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TRANSLATION AND 'POWER' AT THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

The present article discusses the topic of 'power' in translation from the angle of work at European Union institutions. The article warns against generalising from one particular situation, since there are major differences from country to country, in various epochs in history, and translators' foreign language command. The article then addresses language and 'power' to the European Union. The EU has nearly 400 million inhabitants, and eleven official languages for the present 15 Member States, whose number will swell in the years to come. Language domination is tied to political power, in so far as English and French are the 'core languages' for daily work. However, this domination is eroded when documents are discussed in expert and political fora at the EU institutions, partly because there are non-native speakers who affect the message, and partly because the EU is based on a consensus. Nevertheless, the differences in foreign language acquisition in the various EU Member States mean that some states have more influence, a 'power', that they should be entitled to if only the number of inhabitants are taken into account.

Introduction

In this discussion of power and translation, I shall not feel obliged to refer to discussions of the theme such as those that have dominated in international Translation Studies scholarship in the last 10 years.

There are several reasons why they are disregarded.

First and foremost that, as I have put it elsewhere: "Translation Studies tends to generalise from far too little material" (1999:324).

Secondly, people who make flamboyant statements about ‘power’ all too often fail to account adequately for the limited basis of their pronouncements.

Thirdly, much of the discussion does not pay heed to the working conditions – in the broadest terms - spanning from ‘fees’ via ‘linguistic competence’ to ‘geographical placement’ - of translation work.

Let me exemplify by turning to the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) from where I hail from. Here literary translators are hired for one translation assignment (a book) at a time, in accordance with a negotiated standard contract between the publishers’ association and the writers’ guild. This standard contract sets a minimum price per page, but publishers are usually more than willing to pay good translators more. Furthermore, translators will receive money when their translations are reissued and they are also entitled to annual fees calculated from the number translated books for loan in all national public libraries. The translators’ names are given on the front page and in the colophon. ...// 193 ... In other types of translation work, such as subtitling on television, subtitlers (or their firms) are credited on screen; the opera surtitlers of the national operas are credited in the printed programmes. Translations in ‘respectable’ magazines and newspapers cite the translator’s name. But once we move to private industry where translation is ‘written into’ the job as it were, it is true that translators are not publicly credited for their work.

Conversely, the practice of most literary publishers in the US is to pay translators a lump sum – and that is the end of the translator’s involvement. The translator’s manuscript is then, at least with larger publishing houses, checked by house editors. These house editors will change translations so that they read fluently in the target language, and, what is more, these editors usually do not refer to the ‘original’ at all. This is not only understandable, but also in accordance with what they are supposed to do: it is their job to ensure that a book enjoys sales on the American market, not to be ‘loyal’ to the ‘original’. There is more to it: the author is, in the first place, usually not familiar with the target culture and may well, unwittingly, break cultural taboos, and, secondly, the author is rarely a fluent speaker of the target language. The practice in the Nordic countries and in the UK and in the US are so different it is easily appreciated why facile statements based on national conditions are not as universal as they are taken to be by translation scholars who have little contact with market forces. There are many variations both within one country and between various nations to the above picture. This should be kept in mind.

Curiously enough the discussion of ‘power’ also seems to have focused on literary translation. I would assume that, once again, it is because most people concerned with translation theory are primarily interested in literary works. The focal point in the debate seems to be the ‘dialogue between author and translator’. It is, all too often, assumed that this is the only ‘power axis’ worth focussing on.

This foregrounding of literary translation is out of touch with the linguistic realities.

Even without having statistics to prove it, I posit that, globally, the largest translation efforts take place within nations, not between nations: In a large number of countries most translation work takes place within national borders (and when I speak of translation I include all types of interlingual transfers: from community interpreting to legal and political translation). There is no need to point out this to South African readers, but most

Europeans are blissfully unaware of the multiplicity of languages within Nigeria, India, China and so on. However, it stands to reason that in these countries speakers of one language will, at some stage or other in their lives have to communicate with people speaking another language (or dialect) which is incomprehensible without translation. I am not arguing that such translation is always high-class, but merely pointing out that it takes place.

Even when we concentrate on international interlingual transfers, it is worldwide infinitely less than 1% of all translation work which involves literature. Most translation work is concerned with trade, with exports, with imports, with knowledge transfer, with the mass media. In terms of messages it spans from instruction manuals to international treaties as undertaken at the United Nations. ... //194 ...

‘Power’ and translation: a survey

A view back into history reveals that the translator has usually been subsumed the dominant power. We may illustrate this with brief overviews of interpreting, literary translation and political language work.

It stands to reason that **interpreting** of some sort has existed ever since peoples speaking different languages got in contact with one another, most probably so in situations which required complex negotiation (war and trading can both be conducted without the use of language). Allowing for exceptions, we may also be sure that the interpreter was a low-status figure, a slave, a child. Thus in her studies of the history of interpreting, Ingrid Kurz has found in Egyptian reliefs that the interpreter is depicted as a small person (Delisle 1995: 246, 279, 286) and others, for instance the early explorers of the Americas such as Christopher Columbus and Fernando Cortez, are known to have used American Indian women for their interpreters (for Cortez, see Delisle 1995: 280, 287). This is a pattern which obtains to this day in which community interpreters tend to belong to linguistic minority groups in many countries (Ozolins 1995). Another feature is that interpreters have usually been in the employ of the more powerful party – and in this respect, there is little new under the sun. The Romans employed more than 100 interpreters in Asia Minor in the heyday of the Roman Empire (Lewis 1999), 19th century European tourists and travellers relied on the services of Egyptian dragomans in the Middle East, and today modern law courts in the West employ professional legal interpreters. The question of ‘status’ is changing with the swelling ranks of conference interpreters at international organisations, a species so close to the national and international hubs of power that they command high salaries and are employed by organisations rather than any specific person or firm. Their function is different from that of the interpreter of ancient times: their status is high, but they are chosen because they perform adequately and it is part of their job to do so discreetly and without offending senders and addressees.

There are, thus, two axes, one of ‘status’ and one of ‘power’. But there is also a third one: ‘trust’ which is not quite the same. Careful observers of the international scene will notice that whenever two statesmen on an equal footing meet (say, the Russian and the American presidents), they usually have one interpreter each, thus making sure that they have one interpreter they can trust and who will control his or her counterpart.¹

Community or liaison interpreting differs from other types of interpreting in that the interpreter is often not only a linguistic middleman, but also a cultural mediator which fact may require intervention in order to clarify details to either party in degrees which

must vary from community to community and especially between cultures. Yet the interpreter is expected to do so without becoming “a ‘talking’ individual rather than an ‘interpreting’ one, especially on matters that interest him. ... [becoming] personally involved, posing question or giving advice” (Boloka 1999: 159). ...// 195 ...

It is usually overlooked that until the beginning of the 19th century, **literary translation** in European cultures was conducted as a *con amore* activity. In terms of culture – with transfers of literatures, such as Italian sonnets to England, *Arabian Nights* to French and then in relay to other countries, French classical drama to England, and English novels to German (the German kingdom of Hanover was part of the Great Britain in most of the 18th century), this was important. Since these translations were usually undertaken without any ulterior financial motives by happy amateurs, it is very doubtful whether movements such as ‘les lettres infidèles’ can be elevated to lofty ideologies. They are much more likely to be (translationally speaking inept) products of enthusiasts who had only a partial knowledge of the source language, let alone its culture. The 19th century saw the emergence of professional translators in Europe, but, it seems, mostly in minor countries where they were apparently expected to translate literature, school books and scientific literature – but could, at least – make a living from it (Dollerup 1999: 320, 325). On the present-day scene, literary translators are, in most countries, expected to have a good command of the source language.

At the same time, the West has had a variety of dominant languages in ‘literature’ over the centuries: first Latin dominated until the Bible was translated into the vernaculars, then German in Central Europe and French as of the 18th century for the upper classes, finally superseded by English which now dominates in terms of cultural diffusion notably in the book trade and consequently literary translation (Heilbron 2000).

A dominance is also found, but more ambiguously so in **political history**. Medieval treaties were in Latin and letters between sovereigns and prominent political figures were also in Latin until the 18th and 19th centuries. Contracts about trade – in Northern Europe – have probably been in some kind of German pidgin. But in 1634, for instance, the Danish king appointed a full-time translator to translate the lading bills of foreign ships passing Danish waters. The motive was financial because the king levied a tax on ships; it was determined by the value of the goods carried.

During the Napoleonic wars we meet with one uncontested dominant language in politics at virtually all levels in Europe: When one studies Napoleon’s armies and their moves across the continent, one is struck with the rapidity of the deployment. He could keep his armies supplied despite long logistic lines to France. How come? Of course, the idea of the national state was still alien to most educated Europeans. The sons of the local aristocracy and the burgeoning bourgeoisie had learnt the language of the élite, French. ... // 196 ... So on the arrival of French troops which were not ‘enemies’ (except in the eyes of soldiers and generals), these offered a welcome opportunity to practice the language. In turn the French military was happy to enlist the help of the young men would help with procuring provisions, quarters and the like. As a young man in his twenties, the famous German linguist Jacob Grimm did just that (Dollerup 1999: 9, 325). It is telling that at the Congress of Vienna at which the spoils were distributed among the hundreds of kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities and whatnot left in Europe after Napoleon’s defeat, the negotiations were in French.

French continued to dominate worldwide as the language of diplomacy and the postal services until World War 2. As an outcome of the Anglophone victory in the World war, English quickly supplanted French for diplomacy and German for the sciences in northern Europe in the late 1940s, a movement which continued to southern Europe (with considerable growing pains) in the 1980s (Dollerup 1996).

Finally, the last century saw the introduction of multimedia translation, subtitling, drama and opera translation (during performances in foreign languages), dubbing and – at least in South Africa – the interesting combination of television viewing and sound broadcasting.

Although it is only of peripheral interest to my main theme in this article, it should be noted that much communication and information transfer in today's world is moving inexorably from the written word to icons and other signs, just think of the options in a computer. The world of writing is dwindling, but I do not believe that it is doomed to disappearance. Not in a thousand years.



The EU with colours for different expansions

Multilingual cooperation: the case of the European Union

The European Union had a forerunner in the 1952 European Coal and Steel Union. The European Union (then with another name) was formally founded in 1957. It comprised four official languages spoken in the six Member States (Dutch, French, German, Italian). The first expansion in 1973 added three countries and two languages (Danish and English), the second in 1981 one (Greek), 1986 two (Portuguese, Spanish), and 1995 yet another two (Swedish and Finnish) bringing the total up to 11 languages spoken by the 15 Member States.²

Today the European Union has the largest language services in the world – with more than 4,000 employees. It comprises conference interpreters, translators and support staff at all the major institutions of the European Union.

In principle, as put in the European Union's language charter: "... each of the 11 languages in which the Treaty is drafted is recognised as an official language in one or more of the Member States of the Community." This was expanded in the Treaty of Amsterdam, "Every citizen of the Union may write to any of the institutions or bodies referred to in this article or in Article 4 in one of the languages mentioned in Article 248 [which lists the official languages] and have an answer in the same language." In practice it works, but, luckily, there is no flood of letters to the European Union institutions from the nearly 380 million citizens. ... // 197 ...

To me it seems that the three most interesting bodies in a Translation Studies context are: the European Commission, headed by commissioners ('officials' appointed by member states and in charge of specific areas, such as 'environment'), the European Parliament (with 626 elected politicians) and the Council of Ministers (a body comprising any convocation of ministers of a specific field).

In what follows, I shall concentrate on the Commission which I know most intimately. It shares its interpreters with the Council but has a translation service of its own covering the eleven official languages. Two languages, namely English and French dominate in language work and could be termed the 'core languages' (the role of German has been weakened).⁴ The other languages are catered for in so far as there is a need (for instance when some national expert delegate does not master one of the working languages).

At the meetings, documents should be available in the core languages which fact endows these languages with more 'power' than the others. This is certainly a feature which is known to everybody who touches the organisation. But rather than focusing on this question which may become a thing of the past as there are signs that the Commission may not continue its practice of translating all material even between these languages, it is more telling to have a look at the languages in which source texts were made.

German has not ranked high as an input language in the 1990s but hovers around 5-6%. The main battle has been between French – which held undisputed sway until the inclusion of the UK (1973) – and English. It clearly demanded a switch in the teaching emphasis from French to English in southern Europe, before English gained the upper hand around 1995. Now the majority of the translated documents are drafted in English which has also begun to dominate at meetings.

Language control or 'domination' is closely tied to power. Notably so when the question of power is viewed from a historical angle that takes into consideration European colonialism and imperialism. However, at the European Union there is no such obvious 'power' in the sense that neither the French who insist on using French translation and interpreting services nor the British and Irish feel that they are superior to other nationalities. But it does tell in psychological terms. Most sessions last a whole day and delegates tire physically and mentally from speaking and listening to the proceedings in a foreign language. This means that there is no avoiding of a slight bias in favour of native speakers of the core languages.

