The €-Files

Dollerup's final word on translation work in the European Union.

by Cay Dollerup

In this final article from a series of three, Cay Dollerup makes some concluding comments on professional language work in the EU. It is a comprehensive view, covering more than 25 years of observing work at the EU institutions from the sidelines as a language person from one of the small European Member States (Denmark). The views expounded are his. So are factual errors: The European Commission translates 1,200.000 pages, not documents per year. And the abbreviation for Swedish is SV, not Se.

The past

When the organization came into existence (1958), the six founding nations had four official languages. There are now fifteen members and eleven official languages. The histories of the various language units at the Community institutions (henceforth, EU) grew slowly as they would in any organization. In the course of this expansion there have been major hurdles, and I believe they are easier to see with hindsight—after the dust has settled. First, I believe, it is useful to define discussions of the language work in terms of *who* are conducting the discussions.

Outsiders and language work at EU bodies

There are problems galore in discussing language work in the EU. These are problems of definition and also of the points of departure, which must of necessity be one's own position in relation to EU language work. Insiders as well as outsiders must take this into account.

I am painfully aware that I do not know every nook and cranny in the EU and that I will—at least until some patient old-timer has bothered to take time out of his or her busy schedule—make mistaken technical statements. At which stage, it is appropriate for me to thank everybody at the EU institutions who has done just that. However, when erroneous or incomplete understanding has been mistaken for incompetence it has not been conducive to a fruitful discussion.

It is also obvious that many people who teach or even work for the EU institutions (for instance as freelancers) are not well aware of what is happening outside their own sphere of specialization. In addition, there are people who—in good faith—convey partial views. There are hidden agendas, and sometimes there is speculation without any basis in fact among people who have little connection with the daily work at the EU institutions. It is also forgotten that much 'translation work' takes place in the member states, which is generated by EU work in general.

Notably, there is a problem of losing touch with the reality other parties are facing. The world of Translation Studies has changed in a way that few language workers at the EU institutions are fully aware of. Conversely, the EU institutions are extremely dynamic entities in terms of translation work. What was true in January may be wrong by May. There will be changes within a year—not to mention a decade.

These are the dynamics of the system and the fundamental changes I expressed in the opening statement: 'Things have definitely changed' (Language International, August 2001).

Discussing EU language work

Discussions of EU language work among language professionals often fail to take into account that the view linguists, both within and outside the institutions, have of language work is totally different from that of 'society at large'. Their view is privileged and, consequently, detailed. This can sometimes be a weakness.

On the home page of the Translation Service of the Commission on http://europa.eu.int/comm/translation/en/eyl/en there is an illustration of the number of pages translated into the eleven official languages. It forcibly brings home the central role of linguistic equality in that the 'small languages' get their fair share of translation produce.

This point is made explicit in many European Commission documents. It is a prerequisite that documents used for the democracy established for (and by) the citizens of the EU countries are available to them. In order to illustrate this, we might liken the EU institutions to one person who gets an idea, jots down notes, makes a first draft, revises it several times, and eventually sends off the finished letter.

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There are many cases in which 'translation' is a process that bears little resemblance to a traditional translation assignment because it is part of a system. The specific task given to individual translators and interpreters is merely part of an embryo that must be—or is in the process of being—developed and does not have an autonomous existence until the moment it is published.

This is obvious from the process: The beginnings of, say, a directive, are made in the form of drafts by several persons, some of whom do not have the core language(s) used in the draft document(s) for their mother tongue. The ideas are subjected to discussions in the European Commission and sent to working committees. The delegates in these committees are national representatives who subsequently, back at home and in their own languages, discuss the work with colleagues, superiors and others. They then present the results as delegates at new meetings organized by EU

Terminology:

EU = the European Union = 15 member states /countries and the supranational EU institutions. The term EU is used for the body so termed, although it has had a few name changes since the formation of the European Economic Community (1958).

EU institutions = the supranational institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council.
Translation work in the EU takes place both at the EU institutions and in the member states.

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languages. The coordination of the 'public' release of the final documents at the European Commission is a major task: They must be produced by the translation services within specified deadlines. The documents are then passed on to the requesting body for simultaneous release of the documents in the eleven official languages.

Even with such documents, it is the intermediary or procedural stages in the process that take up most time, involve most interpreting and translation activity, and attract the attention of linguists. But it is only the end result which counts in public, in legislation and in politics in the fifteen EU countries. In the EU system, translations are, therefore, component parts, they are means to ends, not ends in themselves.

