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# **The importance and use of languages in the EU institutions, in particular from the perspective of interpretation**

## **Abstract**

The 2004 enlargement marked a sea change for the EU institutions. With the near doubling of the number of official languages, the challenges were especially acute for the institutions' "language" departments of translation and interpretation.

I propose to show in particular how the Directorate General of Interpretation of the Commission (SCIC) tackled this challenge, and what it implies for our day to day operations. In this context maintaining the quality of interpretation is of prime importance and I will therefore explain how we endeavour to ensure this, as well as how we prepare to meet other current and future challenges.

## **1. Introduction**

There are three interpretation services in the EU institutions: one (DG INTE) in the European Parliament; the Directorate for Interpretation in the Court of Justice; and DG Interpretation (DG SCIC) in the Commission. This presentation outlines the specific case of DG SCIC, but the situation and challenges we face are very similar to those faced by the interpretation services in the European Parliament and the Court of Justice.

DG SCIC is the Directorate General of Interpretation of the European Commission, but since its very beginnings the service has always had an inter-institutional function. We also provide interpretation for the Council of Ministers and the European Council, as well as for some meetings of the EESC (European Economic and Social Committee) and the Committee of the Regions, and some other European agencies and bodies such as Europol. The Council of Ministers is by far our main "client", representing 62% of our interpretation activity in 2014.

DG SCIC has existed as a Commission service since the 1960s, when there were 4 official languages (French, German, Italian and Dutch), and over the years has grown and expanded its language coverage in keeping with successive enlargements. Needless to say, by far the biggest challenge we faced was the 2004 enlargement, with the near doubling of the number of official languages. In spite of the fact that there were many Cassandras predicting that the 2004 enlargement would mean the end of full multilingualism, DG SCIC (and our

“sister” interpretation services) successfully met this huge challenge, and is today able to deliver interpretation from and into the EU’s 24 official languages without a hitch.

We were able to do this thanks to extensive preparation undertaken by DG SCIC in the early 1990s in the then candidate countries, particularly by raising awareness among the relevant national authorities of the importance of actively supporting and – in some countries – of setting up professional conference interpreter training courses in centres of excellence, as well as by advising and assisting relevant universities with curriculum design and with the training itself.

Today we are able to provide interpretation from and into all official languages whenever needed. This is an achievement which I believe DG SCIC can rightly be proud of.

## **2. Multilingualism and interpretation activity today**

Currently, DG SCIC has some 800 staff, 560 of whom are staff interpreters. In addition to staff interpreters we also have a list of over 3,000 freelance interpreters (including interpreters for non-EU languages) who are formally accredited (following a test) and available to all three interpretation services. Some 1,500 freelancers on this list work for DG SCIC on a regular basis.

In terms of volume of work, in 2014 DG Interpretation (SCIC) provided a total of 110,943 interpreting days, which means that we assign between 500 and 900 interpreters on a regular working day; a huge logistical operation! The volume of interpretation provided annually by DG INTE of the European Parliament is almost of the same order of magnitude, with the Parliamentary plenary sessions representing the bulk of their activity. To put it in a global context: taken together, the volume of interpretation activity in the EU institutions represents some 80% of the total volume of interpretation in international organisations worldwide.

On average, DG SCIC services between 50 and 60 meetings per day, but obviously not all meetings have full multilingualism (i.e. interpretation from 23 languages into 23 – interpretation into Irish is not provided as it is covered by a specific waiver). The number of languages – the so-called “interpretation regime” – in a meeting depends on the nature of the meeting and the needs of participants as well as on the available infrastructure (i.e. the number of interpreting booths in the room).

Formal Councils of Ministers meetings and the EU Council generally have all official languages, but most meetings have their “à la carte” (and more limited) language regime. Interpretation in a given meeting could for instance be from 23 languages into 10 (you can speak 23 languages but only listen to 9 different interpretations), 5 into 5, or 9 into 3 – and some meetings just have interpretation from and into 2 languages.

Over and above interpretation from and into all the EU official languages, DG SCIC is also able to deliver interpretation from the three Spanish co-official languages (Catalan, Bask and Galician) and the UK regional languages (Welsh and Scottish Gaelic), and regularly ensures interpretation from and into other languages such as those from EU candidate countries or the EU's main international partners e.g. Russian, Chinese, Arabic, Japanese etc.

### **3. Our goal**

DG Interpretation of course aims to provide whatever interpretation may be required for a given meeting, but in doing so we consider that the quality of interpretation is of paramount importance. To be able to guarantee a high level of quality implies firstly that we must set high standards at entry level, both for the selection of permanent staff in EU competitions or for freelance colleagues in the inter-institutional accreditation tests. We also regularly monitor the quality of interpretation and performance throughout the interpreter's career; for staff this is done in the annual career development report, and for freelance colleagues through a transparent system of regular reports by experienced officials.

To help our staff maintain a high level of quality in their work, we also invest considerable resources in training, both internally within the DG as well as externally by providing assistance to interpreter training in our partner universities.

Internally, this represents some 7,000 training days for staff interpreters; first and foremost this involves language training, i.e. courses and other support for learning new languages of interest to the service, as well as courses/support schemes for strengthening or maintaining language proficiency; and secondly we also invest in "thematic training," i.e. courses on various policy areas or new political or economic developments, to strengthen interpreters' background knowledge and awareness of overall context.

Externally, we provide support to conference interpreter training in our partner universities throughout the EU: via direct grants, bursaries for students of interpretation, and by sending experienced staff to universities to give master classes. In 2014 we provided 450 days of this "pedagogical assistance" and allocated 97 bursaries and 8 grants to universities (DG INTE allocates grants to an equivalent number of universities).

