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## The Italian language in EU institutions and the REI

### Abstract

L'italiano è lingua ufficiale, e quindi istituzionale, anche in altri paesi, quali la Svizzera, la Slovenia e la Croazia, oltre alla Repubblica di San Marino e la Città del Vaticano. Ma lo è anche nelle istituzioni europee fin dalla loro fondazione.

L'impegno a produrre testi chiari e comprensibili a tutti i cittadini è ben presente anche tra i traduttori delle istituzioni europee, che hanno intrapreso varie iniziative per farvi fronte, tra cui la creazione di una rete con gli esperti nazionali denominata REI, Rete per l'eccellenza dell'italiano istituzionale.

### 1. Italian as an official language in Europe

Not everyone is aware that Italian is an official language not only in the territory of the Italian Republic, but also in other countries, although with varying status: at *national* level in Switzerland, San Marino and Vatican City; at *regional* level in Slovenia and Croatia; and at *international* level in the European Union.

This means that if we want to analyse the features of the Italian language used in public administration, we also have to include its use in other contexts. I will examine here the particular case of the “institutional” Italian used in the EU institutions and bodies.

The legal basis for the compulsory use of Italian – as well as of all the other official languages of EU countries – in all EU institutions and bodies is Council Regulation No 1/58, still in force, which states: “Regulations and other documents of general application shall be drafted in the official languages”. This principle was reinforced by the “Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union” (2009), which states “Citizens have a right to address the official EU bodies in any of the EU’s official languages and to receive a reply in that language”.

The intention of the first EU legislators was that all citizens should understand directly the decisions and laws that would apply to them and be able to interact with EU institutions and bodies in their own language. It was a logical principle of democracy and of the legitimacy of the EU institutions.

### 2. The Italian language in the EU institutions

To publish all legislation and important information documents in Italian (and, of course, in all the other official languages of the European Union) was a huge

challenge. To address this, all the EU institutions and bodies – i.e. the Council, the Commission, the Parliament, the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the Social and Economic Committee, the Committee of Regions, the Central Bank, the Bank of Investments, the Agencies – set up their own translation service.

As a result, more than 200 Italian translators currently work across the range of EU institutions.

Taking into consideration only the European Commission (more precisely its Italian Translation Department), there were about 1,200,000 pages translated into Italian between 2000 and 2015, the vast majority of which were published and became national law.

We can thus consider the EU as one of the biggest centre of “institutional” Italian in the world.

### **3. Language policy in the EU institutions: the theory**

In order to ensure harmony and clarity in its legislative process, the EU institutions developed over the years a series of guides, such as the “Joint Practical Guide of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, for persons involved in drafting European Union legislation” (several times updated) and the “Interinstitutional style guide” published by the Office for Official Publications (regularly updated), which were supported by internal style guides and editing rules published by language departments of the Parliament, of the Commission and the Council.

They all recommend that the drafting of a legal act must be **clear**, i.e. easy to understand and unambiguous; **simple** and concise, i.e. avoiding unnecessary elements; and **precise**, i.e. leaving no uncertainty in the mind of the reader.

These essentially common sense recommendations reflect general legal principles such as the equality of citizens before the law (in the sense that the law should be accessible to and understandable for everyone), and legal certainty (in that it should be possible to foresee how the law will be applied).

The common goal is making available to European citizens legislation which makes clear the objectives of the European Union and the means it deploys to attain them, hence contributing to the legitimacy of EU institutions and the transparency of its decision-making process.

### **4. Language policy in the EU institutions: the practice**

The environment in which these common sense principles and intentions have to be applied is a very complex and complicated one. Texts are drafted, often under intense time pressure, by many authors with different cultural and intellectual backgrounds, and are often unclear.

Apart from the Guides, other solutions have been identified and applied (though not always systematically, mainly because of lack of time): the editing of originals by author Directorates General; the editing of originals by the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT); and the adoption of a quality assurance policy (guidelines on revision, reviewing, cross-reading, spot-checking) by the DGT itself.

## **5. The Italian-language Department's contribution**

The Italian translators in the EU institutions are well aware that all the legislative acts they translate will be directly (in the case of regulations) or indirectly (in the case of directives) published and applied at national level, and therefore they recognise the importance of and the need for Italian-speaking citizens to accurately understand what is expected from them.