There are a couple of points that call for comment here. The first is that, roughly speaking, the European Commission is primarily a policy-making and monitoring body in the European context, the Parliament is the legislative and political body, and the Council of Ministers a policy-making and politically specialized body. These and other EU institutions have their own staff of translators. Most institutions,

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such as the Commission, do not publicly emphasize translation aspects of their internal work. There is nothing secret about them, but the nature of the tasks differs from institution to institution in terms of topic, emphasis and audience.

The interpreters of SCIC at the Commission also service the Council of Ministers, for example. At this latter institution as well as in the European Parliament, the European public can perceive the presence of interpreters. So the visibility factor is different for interpreters and translators.

Secondly, an administrative institution such as the Commission will concentrate on "getting things done" while, conversely, the Parliament has to focus on making sure that the public (the voters) can see that it "is doing something about getting things done." This must, for instance, be demonstrated by using a language that is understood by the voters, that is the national languages of the Member States. Accordingly, the official languages must be shown to be used in the public debates and in political work open to inspection.

There is, however, also an abysmal difference between work viewed from the outside faced 'eleven equally valid texts' without an original, and the complex, multi-layered, multilingual component processes which all contribute to the creation of these 'equally valid texts' and which can be seen inside.

Language professionals will tend to concentrate on the small component processes which they can approach, discuss and study because of their specialist knowledge and interest in precisely these details, whereas the outside world, the politicians and EU citizens, can see only the finished product in their respective languages. These two (or three, if we distinguish between language staff and non-staff outsiders) views of language work in the EU are rarely, if ever, combined, or indeed compatible. It is, however, the language professionals who must keep this in mind.

I would like to point to what I consider major practical obstacles that the interpreting and translation services of the EU institutions have overcome since they first came into being more than forty years ago, in order to better assess their achievements.

Successes

There are a few hurdles that I believe we can classify as 'successfully overcome':

– The status of language professionals

The first one has been to ensure an adequate status for the language profession. From the beginning, there was a demand that translators, interpreters and other top people in the language services at the EU institutions should have an academic background. Initially this may not have been prompted by a wish to give the language professionals status, but rather by the need to attract top professionals by means of competitive salaries.

On the other hand, it is obvious to me as a casual visitor over the years that inside the institutions, respect for and understanding of the language services have markedly increased. This does not imply that language staff are loved, but there are more users (requesters and consumers) who are aware of the importance of translation in the broad sense of the term and who appreciate that—despite criticism—interpreters, translators and terminologists are professionals. True, there are certainly differences in the appreciation between, notably, delegates from different nationali-

ties, but, overall, the translators' cooperative role in the process is regarded as equal, not as ancillary and menial services.

I believe that this is crucial: In international contexts that are based on democratic rights, a high status for language workers is essential for any collaboration based on mutual respect.

– The introduction of new languages

There are indications that the Danish entry in the EU (in 1973) was a traumatic experience for EU language work. I am in no way underestimating the factor that might be termed 'inexperience'. It was probably for the good of the EU that Ireland and the UK entered at the same time, since English speakers—who referred to a major language—served to counterbalance Danish views.

In the beginning, there were a number of mistakes, mostly, I believe, by Danes who had underestimated the immensity of the task: For some years politicians and delegates met empty booths, even when interpreting was sorely needed, and Danish translators and terminologists had to correct errors made in the hurried translation processes prior to Danish entry by means of footnotes in legal documents. In the course of further enlargements, the EU institutions gradually accepted that staff, including language professionals however good, cannot master all official languages.

Once again this is seen with hindsight. There was very little preparation in terms of language work on both the Danish and the EU sides and—in my opinion—nobody was aware of the importance of extremely thorough planning.

By now the EU institutions are infinitely better at meeting the challenges posed by enlargements, and they are now preparing to include new languages with professionalism, co-ordination and style. Whatever little the outsider can see bodes well for the functional, pragmatic and democratic integration of new languages.

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– Computerization

The organizations I visited, assisted and studied 25 years ago worked with paper: translation was based on printed and typed pages, and some interpreters themselves compiled handwritten vocabulary lists. Terminology was developed from either translation or natural parallel texts. I have a feeling that this latter type is disappearing, which may be due to the fact that translated texts are not only more likely to yield large harvests, but they have also proved reliable within the EU terminological framework.

