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How work at the EU has changed since 1989: today's challenges for training departments. The experience of the Italian booth at DG SCIC

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Abstract

What was it like to work as an EU interpreter in 1989, when The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation *was first published in Trieste? And what is it like in the age of digitalisation and globalisation? The use of English as a Lingua Franca has been spreading relentlessly at the European Institutions, but multilingualism has not yet been lost and is still strongly promoted. This poses quite some challenges for interpreters, as a great deal of what they have to interpret is non-standard English, and at the same time they have to maintain a thorough knowledge of several passive languages. A group of European Commission staff interpreters share their views on how their work has changed over the past decades and on what this means for trainers and young interpreters wishing to embark upon a career at the EU.*

Keywords

Interpreting for the European Institutions, digitalisation, ELF, practical aspects of interpreter training, old and new challenges for interpreters.

* Disclaimer: The content of this article does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed lies entirely with the author.

Introduction

In 1989, Laura Gran and John Dodds, professors from the then Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT) of the University of Trieste, published a compendium on the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching Conference Interpretation (Gran/Dodds 1989). The world around us and - with it - the work of interpreters have changed a lot since then.

This article presents the views of a group of eight experienced staff interpreters of the Italian booth at DG SCIC, the conference interpretation service of the European Commission, on how the evolution of language regimes at European Union meetings and Information Technology developments have shaped the work of interpreters over the past three decades and how these developments, as well as the wider societal changes around us, influence the didactics of interpreting. The article addresses some very practical aspects of interpreting and interpreter training and naturally focusses on work at the EU and in particular the Italian booth. Some observations, however, will also apply more generally to the profession as a whole.

The interpreters that were interviewed for this article have between 15 and 25 years of professional experience as staff interpreters at the European institutions and have all contributed to the training of young interpreters through the pedagogical assistance and dummy booth practice offered by DG SCIC to universities and visiting trainee interpreters.

The material used includes personal interviews with the above mentioned interpreters, as well as seven reports on virtual classes organised with the universities of Trieste and Forlì between March 2018 and January 2019, three reports on study visits from Trieste and Innsbruck, and a set of twelve evaluation questionnaires filled in by the Forlì students after their study visit to DG SCIC in November 2018.

1. Interpreting from past to present

30 years ago, the European Economic Community (EEC) only had 12 member states (Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Greece, as well as Spain and Portugal, the last two countries to join the EEC in 1986). The 12 member states spoke 8 official languages (English, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Danish, Spanish and Portuguese).

The internet revolution had not taken place yet. Computers were entering people's homes, but were still mainly used for programming, text editing and gaming. Access to the world wide web spread gradually during the 1990s and only became widely available in most households in the early 2000s.

Over the past 30 years the EEC became the European Union (EU) which has grown to 28 member states with 24 official languages, and Brexit (United Kingdom withdrawal) will have no effect on this latter number. Both the gradual enlargement of the EU and the development of Information Technology (IT) have had a considerable impact on the work of interpreters.

The internet and social media now influence every aspect of our lives with smartphones allowing us to be permanently interconnected and giving us access to real-time information on any subject.

Language regimes have become increasingly complex and the limited availability of interpreters and conference rooms with enough booths mean that it is impossible to provide interpretation for all official languages at each and every one of the meetings that are organised at the European institutions on a daily basis. Since most delegates' best second language is English, this has led to an increasing use of English as a lingua franca. The more recent enlargements to Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, 2007 and 2013 contributed further to this trend. In the past, French had a similar status to English, with many civil servants of the European Commission using it as a working language, but it rapidly lost ground with the arrival of a large group of new civil servants and delegates from Central and Eastern European countries like Poland, Hungary, Croatia or Latvia, where French is much less commonly taught.

That said, multilingualism is still promoted by the institutions and many meetings have bigger language regimes. Interpreters therefore, may find themselves working in two very different settings: either working group meetings with smaller language regimes where most delegates speak English, or meetings with full language regimes where they work from several different source languages. This poses two types of challenges to interpreters: being able to turn non-standard English into a cogent message that is as faithful as possible to the original has become the interpreters' daily fare, but at the same time, interpreters must keep up their knowledge of the other passive languages they work from, even though some of these languages may not be spoken very frequently in meetings.

