58..... was the regulation determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community!

It is Regulation No 1 (many times updated now, of course!) which provides the legal base for multilingualism - it defines the official and working languages and stipulates that each Member State (and its citizens) has the right to draft correspondence in any of the official languages and to receive replies in the same language. Similarly, the European institutions are obliged to send all documents to a Member State (or its citizens) in the language of that Member State.

So, for better or for worse, in 1957 the die was cast, and multilingualism was here.....to stay?

It seemed to be the case - with each wave of new accessions, the languages of the accession countries (as defined in the accession treaties) were added to the original four.....

Which of course radically changed the implications of Regulation No 1!!

Of course, over the years, there were mutterings - louder in some Member States than others! - about the necessity of having all these languages. This egalitarian language regime was, after all, without precedent in international politics - the Council of Europe (with 46 Member States) and NATO (with 26 Member States) managed happily with two languages, the United Nations (192 Member States!!) managed with six!!!

But it was really only in the run-up to the 2004 enlargement that serious questions were asked about whether it was even feasible - let alone desirable! - to think of continuing in this way? There was much - often heated - discussion but of course, finally, each of the Member States which acceded in May 2004 saw its language added to the list in Regulation No 1.

The negotiations over the accession treaties of the 2004 acceding countries, particularly those with Malta, showed clearly the importance all Member States attach to their language.

So why can't the European Union align itself with the UN, or Nato, or the Council of Europe? What makes it so special?

Firstly, unlike the European Union, these other organizations are not making legislation - Community law is directly applicable in the Member States and it is of course inconceivable that Member States and their citizens would be unable to access in their mother tongue laws which will affect them in their daily life.

Secondly, the European Union is founded on "unity in diversity" - diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs, and languages.

The European Union is not a melting pot in which differences are watered down (even if some Euro-sceptics might point to some of the harmonization directives coming out of Brussels and say that one might be forgiven for thinking that!) - it is a "common home in which diversity is celebrated" (to quote Commissioner Figel, the first Commissioner to be given multilingualism as part of his portfolio).

Language is perhaps the most direct expression of culture, and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is a core value of the European Union, enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 22) "The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity".

Whatever the practical constraints imposed by multilingualism, the will to maintain it is as strong as ever -perhaps even stronger in the enlarged and enlarging Union as a means of keeping individual identities.

So how do the European institutions manage multilingualism in practical terms?

All are bound by the provisions of Regulation No 1 yet all have slightly different approaches. In the Council, for example, documents for discussion are available in all official languages for formal ministerial meetings, but at less formal ones a more flexible approach is adopted. The Commission has a formalised system of procedural languages - English, French and German - and the weekly meetings of the Commission are held only in a restricted number of languages. It is indeed only in the European Parliament that we see full multilingualism being implemented.

And it could, of course, not be otherwise. The European Parliament is a directly elected parliamentary assembly, and as such any European citizen has the right to stand for election to that assembly. The democratic legitimacy of the European Parliament would be totally compromised if only those citizens mastering certain "procedural" languages were eligible for election - and if the debates of Parliament, which unlike those of Council and Commission are held in public, were only held in these "procedural" languages, hence rendering them inaccessible to any European citizen unable to master those languages.

Hence Parliament's rules of procedure (Rule 138) are categorical - "members are able to speak and listen in their own languages in all meetings and all documents are translated into all official languages". Of course, a pragmatic approach is taken in the case of routine, internal meetings (Bureau, Conference of Presidents) where arrangements are made according to the real needs of Members taking part but Members of the European Parliament get to hear and speak their own languages in all meetings where legislative and financial decisions are taken and they receive all documents relating to those decisions in their own language.

Managing the services responsible for ensuring that Rule 138 is respected is of course a huge challenge! So how do we cope? Let me tell you a little bit about the translation service.

With the increase at the beginning of the year to 23 official languages, the translation service has to cover 506 language combinations! As linguists yourselves, you'll realise that potentially implies a huge number of translators!

Had we continued with the same approach we had always taken after the 2004 enlargement - when we went from 110 to 380 language combinations literally overnight! - the number of translators employed by the Parliament would have had to be increased exponentially. We now cover nearly five times the number of language combinations - yet the number of translators has not even doubled, compared to pre-2004! How did we manage this miracle, I hear you ask?!

The answer is - by introducing what we refer to as "controlled full multilingualism". In practice, this means that we have introduced a system of translation using a relay language - English, French or German - for less common pairs of languages. This meant that the complexity of an exponential increase in language pairings was reduced to a simple linear increase - and we could carry on respecting Rule 138.

So how many of us are there?

