

Interpreting in the European Commission

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Interpretation in the meaning of linguistic mediation has always existed and is part of ordinary human behaviour. In the past, the interpreter was at the same time the neutral arbiter of a controversy or the hostage of both parties, the wizard mastering the art of speech that everybody revered or the unreliable double-crosser whose word nobody trusted. Until recent times, kings and tyrants used interpreters as their spokespersons or special envoys to the point that their personality sometimes overlapped with that of their master. In a brilliant essay, Jesús Baigori Jalón recounts the history of interpretation from the Conference of Paris of 1919 until the Nürnberg Trials in 1946. It is exactly from this date onward that interpretation was born as a true profession. When for the first time the technique of simultaneous interpretation was used, the interpreter could at last assume a more distinct and neutral role, as the conveyor of meaning from one language into another.

Since then, the role of interpreters has gone through incessant changes, much in the same way as the perception of the language issue in our society as a whole. As far as the European Commission is concerned, interpretation is one pillar of its multilingualism policy which has not only the aim to spread language knowledge for a better integration of Europeans, but also to guarantee an equal linguistic treatment of all its citizens.

Nowadays in Europe, when we talk about multilingualism, we tend to consider it as a sort of beatitude, a condition of cosmopolitan perfection that one day or another will fall on us like a miracle. On the contrary, multilingualism is something we must build, a behaviour we must adopt and learn to practice in our everyday life. We have at our disposal the raw materials to reach a true multilingual Europe, that is our precious languages, but we still have to endeavour ourselves to attain this goal.

The European Union linguistic landscape is very diverse. Besides the 23 official languages of the Union, there are 60 or so other indigenous languages and scores of non-indigenous languages spoken by migrant communities. But despite

this linguistic richness, language skills are unevenly spread across countries and social groups in Europe. And yet the ability to use more than one language would encourage us to become more open to other people's cultures and improve our cognitive skills. Multilingualism also plays a role in the integration of migrant communities living in the European Union. Only by learning the language of their host country will the migrants become responsible citizens. Assisting new generations of migrants to maintain their native languages will help them preserve their roots. An unbroken link with their cultures will help them integrate in our societies.

For all these reasons the European Commission has been supporting language learning and linguistic diversity since 1989 with different policies and instruments. In 2002, the Barcelona European Council called for the teaching of at least two foreign languages to all from a very early age. In 2008 the Commission issued the Communication "Multilingualism: An Asset for Europe and a Shared Commitment" on which it is now building its new actions and programmes.

Our multilingualism policy is also about teaching. Schools and training institutions should adopt a comprehensive approach to language teaching covering mother tongues, foreign languages, the language of instruction, and the languages of migrant communities. Children should be encouraged to develop the full range of their communicative abilities since their early age.

The European Commission has integrated the language issues in its *Lifelong Learning Programme*, and more specifically in its parts devoted to schools and to adult and continuing education. Multilingualism is not only about learning languages but also spreading the expression of our different cultures through translation. Europe has always spoken through translation, and today translation is more than ever an active process, transforming what it works on, creating something new, reinventing literature and keeping it alive. In addition, translation is a lively and growing industry. In publishing and other sectors, the demand for translation is rising. The output of traditional and newer professions linked to translation is significant and poised to grow.

In addition to the proactive strategy for the diffusion of language knowledge, the European Union also provide a set of tools to give each citizen access to European Union institutions in their own language. The European Union institutions carry on the most intense, ongoing political and technical conferences in the world. The Directorate General for Interpretation (SCIC) provides quality interpretation in meetings arranged by the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, the European Investment Bank and other bodies and agencies of the European Union located in the Member States. DG Interpretation also provides a conference organising capacity to the Commission services. The European Parliament and the Court of Justice of the European Communities each have their own, separate interpreting service.

DG SCIC provides interpreters for 50-60 meetings each day in Brussels and elsewhere. Each working day, 700-800 interpreters are ready to help the delegations of the Member States and other countries understand each other.

The language arrangements for these meetings vary considerably – from consecutive interpretation between two languages, for which only one interpreter may be required, to simultaneous interpretation into and out of 20 languages, which requires at least 60 interpreters.

DG SCIC employs 500 staff interpreters as well as a large number of freelancers on contract out of a total pool of more than 2,700 freelance interpreters world-wide who have obtained inter-institutional EU accreditation.

Catering for such language arrangements requires the use of all the various simultaneous interpretation techniques and regimes we regularly apply: direct interpretation, relay, two-way interpretation or retour, and asymmetric language coverage.

DG SCIC is also active in international cooperation, among others with the UN, for the promotion of the interpreter profession and the support to universities preparing interpreters. In the framework of this cooperation, DG SCIC also supports projects for the development of the profession around the world, in particular as far as Africa is concerned, in order to help the development of a network of African interpreters for the more and more frequent meetings of institutions.

The brief description of the multiple levels of which interpretation plays a role in the framework of the multilingualism policy of the European Union clearly shows that the language issue today has acquired also a dimension that concerns rights and not just languages. In particular, in this field the profession of the interpreter is finding new directions for expansion.

The most important field where language professions in general and interpretation in particular are reaching a new frontier is legal interpreting.