The enlargement to 28 countries has also had other repercussions on the work of EU interpreters. In certain circumstances, in order to give all delegations the chance to present their positions, while at the same time preventing the length of meetings from spiralling out of control, it has become imperative to limit speaking times. This is especially true at ministerial level meetings. The response of delegations has been to read out written speeches, which can be timed more accurately. Read-out messages are inevitably denser than impromptu speech, as they lack the natural redundancy created by repeating certain points or stopping to rephrase a thought, and are often read out at a fast pace to fit into assigned speaking times.

At the same time, the files discussed at European level have become increasingly technical. Animal health, customs automation, radio spectrum, and cooperation in civil or criminal matters are only a few examples.

Technology has fortunately come to our aid. Online glossaries and documents facilitate meeting preparation and the internet makes it a lot easier to retrieve subject-specific information on specialised websites. Most interpreters nowadays work with laptops, tablets or smartphones in the booth and have direct access to all of these tools.

2. Old and new challenges for training institutions

Although there is no doubt about the fact that the advent of new technologies has made the work of interpreters much easier in many ways, it must also be recognised that it has some downsides.

2.1 General knowledge and command of mother tongue – the interpreters' ABC

Unlike the old days, when access to information was not so easy and a good knowledge of the world around us could help interpreters make sense of what they were interpreting, the younger generations have grown up with the idea that any information they might need is just a few clicks away and seem to attach less importance to solid general knowledge. This means that trainee interpreters may be more likely thrown off by unexpected references to facts they are not familiar with.

The increasing use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as main sources of information may also have a negative impact on attention span and critical thinking skills, as Facebook and Twitter posts rarely confront readers with opposing views and lack the complex reasoning of in-depth newspaper articles and opinion pieces.

In 2017 a group of over 700 Italian linguists, historians and university professors signed an open letter to the Italian government (Gruppo di Firenze, 2017) expressing concerns about the negative impact of globalisation and social media on language proficiency. The letter sounds the alarm about the worrying decline in language skills amongst Italian pupils and university students and calls for a reform of the education system that will counter this trend, rather than reinforcing it, as past school reforms have. Traditional exercises like poetry memorisation and summary writing, for instance, have been gradually abandoned, despite their undisputed benefits for vocabulary acquisition, memory training and the development of effective communication skills. The scholars that signed the letter warn that Italian university students are no longer able to write without making basic grammar or spelling mistakes and call for school curricula with clear and effective learning targets.

Thanks to an effective selection of students through strict entrance exams, some of the more reputable interpreting departments have been less affected by this problem, but juries at EU freelance tests have observed a weaker command of their mother tongue amongst candidates. This concern was confirmed by the staff interpreters interviewed for this article, who suggested that grammar and language usage mistakes have become a regular occurrence amongst young interpreters in recent years. 3 of the 7 virtual class reports filled in by EU trainers indicated that several students in the group did not seem to have a thorough knowledge of Italian and lacked the ability to adapt to different registers.

Several simple strategies can be applied to counter this trend with no need to resort to innovative solutions. In fact, most of the exercises listed below have been used by teachers in schools and universities for many decades, but they ap-

pear particularly valuable today to counter the general loss of language and communication skills amongst students.

First and foremost, thorough and attentive reading remains of the essence. Students must be encouraged to work on their general knowledge and to keep abreast of current affairs by reading well researched articles, background information and reasoned commentaries with solid lines of argument, rather than just flicking through newspaper titles or short news feeds on social media.

During interpreting classes, students can be invited to summarise newspaper articles and turn them into speeches that their fellow students can interpret in the booth. I personally remember giving speeches to my fellow students during the 1990s at the SSLMIT in Trieste. This type of practice has several benefits. Firstly, students need to make sure they fully grasp the content and logical structure of the articles they read if they want to summarise them correctly. The speech-giving part of the exercise will in turn strengthen their communication and public speaking skills, which will be extremely valuable in their future careers. And finally, their fellow students will be able to practise from different speakers who may have different voices and pronunciation (native and non-native), as well as different ways of expressing themselves. There may be fast speakers, slow speakers, very clear speakers and speakers that may not always make a lot of sense, just like in real life.

