

NINE LANGUAGES, GOOD HEAVENS!

By

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Gaelic and Letzeburgesch (the dialect spoken in Luxembourg) just didn't make it, but all the other official languages spoken in EEC countries have a right to be interpreted in Brussels - that is, delegates may very often speak, and listen to, their own language. Maybe even more languages will be added in the future in EEC meetings (Norwegian? Hungarian? Polish?), but even interpreting in nine languages requires a solid infrastructure, causing quite a headache to planners, speakers, and, last but not least, to interpreting colleagues.

Let's take an example. During the last Greek presidency, a phone call arrived at the conference HQ in Brussels, from Athens:

"Our Minister for Tourism wants to meet his colleagues of the European Community. He's very anxious to meet his colleagues to offer every facility to his peers - so we need interpretation for at least six languages for this meeting which, incidentally, will take place on a boat". In other words, the kind of work students dream about in an interpreters' school. Unfortunately, at that moment, it just wasn't possible to send so many interpreters to Athens, where other ministerial meetings were also taking place. *"No problem",* replied the Greek official, *"you'll find all the interpreters here".* And she read out a list of local interpreters. *"Madam, have you thought of passive languages? Who will interpret from Portuguese?" - "But one of the people in the German booth works from Portuguese". - "Yes, but nobody in the French and English booths that you propose, works directly from German. Are you suggesting a double relay, via...Greek?"* There ensued a long silence at the other end. Eventually, an interpretation in 3 languages was agreed upon.

But even at the European Commission in Brussels, with almost 400 permanent interpreters and a list of 1200 'free lance' interpreters to choose from, 9 languages may raise problems. To follow the line of 'real needs' makes things easier, but just let the habitual

delegate catch a flu and be replaced by another one who doesn't know the same languages, and the whole house of cards, so patiently built, may collapse. Or maybe there's a plane strike, and you've engaged too many Spaniards.

But let's leave the planners at the interpreting services to their conundrums, and let's find out what the 'clients' think of all this. In a routine meeting, or in a meeting of diplomats, an Italian delegate will get along speaking French or English, but when he has to defend an important point of view in a difficult negotiation (and possibly find himself in splendid isolation among the 12), the senior official (or why not?, the Minister) coming from Rome will be much more persuasive if he can speak his own language.

At the European Parliament, the 9 languages are used in practically all meetings, whereas at the Commission, the line is that of the 'discours de Bruges'. No, not the speech by Margaret Thatcher, but a speech by another well-known lady. A speech held in the same hall: follow the 'real need', both for active and passive languages, which often leads to asymmetrical combinations. Interpreters will work from, say, French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, and Greek, but only in three booths: French, English, German. In conference jargon, this is called "sim. 6-3".

Now, what does the interpreter think about all this? When there are three of them per booth (and that is the rule at the Commission, once the number of languages exceeds six), very often all languages are covered. At least on paper, because not always are all three of them sitting on their chairs. Unless a meeting is very interesting or important, it is difficult to resist the temptation to have a coffee at the bar, make a phone call, or just move around a bit. And a colleague who has never worked at the place before, may forget to inform some 'key colleagues' in another booth when he goes out, and this sometimes leads to comical situations, as when two booths both try to take relay from the other one. Of course, the knowledge of 'exotic' languages may improve the

chances to be recruited and to gain access to meetings of greater interest and at a higher level, for which a given interpreter may not be taken into consideration, on the sole grounds of quality and experience.

At this point, a fourth interested party comes to the fore: the school. What advice should be given to the student? Is it worth while to study new languages, to be added to the ones the student had when he arrived at the interpreting school?

That problem reminds me of a young colleague, "débutante" as it were in the profession, asking a delegate who was an expert in financial matters, how she should best invest the wealth she was hoping to earn eventually. The answer was simple:

"You'll place the first million dollars in Switzerland, the second one in the US, and as for the third...., well, there you can risk some speculation".

Therefore, I'd say: English and French are an imperative, and never hope to do interesting work if you don't have both of these languages. Then there are what I'd call "the difficult to do without" languages, i.e., languages which conference people will not miss without a fight: this could be a language spoken in many countries (Spanish is the best example), or because of the political or economic importance of the countries speaking it (German is a case in point), or again because the delegates of that tongue hardly ever speak another language (for instance, Russian). It will be helpful to know at least one of them. After which, the 'speculation': Danish, Portuguese (which opens the gates of Brazil for you, at least as a tourist), Greek. Or perhaps Arabic, Chinese and Japanese, if you hope to work on the international circuit, rather than on the European one.

If you follow this rule, you'll improve your chances of being hired, especially in Brussels, and on top of that, you won't have that frustrating feeling of not understanding half of what is spoken when you work in a "sim. 9-9".

Still, between us and the doorpost: nine's a lot, isn't it?