



*Berlaymont, the Commission Headquarters, Brussels*

**This article was published in 2001 in *Language International* vol. 13 # 5. The world's largest translation institution: Language Work at The European Commission'**

Cay Dollerup continues his report of the Interpreting and Translation Services at the European Commission, which he visited in June 2000. During his visit he spoke with B. McCluskey, acting Director-General and, at the time, Director for Translation, Mr. G. Vlachopoulos, acting Director for Translation and Departmental Head for Legal, Economic and Financial Affairs, Competition and Information, Mrs D. Jank, Head of Sector, Terminology and Language Support Services, Mr K. Larsson, Swedish Language Co-ordinator, Mr. P. Aurø, at the time Assistant to the Director for General and Language Matters and now Danish Language Co-ordinator, Mrs Paaskesen, Head of the Danish Library, Mrs D. Senez, then Translator, SYSTRAN, and Mr K. Burns, Translator, Department for External Relations, Customs Union, Development, Enlargement and Humanitarian Aid. Finally Mr M. Rowe, Coordinator for External Contacts has checked the article for factual misunderstandings. Any errors remaining are Cay Dollerup's responsibility. It must be stressed that the Language services are dynamic entities in which procedures, functions, staff and organisation are changing, which means that the article can only offer a snapshot of the language work at the Commission at the time of the visit. Some departures from the official terminology are introduced deliberately by Cay Dollerup to make for transparency (see box). Similarly, since the workings of the Translation Service are immensely complicated, some things have had to be simplified: it is not possible to cover everything in an organisation which may, in one instance, be serving only a group of specialists and, in another, be working directly for all the nearly 400 million citizens of the European Union.

Here is his report on the Translation Service:

**Terminology:**

In this article: 'Small languages' = languages used to a limited extent, and often only in one country in the European context: Danish, Dutch, Finnish, (German), Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish. The European Union does not recognise such usage.

Procedural languages: The languages used most often in daily work at the European Union: English, French, to some extent German (outlawed word: 'working language' whereas the European Union also accepts the clumsy 'vehicular' language)

## **Staff**

The translation staff of the European Union is by far the largest in the world. It comprises about 1,300 professionals concerned with translation work at and for the Commission alone. As mentioned in the previous article (LI), they work into and out of the eleven official European languages, but there are language-specific differences in the number of translators and in a number of other details. Most of these are of minor interest when – as in the present article – work at the Commission is described in broad outlines.

## **Organisational structure**

As can be seen in the organigram as of July 2001, (illustration 1), the Translation Service is a Directorate-General. Organisationally, the Service comprises two **Directorates**, three **Advisers** and one administrative **unit** which all report directly to the Director-General. In this article, interest focuses on the two Directorates.

- The Directorate of Resources and Language Support (previously of ‘General and Language Matters’) is concerned with managing resources, the provision of support services, coordination, training and overseeing free-lance translation. The total staff of linguists is of some 65 persons.

- The Directorate for Translation has a staff of some 1,200 working translators. These are organised into six thematic departments according to the subject fields listed in the organigram given as Illustration 1. Departments A/B, C, D and E are situated in Brussels whereas F and G are located in Luxembourg.

Each of these **six departments** comprises eleven **language units**, one for each European Union language and each staffed by around fifteen to twenty-five translators.

As well as the above, there are secretarial and clerical staff numbering some 450 people in Brussels and Luxembourg.

### **Directionalities**

The vast majority of the documents translated, roughly 1,250,000 per year, are sent for translation from English and French into other languages. English has now gained the upper hand as the source language.

It is noted that German does not rank high as a source-language, but is prominent as a target language: more pages are translated into German than into other languages. Since translations are always made into the translators' mother tongue, this means that the German staff is the largest (about 165 members) but not sensationally so (e.g. the Danish is about 90).

### **The material translated**

This brings us to the question of the material translated. Many misunderstandings are caused by the fact that many outsiders get the impression that all documents are dealt with in a similar way.

The documents sent for translation are, of course, Regulations and other legislation adopted or proposed by the Commission. In addition, to cite the official information brochure, translation work comprises, "speeches and speaking notes, briefings and press releases, international agreements, policy statements ... technical studies, reports, minutes ... internal administrative matters and staff information ... correspondence with [national] ministries, pressure groups and individuals..." (1999).

Work is thus done for a multiplicity of clients ranging, in principle, from a few Commission staff members procuring national background material for some expert meeting, to the Commission itself when it wants to voice a unison view on a central European Union issue. The **relationship** between these clients and the Translation Services is that of a normal translator-customer relationship: it is the client who receives the final product and determines what to do with it, including, of course, when and where it will be released.

Translations also have end-users. Again, these users may, in principle, range from a few individuals over a group of specialists, to all the citizens of the European Union.

### **The source and target languages**

The point about language work in the EU Commission is therefore that much of the work is done only for internal purposes. Most documents are not intended for direct translation into all the other ten languages. On the contrary:

the total number of pages translated directly from each of the ‘small’ European languages is well below 2.5% of the total translation output. This is not a controversial point, for it merely illustrates that in much, if not most of their everyday work, staff at the Commission have to express themselves in another language than their mother tongue if it is not English, French or German.

Illustration 3, giving figures for the output in the target languages, shows a much more even spread of language use. The explanation is that all legislation and documents of general application have to be put into all the languages so that the public can understand them. The French and English columns are still high because much of the material generated internally in one of them has to be translated into the other. The German column is higher than all the others because much of the material generated in both French and English has to be put into German, these being the three ‘procedural’ languages at the Commission for its internal workings. And in order to make the point clear: the clients are satisfied with this arrangement for internal, preparatory work or for specific assignments. In many cases the **nature** of these assignments is no different from that of other translation assignments.

Illustration 3 shows that the ‘small languages’ get their fair share of the translation output as target languages, thus forcibly bringing home the central role of linguistic equality whenever the end products are documents which are meant for use in all Member States, be it in the form of legislation or information.

At the Commission translation work is thus a means to an end and never an end in itself.

During my visit I had a look at the internal workings of the Commission Translation Services in general, without paying particular attention to the placement of the activity in the larger context.

## **Procedures**

### **A crude overview**

As hinted, documents meant only for a limited number of staff or for a working committee may be translated only once into one language (if at all). In the **simplest** cases, an assignment is therefore sent to the appropriate thematic department, assigned to specific translator(s) and translated within a stipulated deadline for the client.

Conversely, the procedure in translation work which is to lead to the production of documents intended for public release is **complex**.

The initiatives are usually taken in the Commission and at meetings and discussions in English, French and sometimes German. The early drafts are processed in English, French and to some extent in German, frequently handled by non-linguistic staff who are not mother-language speakers, and often with (indirect) input from one of the 'small' official languages. At various stages in the process documents are translated into several and often all EU languages. It is such documents for 'general consumption' that call for the greatest efforts in terms of 'quality' and 'quality assurance'.

Among the products that must appear simultaneously in all eleven languages are all legislation, reports to the European Parliament and the annual budget.

Translation work and the emphasis in daily routines are subject to political developments. This means that whenever there is a change in political emphasis, this demands a quick response from the Translation Services which have to move resources rapidly from one assignment to another.

### **The Translation Departments**

As mentioned, the Translation Directorate is divided into six thematic departments. This structure was set up in the early 1990s. As the organigram (illustration 1) shows, all departments serve specific clients and client bodies (Directorates-General, Commission Members' Private Offices, Secretariats at the Commission). The division into thematic departments has, it is felt, been an improvement over the old system where each language had a division to itself. There was some coordination between the translation divisions, but translators would often be ignorant of who the clients were. Previously, notably up to the 1980s, translation work was very much looked upon as a kind of 'afterthought' by other parts of the Commission, which, inevitably, made for tight deadlines and little time for revision.

With the new organisation, the identity of the clients is known. It has also led to better planning, usually three months in advance – and fewer surprises (except, of course, where unpredictable events occur).

Translators are provided with information relating to their assignments and they can call 'initiators' of documents for background information and to make notes of special features.

At the same time, the translators at the Commission work for clients which are different in one respect from most of those in private industry. At an industrial firm, for instance the German combine Siemens, translations will typically be read by engineers and the management. At the Commission, the translations, will, in the first instance, be read by non-linguistic staff who quite often have a (passive) command of both the source and the target language.