For the improvement of language skills and the ability to work with different registers, attentive reading with particular focus on vocabulary, collocations and idiomatic expressions should be encouraged during home and classroom practice. During sight translation exercises, students can be asked to find synonyms for key terms and expressions and to rephrase one idea in several different ways.

2.2 Other basic skills that will always be required

Professional interpreters who wish to work for the EU need to have outstanding language skills in their mother tongue and at least two or three foreign languages. They need to have a deep understanding of several cultures, be effective communicators, be able to work under pressure and, above all, master the art of interpreting. The world around us has changed and has had a huge impact on the work of interpreters, but the technique of interpreting has largely remained unchanged. Teaching basic interpreting technique should therefore remain the core business of any interpreting school.

So, what are the technical aspects that interpreting trainees have to work on? Some of the weaknesses observed by SCIC coaches during pedagogical assistance and dummy booth practice have not really changed in recent years and are in line with the normal learning process of students. As far as technique goes, the advice given to students has therefore remained fairly constant over the past decades.

Interpretation is about conveying the message and the intention of the speaker, and not so much about words. Interpreters should strive to find the most natural and effective way of expressing the speaker's ideas in the target language (Seleskovich 1975; Lederer 1981). Students are therefore often discouraged from reproducing the source language syntax in the target language, in other words

from translating word-for-word, particularly if source and target language have different grammatical set-ups. Trainers often attach great importance to this ability and some trainee interpreters seem to be anxious to rephrase at any cost. While this can be a useful exercise in a classroom setting, DG SCIC trainers point out that students sometimes devote too much energy to the quest for better style and end up losing sight of other more important aspects like, for instance, accuracy and completeness. In a professional setting, especially when dealing with very fast speakers, the ability to distinguish between situations where rephrasing is necessary and others where the source language syntax can be followed without any detriment to the correctness and the style of the target language is equally important. Other students, on the other hand, may find it so hard to free themselves from the influence of the source language syntax, that they lose sight of the overall message of the speaker.

Understanding what is being said can of course be a challenge, and even professional interpreters can have a hard time sometimes. Interpreters are rarely experts in mechanics, finance or chemistry and it is at times difficult to make sense of complex explanations about subjects that we are not familiar with, but interpreters must always be aware of the way they put words into a sentence and do their best to always convey a cogent message that will be understood by their listeners.

In order to find the right balance between word-for-word and free translation and to sound natural in the target language, the concept of *décalage* or ear-voice span must be mastered correctly by interpreters. Numerous scholars, such as Timarová *et al.* (2011), have studied the time lag between the source input and the interpreter's output, and there is not much to add to the insights that have already been acquired on the subject. Suffice it to say that developing effective strategies for managing *décalage* will always be a challenge for interpreting students. During pedagogical assistance activities, EU trainers regularly encounter trainee interpreters, who apply *décalage* as an aim in itself and sometimes wait for far too long before starting to speak, simply because they think that this is what they are supposed to do. *Décalage* should, however, be seen as a tool, a strategy that can be applied with a great degree of flexibility. It depends on the difference that exists between the syntax of the source and the target language, on how fast the speaker talks and on the degree of clarity or lack of clarity of the source language input. *Décalage* could be compared to an accordion that expands and contracts constantly, following the rhythm of the speaker.

One of the skills mentioned at the beginning of this section is the ability to work under pressure. Indeed, interpreters must be able to cope with speed, stress and long working hours. The evaluation questionnaires filled in by students who come on study visits to DG SCIC confirm that speed and length of meetings are seen as great stumbling blocks by trainee interpreters. 9 out of 12 declared that they had difficulties in coping with speed and 6 out of 12 felt that they lacked the stamina to cope with long and dense meetings. The only thing that can be said at this point, is that regular practice and exercise will allow novice interpreters to build up the necessary resilience. Interpretation is a bit like physical activity; even a short jog may seem daunting at first, but with regular exercise the body

will become fitter and the heart rate will fall accordingly. Experienced interpreters, who in the course of their career have developed the necessary stamina, may in fact sometimes forget how difficult it was for them at the beginning to sit through long meetings and keep up with speakers.

2.3 What's new

Coping with speed has undoubtedly become one of the biggest challenges for novice and experienced interpreters alike, albeit to differing degrees (see Gerver 1969/2002; Shlesinger 2003; Riccardi 2015). As was highlighted at the beginning of this article, interpreters have to deal increasingly with rapidly read out speeches.

The *tours de table* at EU ministerial councils are extremely draining for interpreters, but it is also worth mentioning the 'one-minute-speeches' at the European Parliament, where MEPs address the plenary session for one minute and often read out their statements at speeds that can verge on the unfeasible. Fast reflexes are the only thing that can help in these situations, but unfortunately there is a threshold beyond which even the most seasoned interpreters will not be able to keep up with the speaker. Interpreters, therefore, have to develop strategies that help them extrapolate the main points made by the speaker and present them in a coherent manner. Good summarising skills and analytical thought come in handy in these situations, hence once again, the usefulness of the practical summarising exercises mentioned previously. In addition to this type of practice, students should also practise working from very fast, read-out speeches. During such exercises, they should try to retain the important pieces of information and leave out everything else and then try to formulate a coherent, albeit summarised and simplified message in the target language.

Interpreting students on study visits at the EU are also quite intimidated by what they describe as 'globish'. This reflects what was said previously about the increasing use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). It is undoubtedly true that the working environment at the institutions has changed compared to 30 years ago and that nowadays the biggest chunk of the work of EU interpreters consists of interpreting from non-native English speakers. Meetings at the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union still maintain a certain degree of multilingualism, but the use of ELF is undoubtedly on the rise in all EU institutions and in particular in Commission working groups where, despite the presence of interpreters, up to 95% or even 100% of the meeting may be held in English. In my daily work I regularly hear complaints of colleagues who find the use of ELF particularly demanding and question its communicative effectiveness. This is in line with the view expressed by some of the interpreters interviewed by Cristina Scardulla, an Italian free-lance colleague who is working on a PhD thesis on the use of ELF at the EU[1]. Michele Gazzola (2014: 5) even goes as far as suggesting that the extensive use of English in the EU context is detrimental to the democratic process:

1 Personal communication by Cristina Scardulla, 26/3/2019.

> […] l'utilizzo prevalente dell'inglese come lingua unica in Europa […] ostacola la costruzione di una vera democrazia europea più di quanto non la favorisca. L'inglese è infatti una lingua conosciuta molto bene solo da una esigua minoranza dei cittadini europei. […] solo il 7-8% della popolazione europea non madrelingua inglese dichiara di avere una […] competenza linguistica adeguata a partecipare alle attività politiche in una democrazia anglofona. […] Insomma una politica monolingue creerebbe diseguaglianze fra Stati membri e fra ceti sociali, alimentando sentimenti di lontananza verso le istituzioni europee[2].

However worrying this prophecy may sound, the trend is unfortunately unlikely to stop in future and interpreters will have to develop strategies to be able to cope with non-standard English input. Professor Albl-Mikasa from Zurich University has analysed the linguistic features of ELF and identified three main difficulties that interpreters are faced with, when trying to understand non-native English speakers: "a) lack of express-ability[3], b) greatly varying proficiency levels and register shifts, and c) massive L1 transfer[4]" (Albl-Mikasa 2014: 26).