Well today the European Parliament employs some 800 staff translators - and spends some €13 Mio on external translation. All translators work in Luxembourg -

remember that Parliament never meets in Luxembourg, only in Strasbourg and Bruxelles! - organised in language units.

In 2006 we translated over a million pages (1,144, 534)!

90% of our internal translation workload is generated by the DGs for Internal and External Policy, ie the DGs ensuring the functioning of the Parliamentary Committees, and documents in the legislative process make up more than half of our work. 20% of texts have to be translated within less than 24 hours - sometimes considerably less! - 50% of texts within less than 72 hours!

And the cost - everyone always wants to know how much it costs!

Well it is no secret - in September 2006 the European Court of Auditors published a special report on translation expenditure in the EU institutions and I'm delighted to be able to say - though of course I take no credit as I was not in the service at that time! - that by 2005 the Parliament had managed to reduce its cost per page from €149 down to €119. Now I'm aware that many of you will be thinking that even this is well above the price you are charging per page of translation but though I don't have time here to go into all the details this cost includes a lot of direct and indirect overheads and is really extremely impressive.

And don't worry, we are not sitting on our laurels basking in reflected glory! We have taken the Court's report, positive though it is in many ways for the Parliament's translation service, as a starting point for our future strategy!

When I asked the conference organisers what kind of things they'd be interested in hearing about in my speech, one of the things they wanted to know was what I perceived as the most important challenges and how I hoped to meet these.

Of course, three months is not a long time but I can confidently say that I already have some clear ideas about translation (and publishing) in the European Parliament over the years to come.

I shall be focussing on how we can adapt the service to better meet the needs of Parliament in the context of the "Better Lawmaking" campaign.

And in how we can individualise the service offered to our Members.

And in doing this, I shall be looking at increasing the visibility of the translation service, in demonstrating that it is a key service crucial to the functioning of our institution.

I shall, of course, like any newly appointed manager, be looking to see whether, and how, we can improve productivity - without compromising quality.

Indeed, I shall be hoping that our quality, already recognised by our clients as being excellent, can be still further improved.

And I talk here not just of the quality of the translated texts themselves, but the quality of the service we offer as a whole. We shall, for example, be looking over the next months at introducing regular client satisfaction surveys within Parliament.

I believe that the key elements in achieving these goals lies in motivating and assisting staff - a properly structured on-going training programme for translators is something I consider to be a priority (and I am looking forward to hearing Mrs Wagner, a former Commission colleague with, as you all know, a long standing experience in this field, talking later today about training for linguists).

I also believe that you, the professional associations, have a role to play.

I know that many of you have worked or do work for the Parliament as external service providers, and this of course the most visible form of contribution.

Others among you are doing invaluable terminology work ...on which our translators rely.

Many of you are also involved in teaching and training the translators of tomorrow.....some of whom will (I hope!) aspire to working in the translation service of one of the European institutions.

But I believe you have a perhaps less visible, but nonetheless more important role - as guardians of the status of the profession.

I have already talked about increasing the visibility of the translation service within our institution, and of course the status of the profession is crucial to this.

And I believe that, today, computer assisted technology has much to offer us.

Translators Workbench is already widely used in the Parliament - I know you are all far more familiar with the technical details of TWB than I am so I will not waste your time explaining how we use it! - and we will be moving towards more systematic use of translation memory software, specifically a system called EURAMIS which has been developed by the European Commission and which offers exciting possibilities particularly for documents in the legislative process.

Some of you will probably already have used the test version of IATE, the Interactive Terminology Database for Europe, which will soon (June 2007) be available on-line to the general public. This is another product - the result of many years of inter-institutional collaboration - which promises to further enhance the quality, not only of translations, but also of all the written communication, of the institutions - and which will, of course, be a very useful tool also for other international organizations and national governments.

And with technology progressing at the rate it is, who knows what exciting possibilities the future holds!

One thing is for sure though - whatever the technological advances may be, translation - at least in the European institutions - could never be a completely automated process. Even if it is true that the role and the working environment of our translators has changed in some ways quite radically over the past twenty years and our current level of productivity and quality would have been impossible to achieve - in particular in view of the deadlines we work to - without some of those changes, the translator him or herself still is, and always will be, at the heart of the process.

How otherwise could we uphold our commitment to true multilingualism? Of course language is an essential means of communication, and we have to translate in order to get basic messages across and enable the European Union to function.

But language is so much more than just a communication tool - it is the most forceful expression, whether written or verbal, of our very essence as individuals. It reflects our response to the world around us, our emotions. It changes as we react to the constant changes going on around us.

And if we want to ensure that the citizens of Europe, wherever they may be, even begin to understand each other- and without that understanding there cannot be even the slightest sense of European identity - true multilingualism has to capture everything that language is conveying.

How could any machine begin to cope with that?

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention: