EU multilingualism: the looming challenges

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Abstract

The European Union's motto "Unity in Diversity" is the demonstration of the enduring vision of Europe's different languages and different cultures as a priceless asset. Ensuring that this diversity is not a barrier to understanding is the task of 10% of the European Commission staff, comprising roughly three quarters translators, one quarter interpreters. I shall of course be concentrating on the latter.

Danica Seleskovitch very pertinently pointed out that the chain of communication does not stop in the booth. We in the European Commission's Directorate-general for Interpretation have long taken this to heart, both literally and figuratively. Literally, in the sense that the ultimate destination of the message is of course the customer: I will present some key findings of our latest Customer Satisfaction Survey which has just been finalised. Figuratively, because the looming shortage of good young conference interpreters coming into the profession threatens that the message may only reach an empty booth for some languages.

Within those two over-arching themes, there are of course other important interwoven issues which I would like to tease out for your consideration.

1. Some preliminary considerations

Allow me first to provide some context for a better understanding of the complexities involved. The four 'founding' languages and their 12 possible permutations gradually increased over the first four decades to 11 languages and 110 combinations. Then came rapid expansion to 23 languages and a massive 506 combinations. The number of languages may have doubled but the operational complexity has increased by far more than that (cf. Figure 1).
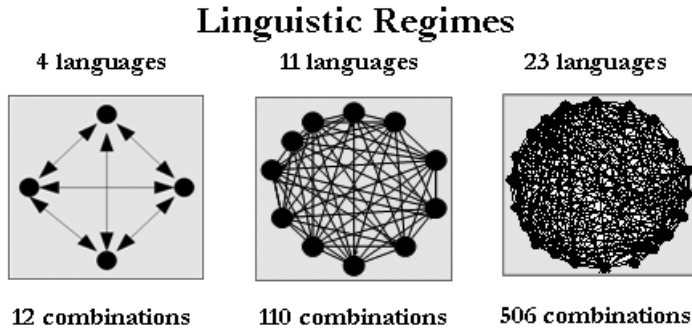
Linguistic Regimes

Figure 1

In addition, special arrangements were also agreed for the occasional inclusion of Basque, Catalan, Galician, Scots Gaelic and Welsh. Nor was that all; visiting Heads of State or government, different international groupings, all require tailor-made language arrangements which we are required to provide. Our record currently stands at full coverage of a 28 language meeting. "*L'intendance suivra*" indeed!

Nonetheless, this exponential increase in complexity has also profoundly changed the professional landscape. Previously, we had stressed a marked preference for direct interpretation into the mother tongue wherever possible. Nowadays, to paraphrase Eco, the language of EU interpreting is relay (cf. Appendix).

It should not be thought that this unparalleled linguistic wealth might offer any immunity from the spread of English. Indeed, there are grounds to argue that this very diversity may have favoured and accelerated the use of the prevailing lingua franca.

Naturally, since we have said that interpreting may be assessed according to its usefulness to the customer, this is a further factor that we must take into account in assessing the quality of interpretation we provide. But I shall return to this later.

Having now pronounced the 'Q' word, I should at this stage immediately declare that I am using the very simplest definition of quality that obtains in an organisation, or perhaps more broadly, in the paid exercise of the profession: " *'Quality' in a product is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the*

customer gets out and is willing to pay for..." (Drucker 1985: 206). Drucker's formula is particularly apt since it is unambiguous, universally applicable and also because it is a useful reminder that interpreting is customer-focused rather than art for art's sake. This definition will be a touchstone to which I shall return in the course of this presentation. Moreover, as Umberto Eco says "*Every sensible and rigorous theory of language shows that a perfect translation is an impossible dream*" (2001). Any assessment of quality of service must accordingly be based on how 'useful' the user considers the interpretation to be.

2.   Are the customers satisfied?

After lengthy preparation – in which our staff interpreters were also closely involved – DG SCIC's first Customer Satisfaction Survey was launched at the end of 2006 and the report published in 2007. This was the very first survey undertaken by an organisation on this scale (over 3,000 respondents) and to such depth, so a degree of apprehension was inevitable. Given the rather creditable results that emerged, the 2010 Survey was greeted with far greater equanimity. The results, published very recently, may be found at the following address:

> http://www.scic.cec/scicnet/upload/docs/application/pdf/2010-03/2nd_
> customer_satisfaction_survey_2010.pdf

