

A European Union with 20+ languages: A major challenge for the interpreting services

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The political decision has been made: as a result of the Treaty of Nice (2001), 10 countries are now negotiating their accession to the European Union, and the language services of the Union are preparing for the inclusion of 10 more official languages by 1 January 2004. Karen M. Lauridsen has spoken with Mr Brian Fox of the European Commission's Joint Conference and Interpreting Service (SCIC) and Mr Patrick Twidle of the European Parliament's Directorate for Interpreting.

In spite of the fact that the treaty has not yet been ratified in all countries, and negotiations are far from concluded, the preparations for the enlargement of the European Union have been in progress for a long time. Both interpreting services have been working with issues relating to the enlargement since the early 1990s, for instance by helping the universities of the accession countries to train conference interpreters, by training trainers, and by providing financial support for new courses, investment in technical equipment, etc.

From day one it will be the responsibility of the interpreting services to ensure that the European institutions function with all the necessary languages. Integrating up to 12 new languages in a very short period of time is actually a formidable task, especially when one considers the fact that none of these languages are international conference languages, some have only very recently acquired the status of national language, and many have small native speaker populations.

More members – more meetings – more interpretation

The Treaty of Nice foresees 25 member states and a maximum of 732 members of the European Parliament by 2004. As the European Year of Languages drew to a close last year, the European Parliament was already gearing up to double the number of official and working languages, and largely thanks to pressure from the EP itself, the Commission is now working to complete negotiations with as many candidate countries as possible so that they can join the Union in time for the next European elections in June 2004.

"The right of elected members to speak, read and write in their own language lies at the heart of Parliament's democratic legitimacy. More to the point, the citizens of the EU are not likely to recognise the EP as being their Parliament, if the EP does not recognise their language. Very soon colleagues and parliamentarians from the candidate countries may well be joining us, and we are working hard to prepare for some of the unfamiliar languages we are likely to encounter: Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Romanian, Slovene, Slovak, and Turkish," says Patrick Twidle.

With, say, 22 official languages, there will be $22 \times 21 = 462$ language combinations within the European Union. However, the right to speak, read and write one's own language is not only a question of democratic legitimacy. In an enlarged European Union, it is very important that the national or official languages are respected because they are also a symbol of the independence and sovereignty of the member states.

Like the Parliament, SCIC provides full interpretation between all the official languages in meetings of, for instance the Council of Ministers, the Committee of the Regions, or the European Economic and Social Committee. However, among the close to 12,000 meetings for which SCIC provides

interpretation every year, there are also quite a few in which they provide what is known as asymmetric interpretation. This would, for instance, be interpretation from all the (present) 11 official languages into two or three languages. Even if delegates can generally understand discussions in, say, English, French, or German, they prefer to put their views across in their own language. In other cases they will interpret between two or three working languages of a committee, or they will interpret between 22 languages, for example when there are meetings between ministers or other officials of the present members states and the accession countries.

All of this obviously has logistic implications, and building preparations are going ahead accordingly. New buildings will provide larger meeting rooms for the European Commission and Council as well as booths for 24 languages and seats for 732 rather than the present 625 members of the European Parliament.

A sensible approach to multilingualism

There are no plans to deviate from the present principle of three interpreters per booth, however. This means, of course, that the allocation of interpreters for each meeting must be more carefully planned than ever in order to ensure that interpreting can be provided for every participant. However, it can be foreseen that not all member states will send representatives to all meetings, and if a language is not represented in a meeting, there is clearly no need to provide interpreting. "In the foreseeable future, there will only be a limited number of qualified interpreters for some languages – in spite of all good intentions, and they must therefore be deployed where they are absolutely necessary, according to real needs," says Brian Fox.

More member states will inevitably also mean more diverse language régimes, and with three interpreters in each booth, relay interpreting for the new languages will be the rule rather than the exception, at least at the beginning. It is therefore important that interpreters be trained not only to cater to their end users, the participants in a meeting, but also to their colleagues when they interpret into the so-called pivot languages. When an interpreter interprets from Romanian into French, for instance, (s)he not only provides the input to the French speaking part of the audience, but also to the interpreters using French as the pivot language for their interpretation into, say, Greek or Swedish.

More languages and language combinations

In the mid- to long-term perspective, the two interpreting services have adopted somewhat different strategies to meet the challenge of the many languages and language combinations. "As with almost all accessions, it is inevitable that we will have to rely on *retour* interpreting at the beginning," says Brian Fox. "At SCIC, it is our goal to build up full language cover as soon as possible so that we can have direct interpreting and not rely solely on interpreting out of the A-language (mother tongue) since this would make asymmetric meetings very unwieldy."

In the Parliament, interpreters must be able to work not only into, but also out of their A-language (*retour*). The languages of the accession countries are all less widely used and taught languages in the EU, and interpreters with these as their A-language must therefore be able to interpret into a major pivot language, but at the same time interpreters will be encouraged to add new languages to their individual language portfolios. "Only in this way, with a mixed system, can the Directorate of Interpreting ensure the necessary flexibility among the staff and the necessary competence in the booths, where about half the work will be done by staff, and half of it by freelancers," says Patrick Twidle.

New technologies

New technologies may assist the language services in their endeavours, and in an attempt to solve some of the logistic problems, experiments have been conducted with remote interpreting. However, it turns out that this technology is not suitable for the institutional environment: it is not cost effective, it impairs quality and it is much more strenuous to interpret from a screen input in another room than

it is to interpret in a booth in the meeting room. The interpreting services will therefore avoid remote interpreting if at all possible.

However, other more promising technologies are being developed in the areas of information and support tools (intranet, handheld computers, etc.) and for building new ways to communicate (multilingual internet chats, web-streaming, virtual meetings, combined videoconferences and internet chat techniques, etc.). SCIC has a New Technologies Unit, which aims to take advantage of existing and emerging technologies and optimise their development; the activities of this unit will be described in another ELC Bulletin later this year.

Education and training

All of this is obviously only possible with the appropriate education and training of the interpreters. In 1997/98 the project for the development of a European Master's diploma in conference interpreting was launched in co-operation with a number of European universities already training conference interpreters, and in 2001 a consortium was established by the universities offering this European degree. The consortium now has 15 members and two observers among which are five members from the accession countries. In this context, special projects are being developed to upgrade the training of *retour* interpreting into a B language, and to examine new applications for website and technology-based systems for distance learning.

The master's programme provides training opportunities for people across Europe, including the accession countries, to develop their interpreting competences and skills if they already have the necessary linguistic skills and sufficient general aptitude. In addition to the financial and technical support provided by the EU Commission and the Parliament, this programme provides the platform for the training of interpreters in, not least, the new official languages (please see also the News in Brief section of this Bulletin).

Together, the interpreting service of the European Court of Justice, SCIC and the EP Directorate of Interpreting support interpreter training courses in all accession countries, and across Europe ab initio language and language enhancement courses are offered to interpreters.

Business as usual

One might think that this is all a very costly affair. However, last year it was documented that all the language services (translation and interpreting) cost €2 per European citizen per year, and this level is expected not to rise too much after the enlargement. Already in 2003 the number of meetings involving some or all of the new official languages will increase. But it's business as usual. There is an increase in demand; the overall budget is severely restricted. "We tailor our services to meet requirements, and every effort is being made to be as cost effective as possible," says Brian Fox.