The new system also allows for a work process which is more transparent, including a better understanding among non-linguist staff of what translation can do and what cannot be done. It is now appreciated that for ephemeral purposes a translation should be 'usable' rather than 'perfect'.

Within each department there is coordination in terms of planning, setting priorities, and making for near-simultaneity in finalisation, which in turn enables the client to publish all the language versions at the same time.

In each department, there are weekly meetings with the heads of the units and with the planners, and the overview of the work is clear to translators as well as to clients.

Translators have full access to the Internet and to the EU database Eurodicautom, to a Multiterm base proper to each department, and to the glossaries relevant to each department. The large-scale introduction of computers in the mid-nineties means that much of the workplace 'camaraderie' has disappeared but instead there are data bases of pooled terms, thus shifting team work to a shared virtual sphere. And, just as before, some assignments are too large for one translator and must therefore be undertaken by translator teams.

Terms and lexical equivalents do present problems. The Greek translators, to mention one example, have had to suggest versions in their language of some terminology for IT, and all EU language coordination work is done in contact with national language boards and academies. There are linguists who contact national ministries to find the official terms for given words, though electronic tools are making personal contacts less important.

### **Terminology and Language Support Services**

The Terminology Unit cooperates closely with both language coordinators and the translators and – less frequently – the interpreters. Their work is increasingly directed towards the freelance translators used by the Commission rather than the staff translators.

Terminology is a largely autonomous and horizontal service of help desks in both Luxembourg and Brussels, which keep one another informed about work, often by means of videoconferencing.

The main concern is with researching and updating terminology. The largest terminology tool is 'Eurodicautom', which was founded in 1973, but since it has now been in existence for nearly thirty years, and has been supplemented by many sources, there are some inconsistencies. The data need to be filtered and updated and there are also problems with converting the data to electronic media – a process well under way.

'Eurodicautom' records terms which are already in existence. Quite often new terms will have to be established in English or French or both and in one or two more languages. Supplementing this, there is a wide variety of procedures used for finding corresponding terms in other European Union languages. These include tenders to terminology agencies, Internet terminology, and 'terminology mining' in the form of searches for new terms for use in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* or in White and Green Papers (which may also be sources for new terms if these are neologisms: a recent example is the term "governance"). In addition, translations into some languages may require new terms where a concept is new to the language concerned, which means that either terminologists or the translators involved have to coin new words or to paraphrase, although such neologisms may present cultural problems. Translators are asked to send in their glossaries for inclusion in 'Eurodicautom', and usually do so. The extensive use of personal computers makes it necessary to share knowledge, thus overriding such problems as possessiveness or insecurity. When there are 20 to 30 words or terms these are uploaded to 'Eurodicautom'.

Assistance from the help desks can come in at an early stage in the translation process. Translators input their queries to the local base and are passed on to the relevant unit, which provides solutions, definitions and at least one target language equivalent.

The SYSTRAN system (to which we shall return) has imported some of the 'Eurodicautom' glossaries. The glossary can be entered by language pairs, by legislative area and text type.

### **Libraries**

The Translation Service has eleven separate libraries servicing the translators, one for each of the official languages. These libraries have printed or

microfiche versions of all EU legislation and large amounts of reference material. The libraries are designed to serve the needs of translators but can – with the pragmatic approach characteristic of the EU institutions – be used by other officials as well. Acquisition of books and journals is limited to the areas covered by the Commission's work. The work of the libraries varies from language to language, but all of them produce guides to documentation useful for translation work. The libraries are used differently by the translators – the emphasis being on books and the solution of special cruces which translators have been unable to solve by consulting the Internet. However, overall the use of libraries is declining with the increasing access to electronic media and documentation.

### **Language coordination**

The role of the language co-ordinators is many-sided. It is based on common guidelines but much work depends on individual background and culture. The core areas are to ensure quality, take part in recruitment and support 'correct usage', notably in terms of terminology.

Much effort goes into ensuring the quality of free-lance work. The Commission is increasingly outsourcing non-urgent and non-sensitive work. The proportion of the work sent out for translation is just under 20% at the moment, and the Commission demands high standards from its free-lances: if assignments are not up to standard, the External Translation Unit can withhold payment. Recruitment is by a system of invitations to tender at periodical intervals; applicants who meet certain criteria such as language spread, cost and experience are placed on a list of freelances who may then be offered contracts to do specific jobs. Freelances not on the list are not used, and there is no guarantee that those on it will be offered contracts.