Questionnaires were distributed to delegates in a range of meetings across SCIC client Institutions and bodies in Brussels. Respondents represented a very similar constituency to that of 2007: 78% were 'regulars', i.e. attended more than 5 meetings with interpretation per year and 75% were national civil servants. In other words there was an overwhelming majority of experienced and knowledgeable customers even if the number of respondents was down (around 2,500 delegates). Overall satisfaction, the 'headline' figure, edged up slightly from 2007 with only 2% expressing dissatisfaction. But, reassuring as that was, we were far more interested in less obvious aspects, particularly where and how we could improve.
Perhaps I could highlight a few more noteworthy findings as I see them:
1. As in 2007, respondents with interpretation into their own language were significantly more satisfied (+7.8%) than those who listened to interpretation in another language.
2. The 'terminology' satisfaction rating was slightly up (1%) on average but the situation for individual languages oscillated considerably. But, digging a little deeper, a most striking correlation is to be found between satisfaction for "terminology" and overall satisfaction. Those who were 'dissatisfied' or 'fairly dissatisfied' with terminology gave an overall satisfaction rating of 57.4% while those who were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with terminology gave an extremely high 95.4% overall rating.

The difference in satisfaction of 38% is enormous and certainly gives much food for thought. The 2007 survey had already indicated that more attention was needed in this area and we had accordingly reweighted our training mix to strengthen the thematic training (meeting subjects) component. It would appear that either this has had limited impact or that the technical sophistication of meeting discussions has become even greater. It is quite clear that we (management and interpreters) must reflect carefully on this.

But what exactly is the problem? On the correlation itself, there is in my opinion room for some exploration. Firstly, how is "terminology" understood? One could easily conceive that 'terminology' might go beyond its meaning *stricto sensu* and spill over into the far wider concept of "knowledge of the subject being discussed". It is true that our interpreters change meetings, subject areas, organisations even, everyday so this is inevitably our Achilles heel. In addition, the relevant documentation is often available only in a restricted number of languages so the technical terms are not always available. At the more practical level, an interpreter who knows the exact term need not dither, hunt around or resort to lengthy circumlocutions and will project effortlessly knowledgeable reassuring professionalism. (I have always considered interpreting to be akin to medicine and banking in that all depend on gaining and maintaining the trust of the client for the viable exercise of their profession). This combination of the substantive and the subliminal could warrant the sizeable premium given to "terminology" by the respondents.

3. Another interesting issue cropped up when looking at which language customers used when interpretation was available. "I always speak in my mother tongue" was chosen by 65% of respondents, 10% sometimes spoke in another language, while 5% always spoke in another language. The principal reasons given for choosing to take the floor in another language were:
   - Concern that the interpreters would not convey their message accurately: 10% (down from 19% in 2007);
   - Communication would be improved by using a more widely-spoken language: 30%;
   - Greater familiarity with the meeting subject in another language: 30%.
4. The progressive spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has already been alluded to previously. It is worth underlining explicitly that this phenomenon has two quite separate manifestations. While more and more people speak (non-native) English, native English speakers are less and less able to speak (or understand) anything else. Thus English-native speakers are by far the most faithful to and dependent on interpretation (93%).

As in 2007, there is again a very substantial gap in satisfaction with interpretation between native speakers and non-native speakers who

listened to English interpretation. Overall satisfaction of native English speakers was very high (93%) but less so for non-natives (79%). This 14% gap shows slight progress since 2007 (16%) but the order of magnitude clearly constitutes a red light on the dashboard[1]. Actually, the red light is signalling a very crucial issue going well beyond the EU: what is English?; which English?; and whose language is it anyway?

> Deeply held feelings of ownership begin to be questioned. Indeed, if there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it anymore. Or rather, everyone who has learned it now owns it 'has a share in it' might be more accurate – and has the right to use it in the way they want. This fact alone makes many people uncomfortable, even vaguely resentful. (Crystal 2003: 2-3)

> This has led to a somewhat paradoxical situation: on the one hand, for the majority of its users, English is a foreign language, and the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve any native speakers of the language at all. On the other hand, there is still a tendency for native speakers to be regarded as custodians over what is acceptable usage. (Seidlhofer 2005: 339)

Thus, the English of native speakers (or very proficient non-natives) cohabits uneasily with the English of those non-native speakers who know it only as a lingua franca, an extra-territorial common space rather than as a language with an indissociable underlying culture, history and geography.

It is manifestly a source of continuing professional frustration for interpreters to hear more and more ELF spoken in meetings – often by their own customers, especially when they see very valid arguments failing to get across because of awkward, ambiguous or plain bad expression. (The lot of the translators is probably even worse, as they often have systematically to revise or even rewrite texts in English. Documents being legally binding, imprecise drafting can cause the direst consequences.)

However, we are there to help not to oblige people to speak any particular language. Consequently, the only way to go about it is to show that interpretation does offer the best way of achieving the customer's objectives.

