

The European Parliament: A Temple of Multilingualism, a Pioneer in Interpreting “Exploits”

Olga Cosmidou

Multilingualism is one of the policies of the European Union, the motto of which is “United in diversity”. Respect for languages is one of the cornerstones in the design of the Union, a proof of applied democracy and intelligent governance. In fact, only immature or totalitarian regimes consider the existence of more than one language as a threat to their cohesion.

The European Parliament as a single paradigm among all other European institutions

Only the European Parliament really functions in its day-to-day operations with a regime of 23 official languages, and often more than that, if the attendance of distinguished guests from other countries is anticipated.

One can wonder if this is a necessary provision or simply a whim which burdens the European taxpayer. To gain a better understanding of the situation one needs to bear in mind the following background knowledge.

A team for a meeting with a full linguistic regime (23 languages) is made up of 69 interpreters, and these 69 interpreters cover as many as 506 possible language combinations. This means that in Strasbourg, where the European Parliament holds its monthly sessions, 1,000 interpreters can be counted as present in the numerous meetings.

The question which is very often asked by visitors is “Why don’t you try to do it using only one, two or even five or six of the most widely spoken languages, as is the case in other Assemblies, for example the Council of Europe, the United Nations, etc.?”.

The answer is relatively simple: the European Parliament is the only supranational body in the whole world whose Members are directly elected by the citizens of 27 Member States. If the prerequisite for someone to be elected was the knowledge of a foreign language, this would restrict the democratic right of every

citizen to stand for election and impose an undemocratic, elitist barrier to participation. This would also mean that somebody could be elected not for his proved qualities as a negotiator or representative but because of his or her linguistic skills!

Let us suppose – for the sake of argument – that this were to be envisaged: how could we then ensure that all representatives would be treated equally in order to defend the interests of the people who had elected them?

The rule should then be that nobody has the right to speak his or her own language (otherwise the representatives of big countries would be “more equal” than those of medium or small-sized countries).

This would mean in practice that English mother tongue speakers would have to express themselves in – let us say – French or German, French MEPs in German or Spanish, German MEPs in English or Italian, and so forth.

Suppose that this system could – theoretically – work. What about the citizens who would like to follow the debates on a given subject, since most of the meetings are webstreamed? The French would exercise their democratic right of control by listening to their MEPs (who would speak – as we said – German or Spanish) through interpretation and the same would go for the English audience, as well as the rest of the citizens of Europe. One can immediately appreciate the absurdity of the situation. Moreover, if we take into consideration the fact that more than 60% of European citizens do not master any foreign language, this would mean that they would simply be prevented from following the debates.

Cost issues

The entire policy of multilingualism (i.e., translation of written texts, interpretation of speeches, and linguistic verification of legislative texts by lawyer-linguists) costs € 2.30 per European citizen per year. In other words, the price of a cup of coffee is the price of democracy. It is a small price to pay to avoid one of the cardinal errors of another Union of recent but unhappy memory.

At this point one should mention the answer given by a former Vice President of the European Commission to a journalist who asked him about the “unnecessary” cost of the linguistic regime of the Institutions. The Commissioner answered, “Elections are very costly too, so what are you suggesting?”.

In terms of daily life, it is linguistic diversity which makes the European Parliament a very exciting place to work or visit: it is the exact opposite of the Tower of Babel, where people spoke different languages but did not understand each other – it is the “anti-Babel”; it is lively, interesting, and fascinating.

Certain preachers of doom and gloom predicted – before the last two enlargements, which doubled the number of official languages– that the system would collapse.

But this prediction did not come true. Why? The secret is *quality*.

Only the top conference interpreters, who have succeeded in either a demanding official competition or an interinstitutional test, can work for the Directorate General of Interpretation and Conferences of the European Parliament (DG

INTE), which provides interpretation services not only for the meetings of this Institution, but also those of the European Commission that are held in Luxembourg, those of the Committee of the Regions, of the Court of Auditors, of the European Ombudsman and of the Data Protection Officer.

Yet, it should be stated that despite the fact that the Rules of the European Parliament confer upon all MEPs the right to speak in their own languages, some of them choose to express themselves in English, thinking that in this way they will be understood by the majority of the others. What often happens in reality is that their English is a kind of “Globish”, not intelligible to other English speakers, either because of the MEP’s accent, or because of the expressions used, which are directly translated from the speaker’s mother tongue and do not correspond to a natural English way of speaking.

Another reason why MEPs choose to speak English when their mother tongue is different is to address themselves to a Commissioner. According to the European Parliament newspaper, *Newshound* (edition 292 of 9 February 2011), “Out of a total of 93 speeches, Commissioners who were not native English speakers used English on 77 occasions”.

“Only 3 out of 16 Commissioners did not use the language of Shakespeare. They spoke in French, German or Italian”. The use of a language by a non-native speaker very often makes the task of the interpreter a very difficult one.

Another thing which complicates the life of the interpreter is when a speaker reads out from a written text which s/he has not made available beforehand, or when s/he uses jokes based on specific words (which do not match those in other languages), excerpts from literature, etc.

Organisational problems

Having solved a lot of technical issues (concerning the number and standards of booths, the specifications of the consoles in the booths, etc.), the most important problem with which the Institutions are now confronted is the search for high-level professionals. In fact, under the principle of subsidiarity, Member States are responsible for the training of linguists (in the same way as they are responsible for the training of lawyers, engineers, doctors, economists, etc.). Many of the EU countries are not aware of this responsibility or of the level of excellence required for the studies, let alone the countries outside the EU whose languages are very important in international relations (*i.e.*, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, etc). The three interpreting services of the Institutions of the Union have generated networks among several Universities for the postgraduate training of conference interpreters. They have also helped set up this type of programme of study in the USA and on the African continent, bearing in mind that this profession is a global one and a very mobile one. The pressing need to find young conference interpreters either to replace the retiring generation or to cover the “new” languages means that young students of any discipline with good linguistic knowledge could seek supplementary training in conference interpreting.

Relevant schools are listed on the website of the AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters).

To conclude this paper, let me not omit to say that conference interpreting is a different job than contact interpreting (business, hospital, etc.) or legal interpreting.

The need for excellence in quality is very plainly visible when international politics force us to follow developments through interpretation. This was recently the case with events in Tunisia and Egypt, where several TV channels transmitted the declarations of officials: some of them were understandable, others were not. This very clearly demonstrates that only interpretation of very high quality is useful, otherwise it can be misleading and even harmful.

Allow me to end this article with a quotation from Nelson Mandela, highlighting the importance of interpretation: “If you want to speak to a man’s mind, speak to him in a language he understands; if you want to speak to his heart, speak to him in his own language”.

*Directorate-General for Interpretation and Conferences
European Parliament*