As professional mobility, tourism, migration and refugee movements are reaching new heights, the number of foreign defendants is also increasing in all Member States. To face this new development of EU legislation, in recent years, the European Commission has gathered a group of experts to reflect on the issue of legal interpreting. The Commission had assumed for years that the establishment of minimum standards for court procedures is an indispensable prerequisite for the full mutual recognition of court decisions. The Group confirmed that, as regards criminal proceedings, the rights of suspects and defendants should be harmonised within the EU. The right to interpretation and translation of important documents during all the stages of a proceeding, including meetings with the legal adviser, had to be enshrined in EU legislation. Moreover, the right to make use of the services of an interpreter free of charge had to be extended to persons with a hearing disorder or a speech defect. As a consequence, this new linguistic side of EU legislation had also to encompass sign language interpretation. The conclusions of the group have subsequently inspired the decision of the Commission to propose new rules to ensure that EU countries will inform anyone suspected or accused of a criminal offence of their rights in a language they understand. According to these new rules, anyone arrested will have to be informed in writing with a Letter of Rights listing his basic rights during criminal proceedings.

Following this decision, more and more interpreters will be needed in Eu-

ropean courts and the profession itself will comprehend a new specialisation. But this new development is only its beginning. It was further ascertained that Europe lacks a sufficient number of languages that are very important in court. Therefore, the sworn in and certified court interpreters cannot satisfy the new needs of courts. They are not at all or only insufficiently qualified for working with these languages. The quality of interpretation and translation services and the training of interpreters and translators in legal matters have to be improved in the entire EU. This means that new educational facilities will have to be established in Europe in order to create common quality standards for court interpreters. The DG Interpretation is deeply involved in this training effort and is following closely its developments.

Moreover, the size of the migrant communities in Europe has reached such a level, with such a variety of languages that in some areas their numbers are more conspicuous than those of the historic national language minorities. The variety of languages coming from migration cannot be completely taken into account, as these languages have no official status in Europe. Nonetheless, for the sake of European integration, here too a work of cultural mediation is needed, in particular as far as the adult population is concerned, where the interpreters will find new working opportunities. The cultural mediator will not only have an interpreter's training but will also master legal issues and have a good sociological background and a deep knowledge of the migrant's culture.

These new developments of the profession highlight one aspect of the language issue that is often underestimated or treated as a separate issue: the knowledge and preservation of the mother tongue and the role it plays in the integration of migrant peoples and for the protection of individual rights in general. For many migrants, settling in a new country equals a language loss. The mother tongue is inevitably neglected to the advantage of the host country language, which is nonetheless an essential tool of integration and social promotion. In the same way, the spreading of English as a *lingua franca* often obliges non-native speakers having to conduct their business in the globalised economy, to speak English and just English. This entails an inevitable loss of eloquence and effectiveness, and also becomes in the long term an economic disadvantage. In many fields today, English plays certainly an essential role as a communication language. But English cannot replace the mother tongue of millions of Europeans. Nowadays, universities all over Europe tend to provide teaching also in English, with a consequent impoverishment of the national language. The impoverishment of national languages is also an impoverishment of thought, an obstacle to research and education that hinders the capacity of abstraction and leads to exclusion. The work of the interpreter serves this aim too: the preservation of the mother tongue. Providing translation in international meetings, in business relationships, in trade and tourism, the interpreter guarantees the essential right of each European to speak his own language.

The ever-changing patterns of modern economy produce innovations for the interpreter too. In the field of translation new activities emerge, such as those required by the localisation industry. More and more firms go on-line for their

trade and promote their products and services in a variety of countries. The translation services that this business needs have an important cultural side, as you cannot present your products in the same way all over the world but you need to “localise” them. Matters concerning perception, marketing and ethics play a role here and require a whole commercial strategy. Managers and agents need to be prepared for their tasks and informed also on the cultural background of the countries where they are operating. The interpreters hired to assist them must therefore be aware of the global dimension of the business they are working for and be able to convey not only the linguistic translation but also the cultural meaning hidden in local usages and customs of a given country or region.

As we can see, the boundary between the classic language professions of the past and the profile of modern interpreters is shifting. These new requirements constitute a challenge for those taking up the career of interpreters today but also for already accomplished professionals that must adapt to new needs. The activity of translation in itself is undergoing deep changes, as well as the study of languages in general. On the one hand, more and more people are competent in a foreign language, can manage an ordinary exchange or conversation and do not need basic interpretation nor translation services anymore. On the other side, more and more people take part in international meetings, business boards or trade in global markets where they need highly skilled interpreters with a vast cultural background instead.

Interpretation and translation in general are fully part of the European Commission multilingualism strategy aimed at taking advantage of one of the more distinctive characters of the European Union: linguistic diversity. Multilingualism is deeply rooted in the European tradition. Investing in it and grasping all its potential is essential if we want Europe to remain a global player and become an integrated society.

In the same way we are ready to taste a dish from another country, we should as well have the curiosity to try another language and have a taste of another culture. Multilingualism is indeed one important of the education and cultural sector. All that is done in Europe in the cultural field has, in one way or another, something to do with languages. Multilingualism is an asset, not a burden. A multilingual society is essential for the prosperity of our countries, for the respect of all citizens’ linguistic identities and for the proper functioning of the European Union. Improving citizens’ language skills will be equally important in achieving European policy goals, particularly against a background of increasing global competition and the challenge of better exploiting Europe’s potential for sustainable growth and more and better jobs.

The ever-changing profession of the interpreter is deeply contributing to the creation of a more just and linguistically equal European society where multilingualism is not a slogan but a living reality.

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