> [...] l'interprétation est de plus en plus vue comme un luxe offert aux auditeurs pour leur confort afin de leur épargner la fatigue occasionnée par l'écoute prolongée d'une langue étrangère, comprise certes, mais au prix d'un certain effort. Or ce confort n'est apporté que par une interprétation qui présente la qualité d'un produit de luxe. (Déjean le Féal 2005: 41)

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1   Perhaps the binary distinction between native and non-native speakers may be over-simplistic since the Nordics and the Dutch are often highly proficient.

If customers are unconvinced by the quality of the interpretation to which they listen, it follows that they will be far less inclined to trust to interpretation when they themselves speak. Hence the importance we attach to performance appraisal at every level. The weakest link determines the strength of the whole team and so quality must necessarily be consistently high throughout the whole team.

But the rise of English is a global phenomenon going well beyond the meeting rooms of the EU Institutions. Other rather more powerful instruments are committed to ensuring that multilingualism remains vibrant. In 2002, the EU Council of Ministers in Barcelona set the target of "mother tongue plus 2" (foreign languages) for citizens. It was generally understood that the "2" would comprise one 'major' language and one other. In 2008 the Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue (a.k.a Malouf group) aired the interesting proposal that the other language should be a PAL (personal adoptive language).

> The idea is that every European should be encouraged to freely choose a distinctive language different from his or her language of identity, and also different from his or her language of international communication (Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue 2008: 10).

Given ELF's inexorable progression, this has been completed more recently by the very explicit 'English is not enough'. Indeed it is not.

3.   The next generation

The ranks of our interpreters are not enough either. Although good conference interpreters have always been in short supply, that shortage – which also affects all the international organisations – is becoming increasingly acute. Nowhere more so than for English. The paradox of being awash in a sea of English and yet experiencing a drought of English interpreters recalls Coleridge's thirst-stricken Ancient Mariner in a becalmed ship: "*Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink*".

But shortages were already present and/or foreseeable for other languages too, e.g. French and German. These shortages are also making themselves felt more and more. For German, there is also the aggravating circumstance that the number of learners of German is continuing a clear downward trend, so much so that interpreters working from German are keenly sought.

In addition, the EU and other interpreting services found themselves fishing in the same talent pool as many other recruiters, the latter often having superior pulling-power with more appealing remuneration/career packages. In the last decade the demand for bright young graduates with keen analytical skills and a flair for communication has rocketed. As far back as 1997, the iconic McKinsey consultancy had coined the phrase "War

for Talent" and prophesied that the demand for highly-skilled people would increasingly outstrip supply for the next 20 years.

> For a few more years companies can fill their executive ranks with the increasing number of older baby boomers, but when those boomers retire, companies will find their management ranks very thin (McKinsey & Co. 2001: 10).

The greying of Europe is certainly evident behind the tinted glass of the interpreting booths. The average age of SCIC German interpreters is 48.4, the freelance colleagues at 53.4 are even older. For the French the ages are 44.8 and 53 respectively and for the English 48.3 and 51.2. The wave of baby-boomer retirements has started and will continue for the next ten years or so.

The ever-fiercer competition for the best, generated by the transformation of Europe into a knowledge society and coinciding with the move towards retirement of a whole generation of baby-boomers was and is a major source of concern. Nor is this confined solely to the EU, it is a major issue for advanced economies world-wide. The European Commission had already been pro-active on the succession planning front, as had the European Parliament. A diversified cooperation programme of professional and financial support for student interpreters and university training courses had been progressively set in place.

But it was clear that more was needed.

1. *Innovative Schemes.* Most appropriately for the Year of Innovation and Creativity, 2009 was a year that produced an unprecedented number of significant and innovative actions on our part. Over the last years, we had intensified our contacts in the Member States. From numerous visits and conversations with key players in the Universities, Ministries and other national authorities, by my management team and myself, we were able to identify potential areas where productive improvements could be introduced. We designed, developed and, in 2010, launched the 'KIN' actions, a set of three new schemes tailored to complete our "Next Generation" platform (cf. Figure 2) with the following aims:

- *Key Trainers Scheme*: Support key university trainers by offering specially tailored access to long-term recruitment, so as to allow them to reconcile both their University training commitments and their interpreting activities for SCIC, (thereby also ensuring transmission of our professional and quality requirements to student-interpreters);
- *Integration programme:* Provide a one-month internship with grant for young graduates who had not quite made the grade in our tests but had demonstrated the potential to do so to EU test panels. This highly flexible facility allowed us both to cater to a wide linguistic range of candidates and to do so in a highly more cost-effective manner. In the

framework of inter-Institutional co-operation, our EU sister services also contributed valuable support;

- *Newcomers Scheme*: Guarantee a good professional start for newly-accredited young colleagues. Given the "live" nature of the profession, inexperienced young graduates inevitably face a vicious circle: no experience means no work; no work means no experience. Offering a guaranteed annual workload with accompanying mentoring, this scheme tangibly improves the entry of promising young interpreters to ensure the continuing vigour of the profession.

