

«The language of Europe is translation». An interview with Karl-Johan Lönnroth

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The European Commission's Directorate-General for Translation likes to introduce itself as «the largest translation service in the world». Based both in Brussels and Luxembourg, it has presently a permanent staff of about 1700 linguists and some 550 support staff. The DGT translates written texts into and out of all the EU's official languages. It does not deal with interpretation, which is the responsibility of the Directorate-General for Interpretation. And it works exclusively for the European Commission, on the understanding that other EU institutions have their own translation service.

Considering the key role that the DGT plays in the complex structure of EU multilingualism, *Quaderns. Revista de Traducció* saw it fit to have a talk with Karl-Johan (Juhani) Lönnroth, the present Director-General. Mr Lönnroth was born on 8 September 1945 in Helsinki. He has a Master of Political Sciences (University of Helsinki), a Master of Arts (University of Wisconsin, USA) and also studied at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, in Paris. Prior to his arrival to the DGT on January 1, 2004, Mr Lönnroth worked for the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers, occupied different posts at the Finnish Ministry of Labour, was Director of Employment Department at the International Labour Office in Geneva, and later on was involved with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs, of which he became Deputy Director-General.

Although Mr Lönnroth is proficient in Swedish, Finnish, French, and German as well, the interview took place in English —a telling detail in itself.

Mr Lönnroth, on May 1, 2004 ten new states joined the European Union and nine new languages became official and working languages of UE institutions. How did enlargement affect the performance of the Directorate-General for Translation? What is your personal evaluation of the adaptation process followed by the DGT so far?

The arrival of 10 new Member States and 9 new official languages on 1. May 2004 was unprecedented indeed. Not only did the number of official languages almost double from 11 to 20, at the same time the number of possible language combina-

tions for translation increased from 110 to 380. Moreover, a huge recruitment need was created: Since the translation activity normally takes place from any source language towards the native language, we needed 540 additional staff (translators and middle managers) to cover this translation need. We also needed to ensure that we have a sufficient pool of knowledge of terms and concepts in all of these new languages, in order to provide high quality translations. And finally, we needed a sufficient number of freelance translators to be able to cover our needs for translations which could not be covered through internal translation. I think we globally succeeded with the required adaptation.

Was it difficult to absorb this massive task?

Despite the preparations undertaken, all EU institutions experienced initial difficulties in absorbing this massive task. For example the Commission started off with one tenth of the required capacity to translate into the new official languages. Moreover, the competitions for new staff, which had been organised for all institutions, did not yield a sufficient number of candidates due to the fragility of the labour market for translators in the new Member States. The new Member States were also not ready with the translation of the existing EU legislation (the so called *Acquis Communautaire*), which created problems for us to ensure the stability and quality of terms used for translation.

How did you address this challenge?

A strategy for matching the demand for translation and the available capacity had to be put in place. Not only the Commission, but all other institutions as well adopted measures to prioritise translation and manage demand. For the Commission, this implied i.a. the shortening of documents and focusing on core documents, such as legislation and correspondence with citizens. At the same time, a massive recruitment campaign was launched, which has enabled the Commission to recruit almost 500 new translators and other staff from the new Member States —mostly on a temporary basis— to cover the capacity gap.

How successful was this strategy?

The combined effect of the demand management and the capacity increase has been to enable the Commission to meet its legal obligation to translate all such documents which are necessary for the EU to function, for the citizens to be able to enjoy their rights and for the EU itself to ensure the equal treatment of peoples and languages irrespective of the number of speakers of those languages.

On January 1, 2007 two new states (Bulgaria and Romania) are scheduled to join the European Union, each with a new official language (Bulgarian and Romanian). Moreover, on June 13, 2005 the Council adopted a Regulation

granting Irish the status of official language of the EU, which will apply from 2007. This will raise the number of official languages to 23. On the other hand, the EU foresees further enlargements. In EU terms, Croatia, Macedonia, and Turkey are «candidate countries». And Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, plus Serbia and Montenegro are «potential candidate countries». If all these states joined the UE, the number of official languages would climb at least to 27, if we take Croatian-Bosnian-Serbian to be a single language. Is there any upper limit in the number of official languages a translation service like the DGT can cope with?

Indeed, the number of official languages in the EU continues rising. Moreover, with Bulgarian, we will also have a third official alphabet: the Cyrillic. With 23 languages the number of possible language combinations to translate will increase to 506, and with 27 languages to 702. Some of these however, are never used (such as Maltese to Finnish, for example).