We also organise structured "Training for Trainers" events, when we bring university trainers to Brussels for a week to share experience and help "bridge the gap" between the training at the universities and the reality of the EU institutions.

Finally, to ensure that we keep in touch with clients' needs and expectations, we have since 2007 carried out three-yearly "Customer Satisfaction Surveys" amongst meeting participants. By means of a brief questionnaire which we dis-

tribute in all meetings during a three week period, we ask for feedback on a range of aspects concerning interpretation: use of terminology, accuracy and completeness of content, language register, delivery, use of voice, potential disturbing factors, etc. This enables us to take stock of our overall performance as a service. Whilst overall the outcome and the responses have been very positive, these surveys also help us identify areas of concern to our listeners where further improvements for interpretation could be made.

## **4. Our challenges**

Whilst DG SCIC can pride itself on being able to meet the demand for interpretation from the various institutions and bodies it serves, there are nevertheless a number of short and medium-term challenges and constraints that we must constantly be aware of and need to address.

First of all, by its nature DG Interpretation is a support service which responds to the demand for interpretation from its clients; we are not ourselves in a position to set or predict demand, which may fluctuate in the light of the work rhythm or political priorities of each institution. For instance, in recent years we have seen a drop in demand for interpretation which is more pronounced for some languages than others. In this somewhat volatile context we nevertheless need to ensure the best possible use of our resources, so it is important to keep our finger on the pulse and to have constant monitoring of activity to detect possible trends and align our recruitment or staffing levels as closely as possible to the likely demand.

Secondly, as in all other Commission DGs, our resources are under pressure. Over a 5 year period until the end of 2017, DG SCIC's staff posts will be cut overall by 10%. We therefore need to carefully examine the resource needs for different languages and ensure flexibility in the internal reallocation of resources.

In addition, in some language units such as EN, FR, DE, IT and NL, we also face the problem that many senior staff interpreters will retire over the next 5 years; we not only face the challenge of replacing these staff with new qualified recruits, but those who retire often have several passive languages (some up to 6), whereas new recruits for the most part come with two or at most three languages, which in turn implies the need for a sustained language learning policy.

Thirdly, over the past decade, the nature of interpretation in the EU institutions itself has undergone some profound changes. As EU's policies and powers have broadened, the subject matter of meetings has become increasingly complex and often highly technical (just think of the financial crisis, taxation, home affairs, the digital agenda etc.), requiring much more thorough advance preparation by interpreters. With 27 member states around the table, the very nature of meetings has also changed: interventions are less spontaneous and more scripted; densely

written texts and statements are read out, often at break-neck speed, rendering proper interpretation extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible; not to mention the increasing predominance of English and the pervasive use of English by non-native speakers, which also impacts on interpretation.

How are we trying to cope with this? In part we have a sustained policy of awareness raising with our clients on best practice for working in meetings with interpretation. In particular, heads of language units aim to foster close relations with their Permanent Representations, to identify their needs and identify ways of ensuring that they get the best possible interpretation – e.g. by encouraging them to be in touch with their interpreters and to systematically share speaking notes and terminology, and to give feedback. With tailored training we also try and help interpreters develop certain coping strategies e.g. for read-out speeches. None of these initiatives are a panacea, but every little helps.

The fourth main challenge is that of new technologies and how to bring them into meetings with interpretation – in particular video conferencing, as well as remote interpretation. DG SCIC has worked with other Commission services and has developed standards to facilitate video conference meetings with interpretation, and also technical standards. Several meetings now use this facility on a regular basis. As for remote interpretation, an inter-institutional agreement was signed in 2007 to allow this type of interpretation in the EU Institutions. A derogation to this agreement negotiated in DG SCIC made it possible for us to systematically provide remote interpretation for dinners/meals of heads of state and government in the European Council from 2011.

Remote interpretation in practice means that the dinner takes place on the upper floor of the Council building, whilst the interpreters are in a meeting room several floors below. The rooms are connected by audio and video link and the interpreters work from 4 television screens which are placed in front of every interpretation booth, ensuring that the interpreters have the fullest possible view and “feel” of what is happening in the dining room. A large screen gives an overview of the dining room, two smaller screens placed on each side of the large screen show the speaker and one screen placed at the top always shows the President of the EU Council who steers the meeting.

Obviously, apart from the screen set-up, several technical issues had to be resolved (*inter alia*, how to ensure the requisite sound quality, including perfect lip-sync, for interpreters; how to guarantee a good visual image of the dining room and of meeting participants; camera positioning and quality, etc). However, and perhaps more importantly, remote interpretation initially met with considerable resistance amongst interpreters, who were concerned about the working conditions and the possible longer term impact on the profession; so overcoming this reluctance was an important challenge for the service. DG SCIC therefore negotiated an agreement with the interpreters’ staff representatives which outlines

the technical requirements as well the working conditions for the use of remote interpretation, which was subsequently accepted by a general assembly of staff. Since then the issue has become less controversial and remote interpretation at the dinners of heads of state and government is now a regular and generally accepted feature of EU Summits.

## **5. Conclusion**

The above gives an overview of the practice of multilingualism and interpretation within the European institutions, in particular from the perspective of DG Interpretation of the Commission.

As stated at the beginning, I believe that DG Interpretation can be proud of its achievements, but we also need to be aware that the world around us, as well as the EU institutions, are constantly changing, and as a professional service we need to be alert and move with the times as well as try and steer new developments. I am confident that ultimately the ability to adapt and the pro-activeness which we have shown in the past will help prove that interpretation adds value and ensure that multilingualism in the EU institutions is safeguarded.

**Bibliographical information**

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