The figure also shows the existing actions which many of you will be very familiar with already to show how these new schemes dovetail into existing programmes. We hope they will also prove mutually-reinforcing.
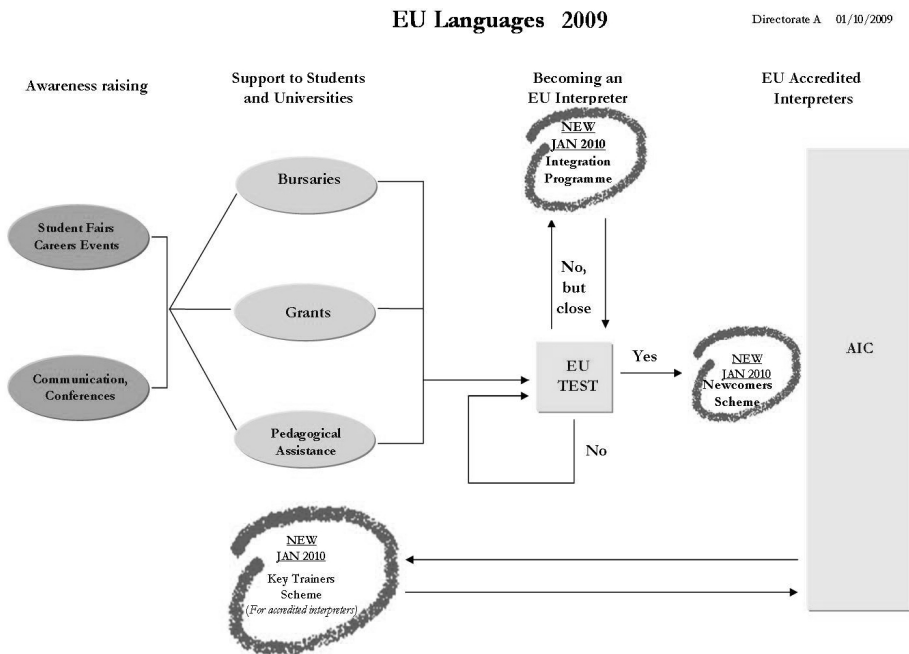
Figure 2

2. *New Channels.* We also realised that in order to get through to our intended target audience, traditional media was ineffective and we had to harness the power of attraction of the Internet. Thus, we published a Facebook page for information and dialogue appropriate for the target age-groups. After a visit to Riga, Marco Benedetti commissioned a tailor-made clip for Latvian which proved very successful. On that basis, we launched a series of video-clips targeted at the different languages and age-groups we sought. The site, named "Interpreting for Europe"[2], is

2   http://www.facebook.com/pages/Interpreting-for-Europe/173122606407.

tangible proof of the high degree of cooperation attained by the three EU Interpreting Services (European Court of Justice, European Parliament and ourselves, European Commission). Your feedback and contributions are always most welcome.

3. *Strengthening Cooperation.* Our inter-organisational cooperation also extends well beyond Europe encompassing virtually all the world's International Organisations through IAMLAPD[3]. This is the one and only forum for the Language and Conference Services of the world's international (and supra-national) organisations and is chaired by the UN.

In this wider global context and in close cooperation with the UN, we are founding project partners in the 2 new conference interpreter university training courses on the African continent (Nairobi, Kenya and Maputo, Mozambique) also contributing pedagogical support and examiners. In the same framework, we remain in close touch with the existing course(s) in North America and also continue to talk to potential new entrants. As Chairman of the IAMLADP Working Group on Training, I can assure you that IAMLAPD is firmly committed to working with the training Universities and will constantly strive to strengthen and multiply the bridges between the employers and the trainers.

4.   Conclusion

In concluding, I am grateful for this opportunity to offer an insight into our main concerns as well as some new initiatives and developments which I believe might be of interest to you as University trainers, researchers and professionals. Apart from providing the intellectual underpinning of the language professions, your research will inevitably feed back into the teaching and training of the next generations. They will be all the better for it. There is no room for complacency in today's world and customers' expectations of quality rise continually.

From almost everything I have said, it emerges beyond the shadow of any doubt that we are firmly committed to quality and that the Universities and trainers with whom we cooperate are and will remain the key elements of our strategy. As you are aware, we invest heavily in our joint partnership and we intend to continue to do so.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to record my deep appreciation of the very valuable work you are doing, particularly in the

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3   International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publishing.

straitened circumstances in which many of your institutions currently find themselves.

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Imprimé le   03/09/10 15:21