



Most people think of international organizations
as bureaucracy-bound.

An inside look at the OECD shows a cutting-edge
approach to language that's anything but.

by Andrew Joscelyne

In a rapidly changing, globalizing world, you might think that the translation departments in the world's international organizations would adopt the same cost-cutting and technology-driven solutions as their private-sector counterparts.

You would be partly right. The European Commission's *Service de Traduction* is a prime example. They recently deployed an "information-gisting service," which provides machine translation (Systran-based) for Commission staff who need rapid raw translation delivered over an in-house network. It is called "gisting," since the computer-generated translation generally provides enough substance that the reader gets the "gist" of what is being said (for coverage of machine translation in the EC, see *Language International*, vol. 9 no. 3). It is also no secret that in 1998, a team from the United Nations translation department commissioned a report on the use and viability of the machine and machine-assisted translation service at the EC, presumably to examine the applicability of such technology to its own needs.

Similarly, calls for tenders are regularly issued by large international organizations

for external translation suppliers. They often require assistance in specific language combinations, or in machine-translation post-editing, to offset pressure on in-house teams. In line with the general trend, translation volume has grown exponentially across the spectrum of international organizations.

Despite these shared features of the translation landscape, there are specific aspects of language-transfer management in international organizations that are not echoed in private-sector practice. This is largely because of the role translation plays in these organizations, the translation "ethos" that quite often differs from market-driven private-sector translation departments.

By focusing on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this case study attempts to show that the specific nature of language, and *a fortiori* translation, in these organizations determines the options available for translation management.

Foundational Multilinguality

Most larger and older international organizations differ from corporate users of

language services in one way: built into their founding charters is a clause enumerating the organization's official languages. The United Nations, for example, has six working languages; the World Bank, the IMF, NATO, and OECD each work in two official languages. We call this property *foundational multilinguality*.

Many global organizations (as opposed to "regional" international organizations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) were created in the aftermath of World War II, following the creation of the United Nations and the 1944 Bretton Woods conference. Their foundational multilinguality tends to reflect the linguistic configuration of diplomacy at that time, with French and English chosen as the major working languages, but not the German or Japanese of the recently vanquished nations.

The continued identity and existence of international organizations is largely predicated on balancing the interests of nation-state members. This means that explicit foundational multilinguality—what is written into the organization's founding charter—will rarely be questioned or

modified in response to market or other external pressures. Any translation practice set up under such foundational multilinguality therefore tends to endure, whatever the changes in the external balance of linguistic power.

A possible threat to the linguistic *status quo* of international organizations is a voted decision at the UN allowing Japan and Germany to sit on the Security Council, due to their clout on the world economic stage. If accepted, the language range of the UN would have to expand to accept German and Japanese.

Similarly, some may claim that the diplomatic, political, and economic role of the French language has declined since 1945; hence there would be no overriding statistical or strategic reason for French to form a consistent core member of the family of foundational languages.

The evidence so far suggests, however, that foundational multilinguality is highly resistant if not immune to such changes. As a result, the translation departments of these organizations form a unique “translation preserve” which operates with significant autonomy compared with the rest of the world’s translation activities.

Inside The OECD

The OECD has been described as a rich-man’s club of like-minded members—part think-tank, part monitoring agency, and part nonacademic university. It groups 29 of the world’s most developed countries in an organization that provides governments with a platform to discuss, develop, and refine economic and social policy.

Founded in 1961, it replaced the OEEC (Organization for European Economic Cooperation) which was formed to administer US and Canadian aid under the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. The 29 member countries each send an ambassador to the OECD, and each contributes to the ca. US\$200 million annual budget.

The OECD’s purpose is to build strong economic policies in its member countries, improve efficiency, hone market systems, expand free trade, and contribute to the development of industrialized and developing countries.

It functions through a cascade of committees, the preeminent one being the Council, which has decision-making power and works at the ministerial level with member countries. Some 200 other specialist committees, working groups, and expert groups deal with specific issues of

policy, with each producing a steady stream of knowledge in the form of documents.

The OECD is run by the Paris-based Secretariat, which fields 1,850 staff members to directly or indirectly support committee activities. Seven hundred economists, scientists, lawyers, and other professional staff, mainly based in a dozen major directorates, provide research and analysis. An additional six general secretariat units and a half-dozen “semi-autonomous bodies” produce knowledge eventually translated by the Translation Division.

Translation at Center-Stage

In a very real sense, the Translation Division stands at the center of the organization’s activities, acting as a quality filter through which the organization’s bilingual discourse passes. Four key aspects of knowledge production at OECD effectively “empower” translators and endow them with a status they rarely enjoy in private-sector work:

- *L2 authoring*—Many authors of the source material, i.e., the knowledge producers, write in a non-native language, mainly English, one of the foundational languages of the organization. In other words, the linguistic expression of the knowledge produced is often nonstandard.
- *Committee-authored documents*—This does not refer simply to multiple-author documents, which are increasingly frequent in cooperative work environments. Rather, it refers to documents which have been serially, rather than synchronously, edited, often by hand, by a cascade of different committees, each with their red-penning habits and linguistic quirks.
- *Multiculturalism*—The organization produces knowledge based on material that is itself the product of other traditions of knowledge production, in particular knowledge produced by client members of the organization. As the OECD has 29 members, its products allude to, draw on, and exploit

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extremely “culturally” heterogeneous information.

- *High referentiality index*—This is a typical property of the way knowledge is distributed within documents. Since part of the knowledge produced by the OECD involves legally binding resolutions, international conventions, and the like, it inevitably refers to previous OECD documents and those of other international organizations.