We are nevertheless obliged to recruit an adequate number of new translators for each new official language. However, in my opinion, we will cope with this, on one condition: that we remain strict on the priorities what to translate and also continue to restrain the length of texts. Also, we have to remain pragmatic as to the use of much fewer languages in the internal preparation of documents. We have no choice to this policy either: The Treaties of the EU oblige us to continue translating into all official languages whatever their number. So unless the Treaty is changed, we have no limits.

As is well-known, on June 13, 2005 the Council also decided to authorise «limited use at EU level of languages recognised by Member States other than the official working languages», namely Catalan/Valencian, Galician and Basque. If there are no limits to the number of official languages in the EU, do you think Spain's regional languages might end up by being official working languages?

This is a quite difficult question to answer, since there is a fair amount of speculation in it. Firstly, as the addition of any official language, this depends entirely on the interplay between the Spanish Government and the Council of Ministers. The Spanish Government would have to request it and the Council would have to accept it by unanimity. One should remember, however, that there are more than 40 such languages spoken in the EU, with more or less official status in the Member States' legislation. Therefore, in my personal view, it would be very difficult to maintain equity and arrive at a unanimous decision on all of them.

How does this situation reconcile with the EU endeavour «to ensure the equal treatment of peoples and languages irrespective of the number of speakers of those languages», that you mentioned at the outset?

We should not confuse the issue. The equal treatment principle covers all the official languages as recognised by the Treaty. The Treaty has been accepted and rat-

ified by the Member States. Beyond that, it is not up to the EU institutions, but up to the Member States to guarantee equal treatment of their citizens within their own jurisdiction (which may vary from country to country).

In any case, in December 2005 the Commission concluded an administrative arrangement with Spain on the basis of the aforementioned Council decision. How is translation from and to Spain's regional languages organised?

There are indeed such administrative agreements between the Spanish Government and the EU institutions (not only the Commission). This is very simple. A citizen who wishes, for example, to address the EU institutions in Catalan, receives a reply in that language. The costs of translation from and to that language are covered by the Spanish Government. The Spanish Government has appointed a service which acts as a «focal point» in coordinating and assessing translation requests.

How do you evaluate the implementation of the Council decision, as far as the Commission is concerned? And what about the other EU institutions?

In my view there is nothing particular about such administrative agreements between a Member State and the EU institutions. Such agreements exist also on other topics. It is also a bit early to say how this one operates. I do not know of many cases yet where this agreement has come to operation. But we will proceed with regular evaluations on it.

Now let us leave Spain's regional languages aside and turn to the full official and working languages of the EU. In February 2005 the translation regime of the European Commission made it into the Italian and Spanish headlines. According to accredited newspapers such as *Il Corriere della Sera* and *El País*, the European Commission intended to *reduce* the translation facilities for languages other than English, French and German in the Commission's press room. Both the Italian and the Spanish ambassadors at the EU sent letters to protest. What was exactly the Commission's proposal? How is the present translation regime at the press room, as compared to the past?

I believe that the information in the newspapers you mention was based on a misunderstanding, and the reference does not correspond with facts. It is true that following some newspaper articles, a debate took place which I believe was partly motivated by domestic political considerations. This debate was rather focused on the question whether the Commission (and other institutions) should have a number of translating staff which corresponds with the number of speakers of each language. This is however a false debate: All the EU institutions are fully committed to the policy of multilingualism. But they should have the number of staff which corresponds with the demand for translation, i.e. the number of pages to be translated. This is in fact true for any field of activity in the public service: Its size should correspond with the amount of work.

When you refer to the Commission's press room, I am not sure whether you refer to interpretation or translation. As far as translation is concerned, the Commission has not intended to reduce the language regime in the press room. Press releases (max. 3 pages) are translated into the official EU languages. In addition there are «press memoranda» which provide more detail on Commission's press releases which are also translated up to 7 pages. Other material can be available in a varying number of languages depending on the target audience.

«As far as translation is concerned, the Commission has not intended to reduce the language regime in the press room». I know that the DGT does not deal with interpretation, but let me put this question anyway. As far as interpretation is concerned, has the Commission intended to reduce the language regime?

