

Systran at the Commission

While Systran Software readies its software for the desktop market, the European Commission, in Luxembourg continues to pursue an independent development course for its hard-working Systran system. To combat the impending "language gridlock," yet more language pairs for Systran are in the pipeline. Currently, Dutch is available only as a target language (English-Dutch and French-Dutch) but thanks to the efforts of several Dutch and Flemish cultural organizations it will soon be available as a source language as well, for Dutch-English, Dutch-French, and Dutch-German. The cost of the new language pairs is estimated to be ECU 300,000, of which half will be borne by the Commission and the remainder by the Dutch and Flemish. The Dutch Taalunie believes the new language pairs will help speed up the process of applying for EU subsidies.

Systran is widely used within the Commission, not, as you might expect, by translators, but by Eurocrats in need of rough translations of official documents. Translation costs are nonetheless soaring, with ECU450 million (US\$750 million) devoted annually to the feed and care of the Commission's army of translators and interpreters. Moreover, the situation is getting worse, with yet more languages coming on board, notably Swedish and Finnish at the beginning of 1995. This state of affairs recently spurred the French minister for European Affairs, Alain Lamassoure, to call for limiting the number of official languages in use to five (German, English, French, Spanish, and Italian). Predictably, this provoked an outcry from speakers of the remaining languages. Last year, even the prolifically polyglot Swedes resolutely rejected the idea of sacrificing Swedish as an official EU language on the altar of economic necessity. Now, and for the foreseeable future, the Commission's permanent (sub-contracted) staff of Systran engineers and linguists certainly have their work cut out for them.