The decision making process

A rough outline of policy-making at the European Union looks as follows:

1. There is an initiative (at the Commission or from a Member State), for instance concerning a directive on methods of transport for toxic fluids
2. This leads to preparatory studies at the Commission (experts, commission)
3. which conclude with a green or white paper for public consultation with the Member States (translation into all languages)
4. This is followed up by discussion in the Member States and in expert meetings

5. There is a final version for decision by the Council of Ministers and the Parliament (translation into all languages). ... // 197 ...
 6. This is finished with debates and
 7. The publication of the directive (translation into all languages). Finally there are
 8. Reports on the implementation (translation into all languages).
- (modified from the version found at: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/translation/en/eyl/en>)

There are quite a few points worth noting about the policy-making. The first one concerns the inception of the initiative:

When the initiative derives from the Commission, the probability is that it has not been made by native speakers of the language in which the first documents are made: already at this stage, the multilingualism of the European Union makes itself felt. The French are much more squeamish about 'purism' than the English who have long had to accept that most foreign speakers of English use the lingo to speak to other foreigners rather than to Englishmen born and bred. But the English tolerance is definitely a factor which pushes more of the ground work into English. This, in turn, means that most translation work is into German – not that much, but fractionally more than into French and English (c. 12-14% of the total).

In between the stages at which the official guidelines demand translation into all languages, there are, then, documents and translations into the core languages (English and French). These are then discussed by delegates representing the fifteen Member States. This is done at meetings, at which only the English and French can be reasonably sure of having the documents in their language.

The linguistic edge, the 'power' vested with the translations of the documents, however, erodes in the course of the many meetings involving not only the Commission and national delegates but also various lobbyists.

Let us peep into a meeting to see how the word is passed around:

[Wednesday, afternoon: 16:22]

English expert: English

Chair: English

Scots delegate: English

Chair: English

English expert: English

Chair: English

Danish delegate: Danish

German delegate: German

Chair: English (directing the talk only)

Scots delegate: English

Luxembourg delegate: French

Spanish delegate: Spanish ... //199 ...

The English expert (in English) makes a substantial concession by accepting deletion of some tables.

Chair: English, moves to the conclusion.

Spanish delegate: outburst in Spanish

Chair: English. [There is some unrest among the delegates]

German delegate: German

Chair: English

Luxembourg delegate: French

Chair: English

The Danish delegate (Danish) makes an incredibly complicated and terminologically dense speech

German delegate: German

Scots delegate: English ...

[from my personal files]

The point about this meeting is that there is interpreting into four languages (English, French, German and Danish) and interpreting from five languages (namely + Spanish). This explains why the Spanish delegate reacts and can be sure this is understood (he is *listening* to either the English or French interpreters). The Danish delegate believes that her dense message makes it.

The presence of interpreting thus also constitutes a support of power – and an effective one for the Spanish – whereas the Danish delegate does not really get through, possibly because, in the heat of the moment, she forgets that although she is listening to Danish interpreters, her Danish is rendered into the other languages by interpreters in other booths (the French and German ones, to be exact).

At the same time, it is noted that the power is shifting all the time: the chair is largely neutral, and it is the delegates who, relying on the translated documents and on the interpreting they understand, alternatively command the floor, putting in their expert (and, possibly, national) views in an intense interaction with the language service staff.

Meetings of this type which are attended by representatives from all the member states at the expert level in the Commission are - in the major perspective - the most powerful fora at the EU institutions, and, largely unknown to outsiders, this is where we find the intense give and take of national expertise, knowledge and power which is facilitated by translation and interpreting

At the same time, it is pertinent to stress that although translation is usually only done into the ‘working’ languages and most interpreting involve these as well, these meetings have a ‘democratic power’ of their own. The most striking feature about the European Union expert - and political - meetings, is that all Member State have more or less the same number of delegates thus making for an equal distribution of power. This is not changed substantially by the presence of Commission staff.³ Lobbyists do tend to come from central Europe rather than the fringes, but then they are not casting any decisive vote. ...// 200 ... One of the important factors for influence and exertion of power is therefore the national delegates’ command of foreign languages: Poor French is faithfully rendered into hopeless English and baby English will be interpreted into awful French (which has a strong tradition for rhetoric and oratory).