The consequences of computerization are daunting. The introduction of computers and the sophisticated use to which they are put, thanks to their ability to handle enormous masses of texts in several languages has changed translation work—not only at the EU institutions, but also worldwide. There are many factors at play here: speed, the overall fusion of dictionaries, corpora, the easy importation and recycling of large passages from previous translations and so on. For individual translators this increases productivity and ease in routine translation, but at the same time it will call for heightened intellectual alertness. The machines have funny ways of tricking their human operators.

The very fact that the EU has handled—and is handling—about the largest bodies of translated texts in the world (when we disregard the Internet), establishes the EU institutions as the front-runner in the translation business. I would like to see their research and development work put at the disposal of the EU public at large rather than see the EU institutions competing with private industry, but this view is probably not shared by all.

Points to be solved

It should be obvious that the following remarks are personal. On the other hand, they are offered not as criticism but for constructive discussion—as points noted and no more. It is also clear that they touch fields in which interests go far into politics, national pride and the like.

– Overall views

As I see it, the EU institutions' language services lack a kind of ideology, an overview which might do away with inconsistencies that make them vulnerable to unjustified attacks. Let me exemplify:

At least until December 2001, you would, on the web site of the Commission's Translation Service, meet with one passage claiming that the Translation Service (implicitly always) aimed at quality; a few lines further down you could read that machine translation is used. To address another thorny issue: how can it be that one out of eight EU institution staff is employed in the language services and the costs for language work amount to less than 1% of the total budget?

What I am calling for is transparency, the pedagogics of 'selling the goods'. Let me suggest that the budgetary problem could be solved by simply stating the truth: yes, all European citizens have to pay 2 euros for getting information in their mother tongues. A calculation relating this to the population of the EU sets the price at more than 700 million euros for the lan-

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guage services of the EU institutions alone. The attempt to make the cost seem to be lower by using percentages of the total budget is not sound. Firstly, because it seems a clumsy attempt to hide the real cost. Secondly, because it mixes up productive language work with compensation to fishermen in the North Sea and with agricultural subsidies, which alone dwarf the cost of language work. The number of olive trees in Greece and the quotas for cod are—in the nature of things—totally different from translation.

– Language and democracy

It is a moot point for democracies that people from the 'floor' can have a say at the highest level. In that respect, I believe the EU principle of replying to questions in the national languages is important.

I also believe that the policy by which the Member States insist on extremist political positions in the battle for the 'rights' of national languages is softening and compromises are seen, but the EU as such is so large that there will always be other views on this issue and Member States that wish to promote their national language. It may be utopian to believe that there will be an agreed political direction in language work.

Some issues are not related to practical work but to tradition and perception: one major problem is the perception of translation in the world at large. Most people still see translation as something involving one author, one text and its recipient(s)—and changing this perception is hard. Another challenge is that to many citizens in the EU, the EU institutions, if not the EU itself, are distant entities.

– The equality and the use of core languages

Much criticism heaped on the EU institutions relates to the belief that, somehow, democratic usage of the official languages is identical with 'equal usage' in terms of time, money, and production. (Let me confess that this was also the vague view I held until I first visited the institutions). In terms of the EU institutions, the main problem is that for politicians it is legitimate, indeed vital, to promote this principle. It is therefore the EU institutions which must come up with solutions about how to tackle language work. And in all likelihood, this is done better by practical execution than theoretical discussion.

It is obvious that you cannot allocate speakers of the eleven languages more or less the same speaking time. I know of few democratic institutions where speaking time has been meted out like that (Oh yeah, I've met them). In the context of a community of nearly 380 million people, it is absurd in terms of cost alone.

It seems as if it has not been made sufficiently clear that, in many EU contexts,

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the use of 'a core language' in most documents, in, say, some committee work, does not mean that work is actually dominated by the nations using that language (UK and Ireland; France and Belgium; Germany and Austria). Even many language professionals miss the point that a 'core

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language' serves as a practical means for ensuring and keeping track of a democratic process in which all languages contribute—as best they can and will—to a common goal, which is finally realized in the eleven languages.

Since most discussions of the EU are based on 'here-and-now' assessments which are generalized, it is worth pointing out that the identity of these core languages has changed over the years. Initially they were French and German; as of the mid-1970s they were French, English and German and for the last few years they have been English and French. German serves as a fine illustration of the fact that influence, size and linguistic expression are different entities. Although German is the 'largest language' in terms of native speakers in the EU, it has never been the main core language.