Novice interpreters, who have had less contact with non-standard ways of pronouncing the English language, unorthodox syntax and ambiguous vocabulary, find it particularly difficult to tune into all the different ways delegates might pronounce English, depending on their country of origin. It is therefore advisable to familiarise students with different non-standard accents before they finish their degree and come to the EU, and to provide students with a wide variety of speeches delivered both by native and non-native speakers. 30 years ago, students mostly practised using speeches delivered by native speakers, as it was generally assumed that they would mostly translate mother-tongue speakers during their professional career. Nowadays, however, we have to conclude that coping with non-standard English is equally important. Regardless of the quality of the source input, interpreters always have to meet the same high-quality expectations for the target output. Practising with source language speeches delivered by non-proficient English speakers has, therefore, become more important in interpreter training.

2 "[…] the prevailing use of English as single working language in Europe […] hampers the construction of a real European democracy, rather than favouring it. The English language is well-known by only a small minority of European citizens. […] Only 7-8% of Europeans consider that their command of English allows them to actively take part in the political activities of an English-speaking democracy, […] A monolingual policy would strengthen disparities between Member states and social classes, thus fuelling a sense of alienation from the European institutions". (Translated by the author)

3 i.e. the ability to express ideas clearly and logically.

4 i.e. linguistic interference from the speaker's mother tongue (L1), e.g. use of literally translated idiomatic expressions that do not exist in English.

3. IT tools – the interpreters' companions

This article previously mentioned the pitfalls of the widespread use of the internet and social media. However, it goes without saying, that the availability of online glossaries, translation memories, dictionaries and encyclopaedias has made meeting preparation a lot easier. Young interpreters nowadays are internet savvy and know how to use online tools and platforms. This aspect, therefore, should not pose any particular problems for interpreting students.

DG SCIC trainers, however, wonder whether universities are making full use of the opportunities offered by the IT solutions developed at the EU. Online terminology tools, such as IATE[5], are well known and widely used inside and outside the European institutions, and both professional interpreters and universities use the Speech Repository[6] as a source of recorded speeches for practice purposes. According to one of the staff interpreters interviewed for this article, however, fewer people seem to use the My Speech Repository section, which allows users to create personal profiles, save favourite speeches, record their interpretation and get feedback from teachers or fellow students.

A new feature inside My Speech Repository is My Collection, which allows registered universities and international organisations to create their own speech banks in a dedicated, private space and create cross-university communities to practise with students from all over the world.

Last but certainly not least, DG SCIC recently launched the Knowledge Centre on Interpretation[7], a one-stop hub for the exchange of information on interpretation and best practices. The KCI provides a dynamic, collaborative space for interested parties such as partner universities, national administrations and individual interpreters and offers users the possibility to create forums and communities where they can discuss and share information. Students coming on study visits to DG SCIC will be regularly introduced to the new tool and the tool will be further disseminated in future contacts with interested parties.

4. Conclusions

This article cannot be considered an in-depth study on interpreting and interpreter training, and it does not qualify as sound scientific research, as it is solely based on the personal experiences of a small group of professional interpreters from the Italian booth at the European Commission. We hope, however, that our contribution will feed further reflection on the subject both in universities and at EU level. DG SCIC is always open to students and young graduates who wish to visit the institutions and learn more about work at the EU. The feedback received by students confirms that these visits are extremely valuable for trainee interpreters. Visiting students are generally very satisfied with the learning ex-

5 <https://iate.europa.eu/home>
6 < https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/>
7 <https://ec.europa.eu/education/knowledge-centre-interpretation/knowledge-centre-interpretation_en>

perience and appreciate the possibility to practise in meetings covering a wide variety of subjects. Dummy booth practice is an excellent opportunity to experience real-life situations which are difficult to reproduce in a classroom setting, such as long meetings, different types of discussions and meetings with several working languages, where interpreters have to rapidly tune into different source languages or use relays.

The strong ties and the constructive dialogue that have always existed between Italian universities like Trieste and Bologna Forlì and DG SCIC is extremely beneficial for young interpreters who wish to embark upon an EU career, and it is also in the interest of our service, which is always in search of talented, well qualified young interpreters.

Acquiring all the technical skills required to be an interpreter and learning to work under pressure may seem daunting for first year interpreting students, but generations of interpreters that have gone on to work for international institutions have proven that it is a reachable goal.

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