This does mean that at present some of the small nations (including my own) have a say which is way beyond what they should be entitled to according to their size and importance for the common European good.



Negotiations at the EU

The languages at the European Union

The careful listener at the EU notices that whenever meetings are in progress, the language spoken, even by delegates served by interpreters, tends to lapse into some jargon. Part of this jargon is specialist terminology, but there is also a special European jargon and then there is, definitely, a European English which is quite distinct from British English. Rather than a 'lingua franca' it is a common ground to which all add their mite or from which they detract according to their command of English and the interference from their mother tongue. The French are probably the least tolerant, and this will undoubtedly contribute to the decline of French linguistic dominance in European Union fora.

At the same time, the fact that directives are now turned into national law in the Member States is interesting. The 'identity', the exact phrasing of such directives is determined by translators trained in legal technicalities so as to ensure that these directives are understood in the same fashion in all Member States. There is thus consent that these translations be introduced as national laws which can then be monitored and enforced by the policing Commission.

Nevertheless, translators are human, and there is also an intake of new translators and interpreters who take along their updated and innovative language usage: Thus a student of mine studying EU-documents all of sudden came across a Danish translation full of compounds split up into their constituent individual words. This is a modern development in Danish, hardly noted by the Danish Language Board which monitors development of the language.

Yet, at the same time, all translation work at the European Union is bound by previous translation and increasingly so: every time some passage has been translated in a specific way in a previous legal text, the exact wording in the previous translations must be used.

The power of past translation

Formerly the translators would have to rely on documentation. However, since the mid-1990s, the European Union translation services have been computerised so that translators access not only dictionaries and terminology bases but also all previous documents pertinent to any job in hand. Both procedures imply that fragments of translations of old treaties and agreements will surface and be binding in modern legal texts at the European Union. These 'originals' – or rather, 'original translations' are becoming archaic in their source language, but they are not ageing at the same pace in the different European Union languages. ... // 201 ... My guess is that translations into Dutch and Danish, both nations placed precariously close to Britain, are changing most, Spanish to some ex-

tent (because of Latin American influence) and French the least (because of the conservative language policy of the French Academy).

Yet this feature, of course, vests the old translations with a power over new translations that also contributes to make even updated legislation from the European Union seem odd to many citizens in the Member States. The political leaders have come up with a solution, not to the (unrecognised) language problem I outline here, but in order to ease the work-load of the central bureaucracy, including the language services. This is the introduction of ‘subsidiarity’ which means that instead of having laws phrased at the European Union institutions, the individual Member States will themselves have to hammer out new laws according to some commonly accepted guidelines. They can thus give shared legislation a linguistic form attuned to updated language usage in each country.

Yet it does not do away with the powerful tyranny of past translation work which has been transferred from paper to translation memories from which strings of electronically stored previous translations will emerge with their ready-made and obligatory solutions. It is interesting to speculate that a phenomenon along these lines may possibly also be in store for South Africa. On the other hand there are so fundamental differences between the language work and its scope in the rainbow nation and that of the European Union that the problems cannot and will never be the same despite the fact that both have eleven official languages. The factors mentioned at the beginning of the articles such as the working conditions for translation work are so different that, once again, we should abstain from generalising from too little material.

But it may definitely be that in the long perspective, the European Union will have to rewrite all its basic laws not to have outmoded translations exert a ‘power’ which may lead to paralysis.

Notes

1. Statesmen may also make gaffes – or be deliberate rude. An expert interpreter will ensure the message gets through in the way which is intended.
2. The Member States are (language in parenthesis): Austria (DE), Belgium (FR/NL), Denmark (DA), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Ireland (EN), Italy (IT), Luxembourg (FR/DE), Netherlands (NL), Portugal (PT), Spain (ES), Sweden (SV) and the United Kingdom (EN).
3. The Commission staff comprises citizens from all Member States at some relatively fixed ratio.
4. I August 2001, the Chairman of the European Commission, Romano Prodi announced that, in future, there might not always be translations of all crucial documents into the two main procedural languages and that delegates would have to manage without them.
... // 202 ...

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Further reading

There is detailed information about the actual workings at the EU consult the homepage.

There are three articles by the author of the present article in *Language International* (Amsterdam) (2000 # 4, 2000 # 6, and 2001 # 1). These can be downloaded from the Internet at www.cay-dollerup.dk.



The signatures on the Treaty of Rome