In order to recruit new staff, co-ordinators or local field offices do PR work, for instance by visiting institutions where potential applicants are being trained and by offering advice on how to prepare for the competitive recruitment examinations. To be allowed to sit these examinations, candidates must be graduates and must be able to offer at least two official EU languages other than their mother tongue. Those admitted sit a test based on multiple-choice questions. This is followed by translations of at least two difficult texts in the languages offered, with the use of tools, and an oral test for those who pass the



preceding stages. Successful applicants are put on a reserve list and may be offered a permanent post as and when one comes up in their language.

The Translation Service offers a number of ‘stages’, that is five-month traineeships for graduate translators (below thirty years of age), every year – without any guarantee that they will obtain a post subsequently. About 40 such internships are offered per year, of which about three quarters are funded by a small grant and the remainder are offered to applicants who can finance themselves.

The language co-ordinators cooperate with universities as well as language boards and institutions in the Member States. This does not always entail actual meetings but may be in the form of exchange of information, agendas and minutes of symposia and conferences. There are contacts with professionals working with language such as editors, and when a particular language community wishes to have new EU terms given a specific form in that language, the co-ordinators try to promote the initiative, notably by ensuring consensus.

Nevertheless there are occasional problems with poor language that may arise out of ‘multilingual’ originals in which people have expressed themselves in languages other than their mother tongue, as well as from tight deadlines for assignments which demand the collaboration of several translators.

In order to make non-linguist staff at the Commission more aware of language usage, under the British Presidency in 1997, some English-language translators at the Commission launched a ‘Fight the fog – how to write clearly’ campaign. This involved publishing booklets and giving courses on clear writing, emphasising the need to make the language in official documents shorter and simpler and the documents themselves as reader-friendly as possible. This is illustrated by practical examples, e.g. changing: ‘by the introduction of’ into “by introducing”, and ‘in view of the fact that’ into “as”. The baton has been taken over by the Directorate-General for Administration, which now offers officials writing first drafts in English, French and (sometimes) German (“the requesters”) courses in how to express their thoughts more clearly. In general, the idea is to inculcate an awareness that texts should be as simple as possible, with relatively uniform structures where appropriate, in order to make for easier and more elegant translation work, notably with documents which are to appear in all EU languages.

### **Translation work**

The usual procedure for a translation assignment is that once it is received, a deadline is set by the administrative staff, quite often so that the translations into the 'procedural languages' are finished before others and can serve as yardsticks for control as well as supports for other translations. The actual decision about procedures, for instance as to whether the assignments should be done in-house or by freelancers, is taken by the heads of units. In the latter case, there will be revision on receipt from the freelancers.

The use made of tools by individual translators or, collectively, their units, varies according to personal taste and/or the lead given by the head of unit - and, of course, the tools available in particular languages. Thus the Spanish translators as a group make comparatively heavy use of machine translation because the French-Spanish pair works particularly well, owing to the kinship between the two languages, and because Spanish translators have been particularly active in feeding the program with terminology.

The SYSTRAN machine translation system is old and primitive in its basic form: but the sheer mass of material stored in it makes its translation memory a strong tool. So strong, that in some cases it may be more suitable for specific assignments than Translator's Workbench (a text-recognition program which finds sections of text already translated at the Commission in the past) - in a way which individual translators identify by trial and error. Translator's Workbench, which the Commission acquired some five years ago, pre-processes original texts before translation, taking perhaps twenty minutes to identify and import relevant previous work. Its forte is its interactive nature.

Electronic dictionaries in the various languages are installed on the translators' computers and are thus available - with variations from group to group. As mentioned, physical documentation in the libraries is used with decreasing frequency as legislation and dictionaries are available on the computers and since Internet searches can be undertaken on the spot, for instance for checking events and names - this is frequently done, for example, with the names of non-EU politicians.

Access to other tools depends on the conditions in the licences that the Commission has obtained from producers. Translator's Workbench, for instance, had to be installed on individual computers.

