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Harvey, Julia; Owen, David; Palumbo, Giuseppe

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Julia Harvey, David Owen and Giuseppe Palumbo*

Language Centres as translation-service providers: Joining forces at European level

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Abstract: The Translation Focus Group (TFG) within CercleS has paid particular attention to issues concerning the production of multilingual institutional texts within the context of European higher education, specifically in order to enhance the quality and effectiveness of terminology and style in ways that ensure the availability of the best possible approved, validated and relevant translations. Building on various initiatives launched by TFG members at local level, the group as a whole is currently designing a project that aims to create an integrated multilingual online platform specifically to assist producers of higher-education institutional texts.

Keywords: translation, terminology management, quality control, style guides, higher education, internationalisation

1 Introduction

Over the last few years, the Translation Focus Group (TFG) within CercleS has paid particular attention to issues concerning the production of multilingual institutional texts within the context of European Higher Education (HE), specifically to enhance the quality and effectiveness of terminology and style in ways that ensure the availability of approved, validated and relevant translations. Building on initiatives launched by TFG members at local level, the group as a whole is currently designing a project that aims to create an integrated multilingual online platform to assist producers of HE institutional texts. Two funding bids have so far proven unsuccessful, but the group is determined to continue seeking support. The aim is to launch a project that can exploit on a wider scale the expertise developed by individual TFG members. Resources created by the project are intended to serve a wide variety of user groups connected to HE,

*Corresponding author: **Giuseppe Palumbo**, Language Centre, University of Trieste, Trieste, Italy, E-mail: gpalumbo@units.it

Julia Harvey, University Translation and Correction Service, Language Centre, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands, E-mail: j.c.harvey@rug.nl

David Owen, Language Advisory & Translation Unit, Servei de Llengües, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain, E-mail: David.Owen@uab.cat

including administrative staff, researchers and lecturers, students, and policy-makers at local, national and international levels.

2 Translation and multilingual drafting within HE institutions

University Translation Services work in universities and translate and correct corporate documents (such as web pages, rules and regulations, guidelines, and policy documents) and research-related documents (e.g. articles, books, and grant applications) for the university communities. In some cases, Translation Services are part of Language Centres; in others, they are part of different units or operate independently. Some universities have no dedicated translation departments; in these, translation needs may be met with the help of foreign-language instructors or external service providers. In short, the increasing demand for translation services and multilingual institutional texts emerging within HE is being met under a wide variety of conditions and circumstances.

2.1 A European survey

One of the primary objectives of the CercleS TFG was to ascertain how translation and multilingual drafting services are organized in universities across Europe. To this end, an online survey was conducted among European Language Centres (n=69) in 2014. Initiated by the Language Centre of the University of Trieste, the survey aimed at elucidating what role (if any) translation is given within a university's language policy, whether a Language Centre has a dedicated translation unit and, if so, how it operates, how translating staff are recruited or selected, how terminology is managed, and whether a Centre develops dedicated translation resources (such as termbases and text repositories).

Since space considerations preclude presenting in detail all responses to the survey, only some of the major trends will be highlighted. These trends should be considered only as rough indications, since the population of respondents is not likely to be a representative sample of all European universities. In terms of organizational models, the survey showed that in the vast majority (84%) of responding universities the translation service is hosted within the university's Language Centre. It is also interesting to note that in a small number of cases (7%, or three universities) the translation department operates as a small independent business inside the university. In one case,

what had initially started as a translation department has branched out and is now an external company that continues to provide translation services to the parent university but also to other clients. Services to external clients, at any rate, are offered by almost half (43 %) of the translation units represented in the survey.

According to the survey, the actual day-to-day translation work is carried out, in most universities, by a combination of dedicated internal staff and external translators, possibly freelancers or companies to whom work is outsourced. In a significant number of cases (45 %), translation work is carried out by the university's own language teaching staff. All this indicates that universities, even when they have a dedicated translation department, will tend to assign to it an essentially organizational and supervisory role: in other words, what in the translation industry is seen as "project management". Our survey did not include specific questions on quality control processes, but it would be interesting to find out whether the use of external translators is felt to have an impact on the quality of translated texts. Anecdotal evidence gathered by several TFG members seems to indicate that a lack of knowledge of how HE is organised and how universities operate administratively can be a source of difficulty even for experienced translators.

Our survey also sought to find out about the types of texts that are translated within universities and whether related services, such as multilingual drafting or editing, are offered in addition to translation. As regards text types, responses indicate that translation is most often required for administrative documents, regulatory texts and promotional material (in print or online). Research articles also feature prominently but to a lesser extent than the other text types; they are *not* commissioned for translation in a significant number of responding universities, probably because translators or, even more likely, editors are hired directly by the authors of manuscripts. The bulk of the translation work has therefore to do with texts *about* the universities themselves: how they work, how they are regulated, what they offer to prospective students. Included in this are also the documents that universities use to establish international links, such as agreements, memoranda of understanding and executive protocols.

