

# Meeting the challenge of multilingualism in Central and Eastern Europe: the role of translator and interpreter training

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**Zuzana Jettmarova**

Univerzity Karlovy, Praha, CZ  
and

**Daniel Toudic**

Université de Rennes II, FR

The sudden acceleration of the EU enlargement process announced at the latest European summit has once again focused attention on the linguistic challenge that the process will represent. The preservation of the principle of multilingualism will to a large extent depend

- a. on the political will of the Union and of the new member states themselves
- b. on the financial means that the Member States are willing to devote to the implementation of a multilingual Europe with 18 or more working languages
- c. on the capacity of the new member states to provide the professionally qualified translators and interpreters able to meet the EU's exacting standards.

On the commercial and economic front, however, the creation of a wider European market has now been under way for ten years, and here too the linguistic challenge has become part of the equation. Although English and, to a lesser extent, German, have largely dominated the commercial arena, the need for competent technical and legal translators and interpreters in the languages of Central and Eastern Europe has continued to be felt but not always met.

The training of highly professional translators and interpreters is therefore likely to become a crucial issue in Central and Eastern Europe over the coming years. As the Jyväskylä Conference showed, this is an issue which is increasingly being recognised and tackled in academic institutions throughout the area, but which governments and business circles appear to have bypassed up to quite recently.

The survey carried out by the TNP sub-group on T&I in 11 of the CEE countries (the Tempus Phare area plus the Baltic States) clearly showed that efforts were being made in higher education to introduce bona fide translator and interpreter training programmes or modules. All of the 27 respondents among the 30 institutions questioned (chosen on the basis of their participation in Tempus programmes) had established some kind of specific training in translation and/or interpreting, ranging from optional modules chosen by philology degree students at third or fourth year level to separate undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in T&I leading to specific qualifications, with specialisations in conference interpreting or domain-specific translation. In this area, academic traditions and the institutional framework determine the degree of autonomy accorded to T&I training, with some countries more willing than others to recognise it as an academic discipline in its own right. Around a third of the respondents had set up separate translation departments, schools or institutes to run these courses, thus establishing, at least in principle, a clear break with the more traditional philology sector. In some cases, the break was grounded in the historical development of translator training as a technology related subject taught in Technical Colleges and Faculties (e.g. in Hungary), but in the majority of cases, T&I training remains under the responsibility of the language departments of Arts and Humanities Faculties.

There are of course many obstacles to overcome before translator and interpreter training can gain full recognition throughout the CEE area. Some of these obstacles are institutional, as already mentioned: ministries of education (sometimes with prompting from the philology "lobby") are often reluctant to award new T&I qualifications, especially if this is perceived as creating new needs in terms of resources. Nor is there always sufficient support from those very government departments

which would appear to be the main potential beneficiaries of the "output" of specialist T&I courses. However, the prospect of accession and the need to translate the entire "acquis communautaire", has prompted some of the governments concerned to implement more effective translation policies at government level and to set up translation units or, at least, co-ordination units with reasonable IT resources and trained staff.

One of the major obstacles is, precisely, the very nature of the translation "market" itself. After 1990, translation "agencies" appeared in their hundreds throughout Central and Eastern Europe, relying on an unlimited pool of linguists and engineers with varying degrees of proficiency in foreign languages but little or no training as translators and interpreters. The premium for quality and professionalism has therefore remained very low indeed. In the absence of recognised standards and with the new generation of trained translators and interpreters only just beginning to appear on the market, operators attempting to offer international standard quality are still at a competitive disadvantage when faced with those who are prepared to work for rock-bottom rates.

Other difficulties lie at the academic level, with the problems related to implementing more "vocational" programmes demanding new knowledge, skills and teaching methods on the part of academic staff. As in other parts of the EU, the training of trainers and the recruitment of new staff with specific qualifications takes time and the full benefit of several years of Tempus partnerships and the arrival of a new generation of academics are only now beginning to be felt.

Finally, the material obstacles are by no means to be overlooked in countries where many institutions still face severe budgetary constraints and material difficulties. In an age when professional translator and interpreter training cannot be envisaged without a considerable investment in IT equipment and software, Tempus funding (where it has been available) is often insufficient to ensure the long-term financial commitment which such courses require.

Beyond these obstacles, the Jyväskylä Conference workshop looked forward to what a truly multilingual "extended" European Union will imply in the 21st century. Two related issues in particular were raised: that of translation into non native languages and the issue of "rare" language combinations (e.g. Romanian-Swedish or Polish-Finnish). All the CEE participants present stressed the importance within their national contexts of proficiency in "reverse (i.e. A - to - B) translation skills". This may run counter to all accepted professional rules in EU countries with widely-used languages, but takes into account the reality of the CEE market, where a majority of translation contracts are for work done into a foreign language, a situation likely to prevail in the foreseeable future. The importance of "unusual" language combinations in the context of EU enlargement was stressed by the representatives of EU translation and interpreting services, as a means of reducing the vast cost of implementing complete multilingualism in EU institutions. The training of CEE translators and interpreters able to work from at least one of the less widely known languages of the Union as well as from at least two of the main working languages will become a priority in the perspective of enlargement. This will in turn imply lengthening present T&I programmes, with all the attendant resourcing difficulties that can be expected.

As in Western Europe, the way forward probably lies in the diversification and specialisation of translation and interpreting programmes within each country and through transnational co-operation. As regards the specialisation of translators and interpreters, this is already being implemented through the establishment of specific postgraduate programmes. The "segmentation" of the translation market itself according to the specific demands of government and European institutions, major industrial corporate clients, the local small business sector etc. will induce further specialisation and diversification in the structure and contents of training programmes. As for language diversification, it can be achieved via the Socrates mobility programme and through bi- or multilateral agreements within the same country or between several countries, involving institutions offering different less widely known languages. The ELC and the future TNP on languages will undoubtedly have a major role to play in helping to promote such partnerships and to establish new channels of communication between translator and interpreter trainers throughout the wider Europe.