The Translation Division thus does not simply translate all relevant documents into its two official languages, but serves as a quality-assurance filter in delivering the organization’s major products.

Translation-Division Structure

The OECD’s Translation Division was founded concurrently with the organization in 1961. In 1996 it was integrated into a more general Language and Conference Services Division.

The Translation Division is expected to supply specific linguistic services to any of the 20 or so in-house units (often called Directorates) covering subject areas ranging from food and agriculture to e-commerce, economics, and nuclear waste, to name but a few.

The Translation Division consists of four language sections and a relatively well-staffed Reference and Terminology Unit (RTU):

Section	Number of Staff
French	44
English	10
German	7
Italian	3
Reference/Terminology	8
Management	2

At the OECD, and at most other international organizations, translators are recruited as knowledge workers with a similar “civil-service” ranking within the hierarchy to that of engineers and lawyers. They are viewed as skilled professionals rather than subordinates to the more “important” work of knowledge producers.

The translators act as an intermediary in the knowledge value chain. The translator will be involved in various cognitively rich feedback loops—checking with the authors, inventing neologisms as new concepts emerge, establishing official usage, and reusing finalized knowledge products to decode new knowledge.

Consider, as a point of contrast, the translator’s role in an organization with no foundational multilinguality. In such orga-

nizations, translation will be subordinate to rather than coordinate with the knowledge-producing chain: documents will by and large be finalized before translation, and language transfer may be relatively mechanical, cognitively independent of the knowledge-production chain.

Languages Covered

The fundamental mission of the OECD translation service is to translate between French and English, the two "official" languages, producing a bilingual version of the knowledge produced by the organization. At the request of the national members, German and Italian are also provided as target languages. There have also been requests on occasion for Japanese target translations.

There are no official source languages apart from English and French, but there may be requests for documents to be translated from any number of source languages. In a typical year, the Translation Division provides translations into English or French from the standard West European languages (Spanish, German, Italian), strategic East and Central European languages (Czech, Hungarian, Polish), strategic Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean), and any number of other languages on an ad-hoc basis (e.g., Bulgarian, Macedonian, Turkish).

Target Language	Share of Volume
French	80%
English	17%
German	1%
Italian	1%
Other	1%

Since 1985, the relative proportion of French and English target translations has changed dramatically. Fifteen years ago, 65 to 70 percent of all documents were authored in French for translation into English, while 30 to 35 percent were English for translation into French. By 1998, this relative apportionment had radically changed: today over 80 percent of all source documents are in English, and only 20 percent are authored in French.

The Translation Division translates some 90,000 pages (27 million words) of material annually (all languages combined). This represents a 100-percent increase over 1985, or a manageable 10-percent annual increase.

Translation Tools

A certain amount of terminology management (the extraction, maintenance, and

access to terms) is integrated into the overall workload of the translator.

Translators are expected to use the services of reference staff where possible to check on documents and validate wording. A translator who spends an hour on the Internet seeking terms and checking in and out of terminology forums and the like is not rewarded for her/his initiative. On the contrary, this is considered a waste of time (and *ipso facto* the organization's money), since there are staff available to make more efficient resource searches for them.

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Plans are currently under way to simplify access to glossaries by porting them into a Microsoft Access database and designing a single interface. The user will be able to rank the relevance of the various glossaries when searching for a term and benefit from other functionalities.

Interestingly, the department has decided to develop its own terminology database based on off-the-shelf software packages, rather than purchase one of the dedicated terminology-management systems now on the market. Translation-Division managers usually explain this decision by expressing doubts about sustainable support services from dedicated terminology-system developers. They are also expected to purchase software solutions that are multi- rather than mono-functional.

The OECD translation resources are not limited to in-house material. Unlike most corporate terminology users, intent on protecting their proprietary terminology, international organizations have an unwritten policy of coordinating and sharing their terminology and translation resources. This is because the documents produced by these organizations often cite each other, or deal with similar concepts and usage, and therefore benefit from the

extension of terminology validation to any future translation of such documents.

The OECD Translation Division does not use machine translation (MT) in any form. There is apparently fairly strong agreement among the heads of translation divisions at the major international organizations that MT does not yet offer the required reliability and quality.

Translation memory, however, is being actively examined and in certain cases (e.g., at the EC) deployed in the same organizations. On the agenda at the OECD is a project to introduce Trados Translator's Workbench. The goal is to ensure that new translations can automatically draw on validated terminology, thereby harmonizing terminology across the organization.

The Translation Division could then outsource terminology-ready source texts to translators, without having to spend time preparing extensive terminology sheets to accompany the documents. If this proves feasible, translation memory will offer the OECD a tool to address its high referentiality index.

Coming Attractions

The OECD Translation Division is to start implementing a new translation workflow-management system in 1999. This will streamline the translation request and production process and simultaneously provide a rich stream of data about the Division's translation productivity. Which means that, like other organizations, public and private, it too will be producing instrumental knowledge about its own behavior. By then it will be time to radically update the data in this chapter.

About the Case Study

The above is an introductory excerpt from an extensive case study on the OECD, and will appear in full in a book to be published in 1999 by John Benjamins Publishing Co. in the ATA monograph series. The book, *Case Studies in Language Management*, will feature real-life examples of language-technology and management techniques at global companies, large and small.

About the Author

Andrew Joscelyne is a contributing editor to *Language International* and a consultant and journalist covering the language and language-technology industries.