Therefore, they do not limit themselves to the application of the general rules of the EU Institutions and the DG Translation, but have taken their own initiatives. These include:

- An enhanced quality assurance policy with frequent internal seminars to make colleagues aware of the existing Guides and adopt shared approaches to revision and reviewing;
- training initiatives and events, both linguistic and thematic (in order to maintain an excellent level of mother tongue competence and also to acquire knowledge of the subject matters);
- linguistic coordination of translation services across all institutions (regular meetings, training events and reciprocal consultation on terminology);
- the setting up of a permanent network with national experts and bodies (REI).

## **6. Mother tongue: how to maintain excellence?**

Almost all translators and assistants are long-term expatriates. They keep their mother tongue up to date by a number of different means:

- systematically reading newspapers, magazines and books, and watching Italian television (via cable and satellite);
- listening to national radio via the Internet;
- frequently visiting their country (via an internal training scheme and private visits);
- attending activities organised by the Italian Consulate and the Italian Institute for Culture;
- maintaining contacts with linguistic and technical experts in the Directorates-General;
- creating a permanent network with national linguistic and thematic experts (the REI Network).

## 7. **Rete per l'eccellenza dell'italiano istituzionale (REI) (Network for the Excellence of Institutional Italian)**

This was founded in 2005 by the Italian Department with the participation of the Accademia della Crusca (the historic National Body for Italian language) as a *trait d'union* between Italian-speaking EU translators, Italian academies and Italian-speaking linguistic and administrative institutions (from Italy, Switzerland, Slovenia and Croatia).

Its mission is:

- promoting the use of clear, simple and user-friendly institutional Italian for drafting and translating legislative texts;
- keeping the knowledge of the Italian language among EU translators and assistants up to date;
- providing EU translators with terminological support;
- organising study days once a year alternatively in Brussels, Luxembourg and Italy.

This network contributes to the quality of the translations in several ways:

- individual contacts with members (across a wide variety of specialisations);
- the results of the activity of four specialised working groups, i.e.:
  - Linguistic Gender Equality (chair: Mrs. Cecilia Robustelli);
  - Observatory on Italian language beyond national borders (chair: M. J.-L. Egger);
  - Economic and financial affairs (chair: Mrs. M.T. Zanola);
  - Legal matters (chair: Mrs Guggeis and Ioriatti);
  - In-house workshops and seminars for members (on EU premises).

To ensure the communication and dissemination of its work, the REI relies on a set of modern tools: a functional mailbox; a web site, now totally re-designed; an online sub-site hosted by the EUROPA site; collaborative spaces like Yammer, Facebook, Twitter, etc.; online publication of presentations, speeches and contributions from seminars and study days; and paper publication of the most interesting presentations from the study days (the “Quaderni” book series).

## 8. **Plain language: some limits**

We all agree today on the need for all institutions, both national and international, to use common, plain language in order to guarantee transparency and democratic interaction with citizens.

However, in the particular case of the EU institutions there are some limits. For the sake of legal certainty and concordance it is necessary to respect first the terminology of the Treaties; then the terminology of the adopted legislation;

and finally to use specific, precise wording (e.g. for technical and financial terms). The domains regulated by EU legislation are sometimes very technical, for example:

- *Health*: clinical research on cancer, cardiovascular diseases, neurological diseases (in particular those linked with ageing, such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s);
- *Food, agriculture and biotechnology*: genomics, proteomics, metabolomics, systems biology and converging technologies for micro-organisms, infectious diseases in animals, including zoonoses;
- *Environment and climate change*: prediction of climate, earth and ocean systems changes, etc.

Another huge obstacle to the use of plain language in EU documents and publications is the specificity of EU legislation, which often deals with new issues and concepts that do not exist in national legislation. Nevertheless, clarity can be achieved by accurately defining these new concepts.

In conclusion, we can state that the Italian translators in the EU institutions contribute as much as they can to the efforts for a clear legislative and communication style, but *cum grano salis*, in the sense that they have to apply some rules which are unavoidable in the particular, unique context of the EU environment.

For more information:

**Web:** [ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation)

**Facebook:** [com/translatingforeurope](https://www.facebook.com/translatingforeurope)

**REI:** <http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/rei/>

**Bibliographical information**

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The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>