As regards the languages that documents are most often translated into, as one might expect English features prominently: 85 % of responding translation departments declared that they mostly translate into English. However, almost 75 % of respondents indicated that they translate into other target languages as well. On the operational side, a significant proportion of respondents indicated that they use some kind of dedicated translation technology tool: translation memories were the most popular, and terminology management tools came a close second. The vast

majority of respondents (74%) indicated that over the years they have developed their own resources, such as termbases or ad hoc text corpora. It is to be noted, though, that an equally significant proportion of respondents indicated that they do not use any kind of dedicated translation technology tool.

Finally, our survey inquired about the challenges and difficulties that most often confront university translation departments. Here, there was almost unanimous agreement among respondents that terminology is a major source of uncertainty and difficulty, given the lack of standardisation at European level and the pace at which new terms are coined (especially in English) without accompanying guidelines on possible equivalents in other languages. Other frequently cited sources of difficulty were the poor quality of source texts, the lack of specialisation of some translators (and especially their unfamiliarity with the organisational complexity of HE institutions), and the lack of coordination with other university units that operate in the area of institutional communication, such as international relations offices and IT services.

2.2 Terminology management: Issues and goals

As emerged in the TFG survey, the major challenge currently facing university translation departments is the speed at which terminology is being generated to accompany the shifts in education policy at European level. These shifts and policies pass into legislation, but are usually poorly understood at the grassroots level of university departments and teaching and research staff. The experiences of the past few years have taught university translators that they cannot rely on the upper echelons of their institutions for reliable terminology.

How can this pattern be changed? We know that a tsunami of new terminology is heading our way in the wake of the new European focus on quality control, so the sooner we prepare ourselves and our institutions the better. Our recommendations for doing so are as follows:

- Earlier involvement in the generation process
- Development of a Europe-wide terminology management approach
- Close cooperation with policymakers
- Raising awareness of dangers of misinterpretation

Terminology harvesting tools are currently the best way for us to locate terms that are currently being introduced in policy documents. But how can we manage these terms once we've found them?

The project envisaged by the TFG will not only address the monitoring and dissemination of education terminology in European and global theatres, but

also raise awareness of the dangers of misinterpretation. We take a new approach to terminology management, starting with close communication with policymakers in Europe (the Tuning project, www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/) to ensure that the conceptual frameworks behind terminology related to new legislation is thoroughly understood. This is crucial for ensuring appropriate translations of the new terminology into the EU languages. Our terminology data will immediately make the appropriate translations available to all users, in all language combinations, and with explanations of the conceptual framework. Our Europe-wide management approach starts by taking English as the hub for our database project, linking to all other European languages. We will start with just a few, and eventually expand to include them all. Our design enables cross-use possibilities, with users moving from language to language via English. As each language is linked to English, and a thorough understanding of the English term is a prerequisite for inclusion in the database, the chances of misinterpretation and misuse are reduced to a minimum. A feedback option enables questions to be answered quickly, with necessary adaptations swiftly incorporated. We also plan to create an app enabling the database to be consulted whenever and wherever it is needed.

Linked to this project is an online style guide for writing university-related documents, both articles for publication and internal administrative documents at all levels, from internal e-mails to rules and regulations. We intend to use the educational terminology in example sentences to help our colleagues produce high-quality written English documents. The tips, hints and explanations will be in English, and the examples will be tailored to the native language of the user, thus significantly expanding the guide's relevance and usability.

There are currently 9 partners and 7 associated partner universities involved in this initiative. The partners already work well together, and the individual institutions are also supportive. The Barcelona partners have already produced an online style guide that is widely used in Catalonia, and Groningen has had an online Dutch-English-Dutch terminology list for over 10 years. A recent development is funding for Groningen to update its termbase and terminology as a pilot project for our European plans, demonstrating the feasibility of the project as a whole. Related to this, a working group and steering group have been set up in collaboration with the Institute for the Dutch Language (INT), Tuning, IATA (the EU's multilingual term base, Dutch/Flemish section) and Nuffic (the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education) to jointly harvest, collate, generate and approve suitable Dutch equivalents for EU educational terminology. The aim is to have a working version online in the course of 2017, significantly strengthening the TFG's bid for EU funding for 2018–2023.

2.3 Style guides

Style guides have come to play an increasingly important role in ensuring the quality and coherence of the documents produced by HE institutions. This is particularly the case with online texts, which are often published with frequency and in considerable volume. For many organisations, the production of these texts has long ceased to be a centralised task (typically handled by a reduced group of in-house editors and translators working together) which has led to significant variation in written style. In turn, this variation may be perceived as a lack of standardisation and quality; our project aims to address this issue and to help solve it.

Within a remarkably short space of time, the production of university documentation has gone from “mostly paper” to “almost entirely web-based”. This is largely true for most domains of university documentation (even contracts and their obvious need for validated signatures are unlikely to withstand such a change for much longer). It also applies to most universities and HE institutions, both large and small. Increasingly, universities need to provide documents that describe and define their core activities, objectives and products, and in many countries there is the need to produce such documentation in a variety of languages. Clearly, the massive availability of information provided by HE institutions is beneficial to the organisation and its (potential) clients alike. Besides the accessibility of information, this change has also allowed smaller institutions to promote themselves far beyond their traditional domains of influence and to compete directly at an international level.