No, this is not the case. The current language regime for the interpretation is the following: for the Wednesday press conferences, full language regime is applied (active and passive interpretation covering the current 20 official languages). For the other press conferences on other days, a variable language regime applies, depending on the availability of interpreters, since these press conferences are often called at very short notice.

Let us turn again to translation proper. The fact is that in November 2005 the translation regime of the European Commission made a headline for the second time. In Spain, *El País* quoted a «strategical document» for the DGT as advising a cut from 92 to 67 in the staff for Spanish. Was this information also based on a misunderstanding?

I do not think it is very useful to go over this issue again which is almost one year old now. I just wish to say that there was (and still is) some confusion of facts and fiction in this case. The document which was referred to at the time was an internal DGT paper which simply included a calculation (not a proposal) of the staff required to cover the expected demand (at that time) for translation across all EU languages. This is a simple mathematical equation: if you estimate the number of pages required, and the average number of pages translated by each translator, you arrive at a certain figure of staff needs. There is no reason why a public service should maintain more staff than needed, it would be a waste of taxpayers' money. The problem with the figure of 67 was however, that the media overlooked the number of translators needed for other tasks than translating traditional documents - web translation, work on terminological improvement, linguistic advice, linguistic editing, etc. Moreover, translation demand is a dynamic process: the demand (and forecasts) varies over time.

You suggested that the debate that took place following these newspaper information was partly (I would say «mainly») motivated by domestic political considerations. In this connection, the Partido Popular submitted a non-law

proposal to the Spanish Parliament, according to which the Government of Spain should formally ask the EU that Spanish has the same level of use as English and French in all EU institutions («el mismo grado de utilización que el inglés y el francés en todas las instituciones de la Unión Europea»). Is it a realistic demand?

I am not the one who should judge what is realistic and what is not. We should leave this to the politicians, since this is essentially a political issue. However, if the idea is to require that also internal meetings inside the institutions are conducted in Spanish, the only thing I can say is that such meetings now are mostly held in French, English or both. Adding any other language to this would de facto exclude some participants who do not understand that language.

It is significant that both your answer and the Partido Popular's non-law proposal fail to mention German, which is (or maybe I should say *was*) a «procedural» language as well. Leaving «internal meetings inside the institutions» aside, the fact is that Germans have lately been complaining about the neglect of their language. In March 2006 Norbert Lammert, the President of the German Bundestag, sent a letter to Mr Barroso to express his regret that important documents of the European Commission had not been fully translated into German. He announced that the Bundestag would not process European documents unless they were available in German («Der Deutsche Bundestag hat die feste Absicht, Verträge, Rechtssetzungsakte und andere relevante europäische Dokumente nur dann zu behandeln, wenn sie und die zu ihrer Bewertung notwendigen Texte wie z.B. die Fortschrittsberichte von Beitrittskandidaten, Kommissionsarbeitstexte oder Texte zur Politikfolgenabschätzung in deutscher Sprache vorliegen»). Not to mention the continuous and unsuccessful demand that German be included in the EU Presidency websites. I wonder whether these disparities in the use of procedural languages are going to disappear or whether, quite on the contrary, German will soon cease to be a procedural language. Where does German stand as far as the DGT is concerned?

German has been a «procedural language» in the Commission for decades now, and it continues to be so. There is no change in sight in that respect. While it is relatively rarely used in internal staff meetings as a common language among the participants, it is in no way neglected. On the contrary, I feel that the status of the German language has been enhanced during the time I have worked in the Commission: for example internal staff rules and administrative documents are increasingly translated into German, many officials entering from the new Member States after 2004 actually speak that language as their first foreign language, and so on. I also feel that German and Austrian authorities and other stakeholders are more vocal in advocating their language than before. This is a cultural change, whereas these stakeholders —maybe for historical reasons— were more cautious in their advocacy for their language in the past.

What about the position of the German Bundestag?

As regards the demand for translation of documents going to the German Bundestag, it is clear that if the passing of EU legislation requires that a proposal is vetted by the legislative bodies in countries with a federal system, and if there is a specific request to do so, we normally do the translation of the document or relevant parts of it.

Any comment on the EU Presidency websites?

As regards your reference to the language regimes of the websites of EU Presidencies, this is an issue that the Commission has no power or regulatory means to influence. The choice of languages for the EU Presidency is entirely the responsibility of the actual Member State, which has to do its own political judgment what is useful, necessary and cost effective.

