

# Controlling Complexity – Resource-Efficient Translation in the European Parliament

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## ABSTRACT

Multilingualism is a founding principle of the European Union enshrined in the Treaties. In order to ensure that this principle is adhered to in the European Parliament, the Directorate-General for Translation has, over the years, developed a resource-efficient approach that guarantees timely delivery of high-quality translations. Technology is one of the key elements in this development, which prompts us to consider different questions and challenges, such as: How do we control our complex environment? What is the profile of a modern translator? How can we continue to deliver high quality on time?

## KEYWORDS

European Parliament, multilingualism, complexity, IT, specialisation.

### 1. MULTILINGUALISM

Multilingualism is a necessity for the proper functioning of the European Union. This notion was already clear to the founding fathers of what we know today as

the EU. In fact, it was already enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and in subsequent legal acts. By the same token, it is also the very reason for the existence of the language services in the European Institutions.

This principle of multilingualism means that all legislation is available in all the official languages, currently 24, and enables every citizen – from the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to journalists to school children – to follow the legislative work of the European Institutions. Furthermore, if you want to write to any of the Institutions or bodies of the Union, you can do so in your own language and receive an answer in the same language.

Additionally, in the European Parliament MEPs have the right to speak, read, write and listen in their own language. Seeing this multilingualism at work in the European Parliament is a truly unique experience, which is open to anyone when parliamentary part-sessions and committee meetings are streamed on the internet and broadcast. At the same time, the relevant documents are readily available in all the languages; they can be found on the website of the European Parliament.

Multilingualism is also ever-present through the mere fact that staff members work in a variety of languages; usually the three working languages, English, French and German; but also, at times, other languages, depending on the particular situation. It is fair to say that the general linguistic awareness and capacity in the European Institutions is very high.

Source texts are often written by authors in a language other than their main language; most texts are written in English, but English may be only the second or third language of the author(s). This, of course, raises the question of how to handle texts written by non-native speakers. In the case of legislative texts, legal-linguistic verification is performed by the Directorate for Legislative Acts before translation. For a number of other important texts, an English Editing Unit has been established in DG Translation with the aim of ensuring good-quality source texts in English.

## 2. WHO IS INVOLVED?

It is wrong to link multilingualism in the European Parliament exclusively to the language professions. Multilingualism is indeed made possible by the language professionals, who master the rules of their language and produce written and oral output, also following, for example, the rules in Parliament's Code of Conduct on Multilingualism;<sup>1</sup> but in fact multilingualism is practised by everyone.

Some of those involved are the MEPs, committee administrators, translators, editors, lawyer-linguists, interpreters and proof-readers, but these professions

1 Code of Conduct on Multilingualism, June 16, 2014. Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/multilinguisme/coc2014\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/multilinguisme/coc2014_en.pdf) (last accessed on June 30, 2016).

are all engaged in the core business of the EP – adopting legislation. In the administrative area there are other actors who have an equally high awareness of the multilingual aspect of the House.

Every day is filled with concrete examples of multilingualism in action at all levels; many different actors produce originals, maybe even in their second or third language. As an example illustrating multilingual awareness in the administration, when a recruitment notice, or rather a selection procedure for the recruitment of translators, is being prepared by the experts in our human resources department, English is most often used as the basis for defining the texts used in the various selection exercises, but many English words or concepts have to be thoroughly discussed from the perspective of how they will then be translated or used in other languages, bearing in mind both cultural and linguistic aspects. This is an example of the often rather complex procedure for producing originals. It was recently done in the case of Italian, French, Slovene, Maltese and Danish. This full linguistic and cultural awareness is an integral, daily part of our work – multilingualism in operation at all levels.

Very importantly, the translators in DG Translation, with a few exceptions, exclusively translate into what we call the main language, which is an administrative term coined because there is a need to describe the personal choice of candidates in the translation competitions (*concours*). Your perceived mother tongue is not necessarily your main language, a reality known to many who grow up in bi- and multilingual environments.

The core business of translators in the European Parliament is the translation of legislation, and what we do, as expressed even better by the motto of the Directorate-General for Translation, is to create legislative originals through translation. In fact, when texts are voted on by the European Parliament, all the translations of the source text become originals alongside the source text.

### 3. DEVELOPMENTS

One important fact needs to be borne in mind, namely that all 24 official languages are used. With successive enlargements of the EU, the number of possible language combinations has grown to 552 (24 official languages, each of which can be translated into 23 others). It hardly needs saying that, especially in the case of the Union's least widely spoken languages, it is sometimes difficult to find anyone able to translate from a given source language into a given target language, from Estonian to Maltese, for example, or vice versa.

In order to translate texts written in languages that the translation units do not necessarily cover (they are obliged to cover English, French, German, Italian and Spanish), a system of relay languages, as they are called, has been put in place: a text, or the relevant part of a text, is first translated into one of the three current relay languages (English, French or German) and from there into the

remaining languages. Other languages (Italian, Polish and Spanish) may also become relay languages in due course.