Yet this is not quite the win-win situation that it may at first appear to be. The massive availability of textual information also necessarily implies at least the possibility of its massive perusal. In this context, any institution promoting itself as a centre of excellence must ensure that the linguistic quality of its online presence reflects the image of reliability and distinction that it claims for itself. In other words, all texts published by HE institutions – not simply the promotional material – are *digital indicators* of those institutions. Get it right and things are fine; get it less than right, and things may go against you.

In fact, it is probably more accurate to say that, if you get it right (by which we mean that the linguistic quality of an institution’s online documentation is solid), things are not strictly “fine” but, more accurately, are uncontroversial. The message is conveyed, uninterrupted by the media. Get it less than right (by which we mean that a text may have obvious orthographical and grammatical errors, giving a generally poor linguistic impression) and the image to which the institution aspires is then significantly compromised.

Smaller institutions may still be able to ensure centralised control over the production and revision of their own documents. In such cases, a team of professionals will probably address the needs of their institution and oversee the quality of its online texts. However, most HE institutions are now so complex (with faculties, schools, departments, services and their respective administrations) that they have necessarily decentralised the production of such texts. Given this, the issue that needs to be addressed is how to ensure that across-the-board linguistic coherence can be guaranteed. This is where language tools such as official administrative style guides can prove their worth.

Style guidance does not refer to the intangible subjectivity of “good writing” (although writing of an acceptable quality is clearly an objective), but refers, instead, to questions for which advice on usage can be established. This includes aspects of orthography, punctuation, abbreviations, use of numbers, gender and plurality, etc. An example of such style guidance, one that is also a model for the type of tool that our project hopes to develop, is the institutional style guide produced by the Language Service at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (<http://blogs.uab.cat/manualdestilinteruniversitari>). This was created in collaboration with other language services in the Catalan university network and with participation and feedback from a broad community of university staff working in a range of distinct areas.

The Language Service style guide provides orientation on usage and also makes a series of stylistic choices on behalf of the university. This is not because such choices are beyond debate; rather, it obviates the need for technical discussion, facilitates the coherent application of style issues, and provides a reliable tool for writers whose English (in this case) is not necessarily of the highest level. The style guide also provides model documents that are an additional contribution to standardising university administrative texts. These models do not cover all types of documentation, but are a highly practical step towards helping writers make more consistent choices that reflect positively on the quality of the university’s texts.

Returning to our own terminology-management project, along similar basic lines to the Language Service, we aim to produce a multilingual, context-sensitive online style guide, interconnected with our online terminology tool to support that tool and to contextualise its items in a comprehensible and relevant manner. This may eventually be in the form of a toolbar application embedded within the user’s word processor. At all events, the final form and content of the style guide would probably not vary greatly from that of the Universitat Autònoma. Its basic function would also be essentially the same: to standardise possible stylistic decisions that are potentially multiple and therefore capable of producing a divergence of usage that, rather than indicating a richness of authorial resources (as it might in a literary context), would instead create an

undesirable *spread* of dissimilar forms militating against the image of a well-organised and efficient institution.

Clearly, in marked contrast to the model style guide indicated above, while a single institution can insist upon the application or avoidance of a particular series of stylistic issues, the same cannot apply to a tool created for many distinct institutions, which are not related in any formal way. Nevertheless, our project aims to produce a style tool of an authoritative nature (through its relevance and through its immediate and practical applicability) that will aim to provide and support stylistic coherence of a general nature to numerous universities and other HE institutions.

3 Future prospects

The work carried out so far by the CercleS TFG has led to a comprehensive picture of the role played by Language Centres in supporting and enhancing the institutional communication of universities at international level. The Group is committed to the on-going analysis of trends emerging in this area and hopes to be able to secure the necessary funding to start a large-scale project for the creation of open-access online resources. These resources would benefit not only language professionals working in the HE context but also all the other user groups that are interested in, or affected by, the growing internationalisation of HE: students, researchers, administrators, and policymakers.

Bionotes

Julia Harvey

Julia Harvey has been head of the University Translation and Correction Service (UVC) of the Language Centre of the University of Groningen since 2001. She holds a PhD from University College London. Alongside her work for the UVC she is currently jointly responsible with Professor Frieda Steurs of Leiden University, the INT and Leuven University for the HOTNeV project (Higher Education Terminology in the Netherlands and Flanders), which is coordinating the translation of EU education terminology into Dutch.

David Owen

David Owen is head of the Translation and Text-Correction Unit in the Language Service of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) where he has worked since 1997. He holds a PhD in English Literature from the UAB and lectures on the literatures and cultures of English with the university's department of English and German studies. He has published extensively on writers of the late eighteenth century, particularly on the early works of Jane Austen.

Giuseppe Palumbo

Giuseppe Palumbo is a Lecturer in English Language and Translation at the University of Trieste, where he is also the Director of the Language Centre. He holds a PhD from the University of Surrey (UK) and specializes in technical and scientific translation and the use of technology in professional translation. He has published on terminology, the design of translator training curricula and the creation of on-line translation teaching materials, and is also the author of *Key Terms in Translation Studies* (Continuum, 2009).