In the aforementioned Partido Popular's non-law proposal the assumption is made that English and French have the same level of use in EU institutions. However, the fact is that even the French have been complaining about what they perceive as the neglect of their language. (In April 2006 the French National Assembly joined the German parliament in denouncing the «unacceptable drift toward a monolingual system» dominated by English.) Leaving now German aside, what is the share of each procedural language as far as the European Commission is concerned? How did the 2004 enlargement affect the level of use of each language?

It is not uncommon that various nationalities complain about the use of their languages in the EU institutions. The French are not alone in that. It is also true that upon enlargement, the citizens from the new Member States speak more often English or German than French. Let's have some facts first: Some fifteen years ago, almost half of the papers written in the Commission had French as their original language, one third were written in English. Today the share of documents written in French is 17 per cent, and 69 percent are written in English. This is not the result of any deliberate policy by the EU institutions, but due to the fact that people write in a language where they feel comfortable. The reason is simple: the world of work is changing: 80 per cent of pupils in most countries choose English as their first language. The EU institutions have no competence in this matter. So the French (and the other Member States) should be asked, what are they doing in their own educational policy. The Commission is doing its share: I.a. is there a requirement for officials that in order to get promoted, they must learn two EU languages in addition to their main language. The Commission has also recommended (and the Council endorsed) the 1 + 2 language policy (that EU citizens should learn at least two languages in addition to their own). So the Member States should be asked whether or not they are following up these recommendations.

Upon enlargement, did the share of English as the source language of incoming documents increase? On the other hand, to what point is English the most frequent *target* language of incoming documents in a non-procedural language?

I do not feel that the question of «source» languages is as relevant as the question of «target» languages, i.e. that the documents are translated into all official EU languages for the benefit of the citizens. Here, the Commission is fully committed to multilingualism, and there is no discrimination of French vis-à-vis English here. I am also quite surprised about the excitement about the use of languages inside the EU institutions, when the focus should be on how the institutions interact outside with citizens and companies. Also there is much less excitement about the common language of multinational companies, which is English virtually without exception.

However, in March 2006 the French delegation, headed by president Jacques Chirac, left the room of the European Council in Brussels, when the president of the European employers, his countryman Ernest-Antoine Seillièvre, announced that he was going to deliver his speech in English, «la langue des affaires». But this is quite another matter indeed. Let us now summarize. Firstly, in the Member States dozens of languages are spoken, but only those that are *state* languages are official and working languages of the EU institutions, and hence of the European Commission. Non-state languages are simply excluded from full officiality, irrespective of size. Next, among the full official and working languages of the European Commission a clear distinction is made between the three «procedural languages» and the other official and working languages. Thirdly, among the three «procedural languages» English is by far the most widely used. My final question is: From your privileged position, what changes do you envisage in this 3-layer system for the next future?

I do not see any radical change emerging in the foreseeable future. The language regime of the EU is now 50 years old. Its principles have stood the test for decades. In its practical implementation also, a careful equilibrium has been found, and there is no decision maker who would wish to touch it now. There is, for the moment, a High Level Group on Multilingualism, working under the auspices of the Commissioner for Multilingualism, the Slovakian Mr. Ján Figel'. This group will look i.a. at possible improvements, research, the role of different actors and the cost of «non-application of multilingualism in Europe». But I do not think that it will touch upon the main principles enshrined in the EU Treaty.

What do you understand under «multilingualism»?

I think that we should remember that multilingualism actually has four levels: First, how to enable citizens and stakeholders to communicate with each other. Here the

responsibility to ensure multilingualism lies mainly with the Member States, since the EU has very limited competence in education policy. Second, equal access of citizens to the EU institutions, which obliges us to translate all official acts into the official languages. It is our duty, but it is the responsibility of the national governments to decide, which are the official languages of each country. Third, the way the institutions operate internally. Here the «procedural languages» to which you refer, come into play: It is inconceivable that the daily practice of the internal work comprises more than two or three languages maximum. I have worked in several international organisations. In none of them documents are *de facto* prepared in more than one or two languages.

You mentioned four levels...

The fourth level is the mother tongue: I am convinced that one must master one language perfectly in order to be able to learn others. Unfortunately I have seen too many candidates in recruitment situations both nationally and internationally who do not have sufficient drafting or formulation skills in their own language. This is also a responsibility of the educational authorities to watch.

It is indeed. As a Language Professor myself I am well aware of it. Thank you Mr Lönnroth for your time and your insightful comments.