It is also worthy of note that the kind of English that serves as the 'core language' at the EU institutions to most users is one out of many Continental varieties exhibiting features that distinguish it from any English spoken in Ireland and the United Kingdom: the definition of 'English' in the EU context is subtly different from what we learnt at school as received standard.

– The texts produced

When I described the Translation Service at the Commission (Language International, December 2001), I tried to distinguish between 'simple translation' and complex translation—a matter of considerable complexity itself.

But in many contexts, such as public addresses to all EU citizens and in legally binding texts, this distinction is not enough. This is partly due to the traditional concept of translation as the transfer of a message, but also to the fact that, in most cases, in traditional translation work there is one text which is the 'authoritative

source text'. All derivations in other languages are 'subordinate derivations'.

Conventional wisdom will have it that since English and French serve as 'source texts', there will be 9 'translations' into the other languages. This point of view disregards the fact that in the EU the so-called 'source texts' have come into existence

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from a multilingual body, represented by one or more 'requesters' at an EU institution, and, more importantly, that these texts have been through many stages of translation into different languages, that they have absorbed much previous textual-cum-translation work and been pounded, buffeted and given the shape they have by means of input from both written and oral sources in up to eleven languages. This process, to be sure, has its center at EU institutions, but it is certainly not confined to them—in most cases, considerable work has also been done in the Member States.

What we are dealing with in the EU are, in these cases, not 11 authentic texts, but 11 equally valid texts. Another relevant point is that these texts are not created by translation alone but rather in creation-cum-translation work. This is why it is meaningless to speak of 'an original' as in orthodox translation. In the common and legalistic frameworks of EU contexts there is no 'stable original' to which ten 'translations' can relate.

The 'stable original' has always been a fiction; witness texts ranging from the Bible to the Grimm folktales. Yet legal EU texts have a unique status even in this translation history context in that, whereas any biblical text or Grimm tale can be retranslated, nobody can retranslate the 'original' and create another text which anybody would accept as a valid rendition of the 'original' in the target language. There will be a host of other texts which interfere, including prior renditions, laws, and political decisions. The EU system does not allow for anything but eleven interdependent texts.

– Quality

The EU institutions claim to work for overall 'quality' in translation without any clear priorities. This makes for a one-dimensional view of 'quality'.

Actual practice, however, shows that there are enormous variations within the EU institutions: a raw machine translation by SYSTRAN may be fine for a staff member in order to get the general idea of a document. A text with a preliminary form of a neologism may work among terminologists until the term reaches an agreed form. Adequate renditions for public consumption of a message in the official languages call for adherence to language norms in the countries where these versions are going to be published. An adequate rendition of a common regulation, for instance, has 'quality' by conforming with the EU terminology for legal texts in that specialist area, with the agreed EU terminology in general, and with the vocabulary and syntax of the eleven different languages of the fifteen Member States. Add to this that in most countries the target group which will assess the 'quality' of some regulation is more likely to consist of national specialists than ordinary citizens.

It seems wiser to publicly relate 'quality' to the specific parameters under which specific translation tasks take place. In other words, quality is not based on a bi-polar

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semantic differential distinguishing merely between 'poor' and 'perfect'—which furthermore presupposes the existence of some kind of 'perfection', however fluid. It is a multidimensional entity depending, in each case, on how adequate the translation product is in the eyes of the user(s). Explicating such a view will at least make it easier to handle a number of apparent contradictions.

Language change in EU countries

I would like to finish this on a note which I have not seen touched upon anywhere in the literature on the EU, but which I, as a person with a language background, am keenly aware of. The EU at present has eleven official languages and this number will increase. As stated, enlargements are not worrying (which does not mean 'unproblematic') since the EU institutions have braced themselves well for them.

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day-to-day users of the official languages. This problem is most obvious with Danish, but I would assume it is already also perceptible in Dutch (but not in Swedish because Sweden did not become a Member until 1995). The languages spoken nationally are developing rapidly, not only because of the influx of Anglophone loanwords, but in terms of grammatical structure, vocabulary and, most importantly, the rules of word formation.

Well beyond the enlargements now under way, the EU institutions may have to adjust to such changes. There has always been language change but the speed is not the same in all EU countries. Listening to young Danes, I guess it will be a problem in twenty years time when they are decision-makers. Of course, this is far in the future and I am unlikely to be around to see how the EU institutions will meet this challenge.

Still, meeting challenges with flexibility and in pragmatic ways will, I hope, be characteristic of the language services of the EU. That is one sure means of keeping the European project alive and kicking.

Cay Dollerup is a regular contributor to Language International.