Because of the complex machinery needed when using all the languages at almost all times, especially for the legislation adopted in Parliament, a whole series of developments has taken place, both in the field of terminology, which is closely linked to the translation process, and in that of language technology – both internally and commercially developed – and IT support for translators. Furthermore, training efforts have been intensified, in the form of both courses at universities and supplementary training courses, and there is a constant focus on the specialisation of staff that is required by the increasingly complex subject matter to be translated.

#### 4. CLOUD PHILOSOPHY

In order to control multilingualism, with 552 possible language combinations in translation, powerful IT tools and digital memories are needed to store everything that is written in all the languages.

The younger generation has a certain ease in its approach to clouds of various kinds. Even if it might seem a bit far-fetched, the strategy that was initiated several years ago by the European Institutions can also be described as one that enjoys the positive effects of digitalisation. At that time, all the EU translation services agreed that it would be wise to share their work digitally, so a powerful cloud-based repository called Euramis was developed.

In Euramis, all the written output of the Institutions is stored in the form of segments of texts. In a sense, the philosophy of documents has been abandoned and the focus has changed to small parts or segments. The underlying system equips these segments with all the necessary metadata of the document, making it clear what context – primarily legislative – they come from, with a view to their safe re-use in the future.

The translation services of several different Institutions – mainly, but not exclusively, the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament – work together on translations of legislation, which eventually become originals, so that it is of the utmost importance that it is always clear – thanks to these metadata – where the segments come from and what their context is.

Except for confidential documents and a few other document types, everything is uploaded to this EU-wide cloud of segmented translations and, once they are there, we have complete multidirectionality in 552 language combinations. What was once an original segment of a translation from, for example, English to French, can now equally well be retrieved in the form of a translation from Finnish to Spanish. In practical terms, it often happens that texts or parts of texts are repeated in different languages; for example, the same amendments are sometimes tabled in different languages or parts of a text is reused

in another language months later. Thanks to multidirectionality this is not a problem.

It is safe to say that multilingualism and the need to control it have engendered technology that supports coherence and record-keeping.

## 5. TRANSLATOR OR REVISER?

At the Directorate-General for Translation we have some specific expectations of our translators (and to some extent also of our translation assistants):

- knowledge of languages – a perfect knowledge of the main language, plus a thorough knowledge of two other languages, one of them being French, English or German, the second preferably another of these languages and/or Spanish, Italian or Polish;
- intellectual curiosity and knowledge of current affairs and topical events. We translate many parliamentary resolutions, which often deal with topical themes; it is an important part of the European Parliament's role, for example, to express itself on violations of human rights and events in the news in general;
- readiness to specialise; translators are assigned to broad thematic groups, whose subject matter they follow, and thus are expected to build up specialised knowledge which makes their work quicker and better;
- flexibility and a flair for team work; because of the legislative cycles of the parliamentary work and the sometimes very tight deadlines, staff must be prepared to accept flexible working hours and to collaborate with others on some translations; furthermore, translators also need to broaden their activity and participate in meetings of project teams and sometimes in meetings of a political nature such as negotiations between Parliament, Council and Commission (so-called dialogues), in order to gain background information for themselves and their colleagues;
- IT-awareness and openness to technology as a tool with which to meet the high quality and consistency standards that guarantee the coherence of our – mainly legislative – texts;
- translators should be able to work autonomously, but in the case of some tasks they will be assisted by translation assistants, especially as regards the pre- and post-treatment of texts.

In view of the points made above, a fair question would certainly be this: do we need translators or revisers? There is no simple answer to this question, but it is certain that revision skills are becoming more and more an essential asset of a good translator. Increasingly, our staff are processing previously translated texts or segments using CAT tools, be they retrievals from our Euramis cloud or the product of machine translation. This calls for the mindset of a new kind of reviser if the texts are to be grasped properly. The next question must then be:

can people be trained in these skills? Our view is that they can, and as described above we invest many resources in making our staff aware of the political background to their work and giving them the opportunity to specialise; linguistic excellence combined with this specialised political and thematic knowledge is our added value. The abilities needed are therefore not traditional revision skills but, as already pointed out, they include the ability to evaluate the incorporation of previously translated segments, as well as text-analysis skills. The ideal translator avoids the “red-pen syndrome” of overcorrecting and has a pragmatic view of the text. You could call this profile: translator-in-chief.

## 6. ORGANISING TRANSLATORS’ WORK

By way of conclusion, I would like to compare the new requirements described above with the reality of a translator at the European Parliament.

As we have seen, translators at the European Parliament are becoming more and more specialised, since they need to have a good knowledge of policy in order to understand the subject matter of the texts. One could say, in a slightly simplified formulation, that we specialise in background knowledge but we continue to be specialists in what we love most – language. For these reasons, and because of our resource-efficiency, we are indeed the preferred choice for our direct “governors”, the MEPs. Translators specialise in legislation and contribute to the creation of original legislative texts by coordinating linguistic elements, background policy elements and contacts with other practitioners of multilingualism.