The computers have eased work and the in-house SdTVista program, which scours old translations for terms and phrases already translated and

presents them in their context, makes it possible for translators to call up all relevant information, on the same screen, such as originals and previous translations as well as information about e.g. deadlines.

‘SdTVista’ is now the most widely-used in-house electronic tool. It offers information about the degree of matching, by presenting all relevant documents in ranking order, including those at the draft stage. The draft translations and relevant prior translations that can be called up on the screen represent sources of terminology which are easily accessed: seeing terms can in context is immensely useful, even without definitions. So ‘SdTVista’ is developing into the translators’ main terminological research tool.

During their work, translators can make electronic notes for their colleagues on what they find and occasionally point out problems or factual errors in the original. Whenever a document is finished, the source text(s) and all translations are put into the SdTVista database.

### **The use of machine translation**

About five years ago, a machine translation system was set to larger-scale use for documents which did not demand a high standard of translation and which were strictly for in-house use. This is SYSTRAN, which was first developed in the 1960s by the US government for coping with Russian texts. It was introduced at the Commission in 1976, when dictionaries were fed into it and there was feedback in the form of Commission translations, mostly between English- and French ones. Italian was first added in 1978, German, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish in the 1980s, but so far there is no Danish, Finnish or Swedish. Greek-French is available on a test basis. SYSTRAN operates in only 18 of the 110 possible language combinations between the eleven official languages, the pairs being selected primarily on the basis of demand and language affinity . It began to be used about ten years ago, notably for e-mail. As of the mid-1990s, it was offered as an operational service for Directorate-General XXI (Customs and Tariffs) which needed translations of many documents. Since then the service has been expanded to cover all Directorates General in the Commission, the other EU institutions and the Member States' authorities.

The procedure with machine translation differs from that of ordinary translations. The documents must always be in an electronic form, and it is firmly stressed that the output is only **raw machine translation**. The documents

for translation are sent in directly from the administration to the interface, which provides the actual machine translation. This is then returned directly to the requesters. All told, the process may take a matter of only a few minutes. There is a Machine Translation Help Desk which carries out post-editing of SYSTRAN output if requested by the user. Machine translation is a service which emphasises speed rather than quality and users are warned that SYSTRAN is prone to error, particularly with synonyms and ambiguities in the source language, and may render Robin Cook as “cuisinier de rouge-gorge” and so on.

It is therefore not usable for work on documents having legal force or texts which are to be published. It should be noted that machine translation output is not listed in the statistics on the number of pages ‘translated’ at the Commission, although the number of pages is quite respectable. In 2000, for example, it was nearly 550,000.

The version of SYSTRAN used in the Commission is the A version (the C-version is the one offered on the Internet) and it is available to all the EU institutions. Translations between English and French are the most commonly requested and offer acceptable quality. German and Spanish can be ‘translated’ into English and French, and Greek into French. Portuguese is available from English and, on a test basis, from French. Generally speaking the quality of the ‘translations’ varies a lot, and non-linguistic staff using the system are advised on the use and shortcomings of the system and also exhorted to provide feedback on the service so that it can be improved.

There is research and development work to encode semantic and grammatical information in the system. Users can program the system to refine its dictionary searches by choosing up to three specialist subject area dictionaries from a selection of 36, to be consulted by the program as well as the standard dictionaries. Through frequent use, the shortcomings and the strengths of the machine translation system are gradually becoming clearer and more defined.

### **Final comments**

The winding up comments are those of awe. The Commission’s Translation Service has – in a pragmatic way – come to grips with a number of problems and solved them. Like the SCIC (described in *Language International* August 2001), the Translation Service has had to absorb new languages in its daily work and made the impressive translation structure function efficiently. It has successfully introduced computers in “one fell swoop” and put them to use in

central ways in the translation work in the world's largest translation institution. What is daunting and what takes time to understand is that in the last decade the Translation Service of the EU Commission has moved from being just a professional staff of an international organisation into being the pioneers at the cutting edge in translation work internationally.

For more information consult the [www.europa.eu.int/comm/translation](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/translation).

Cay Dollerup will make some general comments in a final article which will appear in a forthcoming issue of 'Language International' and which is listed as # 180 on this homepage.

*[www.cay-dollerup.dk](http://www.cay-dollerup.dk)*



*Meeting involving the EU-Commission (note the microphones)*