Interpreting in the News

EU enlargement and its ramifications, intangible heritage, dragomans, and Hollywood movies with interpreters all make their way onto this issue's honor role.

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Interpreting and language issues continue to be the subject of many an article. EU enlargement has generated the most interest over the last few months, but cultural diversity, diplomacy, the “savings” made by using machine translation, and even tattoos have received attention on the Internet.

EU enlargement

It’s not surprising that EU enlargement was the subject of many a press article these days, and many that refer to use of languages. Enlargement is now a reality, but here’s a look back on what we found leading up to May 1.

- euobserver: EU to wrestle with 20 official languages. “A committee room in the European Parliament is the perfect way to see the practical effects of European enlargement.”
- BBC: Translating is EU's new boom industry. An overview with lots of figures. “Twenty languages gives a total of 190 possible combinations …”
- National Public Radio: MALTA Doesn't Translate as EU Member. “NPR's Scott Simon speaks with a professor of Maltese who discusses why there is such a dearth of Maltese language interpreters and translators.” (Note: you may have to open your media player before clicking on the link “Weekend Edition – Saturday audio.” If you don’t have a media player, the site offers links to download one.)
- Helsingin Sanomat: Finnish interpreters within EU afraid of losing their jobs. The title is eloquent. It’s not often that we see the media reflect concern about our job security. “The work of Finnish interpreters is in danger of being reduced dramatically within the EU Commission as a result of new regulations.”
- The Guardian: Euro babble even tells us how the booths are numbered and gives some interesting data on some of Europe’s less-spoken tongues.
- The Slovak Spectator: Wagging the Slovak Tongue. Our favorite title of all, and also a great quote: “‘In the EU, all official languages are equal in theory. In practice, though, some are much more equal than others,’ said Jozef Reinvart, member of the working group Language Policy in an Integrating Europe, set up by the National Convent on the European Future of Slovakia.”
- The Scotsman: The party’s over – will the EU boom or bust? Did you know that “The accession of Austria, Sweden and Finland in 1995 added more land than was added (on May 1)”? 
- El Mundo: El Gobierno ya ha pedido a la UE que reconozca en la Constitución las lenguas
oficiales en España and La UE estudiará la petición española sobre lenguas cooficiales. Will the constitution be translated into more than 20 languages?

To keep up with the situation of freelance interpreters in the EU, get on AIIC’s European Union Sector mailing list – sign up here.

Cultural diversity and languages

UNESCO is best known for promoting world cultural heritage sites, but the Paris-based organisation has also recognised that languages are part of humankind’s “intangible heritage” and a “mirror of cultural diversity.” Find out more about UNESCO conventions and activities in these areas by following the links.

Dragomans

Bernard Lewis has written a book entitled From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East. Now you can listen to NPR’s Robert Siegel talk to Lewis about the history of the dragomans, the interpreters of for the Ottoman Sultans. You can also find an interview with Lewis in the April 29th issue of The Atlantic.

Thoughts on interpreting

When the Translation Journal announces itself as “A Publication for Translators by Translators about Translators and Translation,” it obviously uses “translator” in the broadest sense. The current issue (Volume 8, No. 2, April 2004 in case you read this when the issue is not so current) contains three articles on interpretation. Scroll down the page and you will find them grouped together.

German town discovers the value of machine translation

The German town of Homberg-an-der-Efze decided to translate a tourism brochure using an internet translation tool. The result? According to the BBC article Getting lost in the translation, it wasn’t good: “As a result of officials trying to save money by getting the internet to do a translator's job, a total of 7500 brochures had to be binned.”

Self-expression or self-deception?

No doubt about it – tattoos are everywhere! And it seems that Americans are especially fond of Chinese and Japanese characters – not as in the stars of action films or animé but as in ideograms, kanji, katakana... But does anyone know what they will be proclaiming with their biceps for the rest of their lives? Echo, a student magazine at Columbia College in Chicago, has come to the rescue with “Lost in Translation: Here’s what those cool-looking Japanese tattoos really say.”

The Interpreter spurs more stories

Well, Hollywood movies make better stories than most conferences anyway, except in serious journals like Communicate!. One suspects that several stories about UN diplomats vying for parts were written with at least part of someone’s tongue in the proverbial cheek. The Toronto Star entitled their story “Ambassadors’ Screen Dreams Dashed.” To calm the diplomatic storm, apparently reasons had to be found for not letting ambassadors play a role they certainly know well – that of UN ambassadors! Mention was made of legal stipulations and Director Sydney Pollack was quoted as saying: “This is not the United States. This is international territory, so the people that are here legally aren’t allowed to work in the United States. They have to have an American work permit to work and get paid by an American film company.” The article also reports that Nicole Kidman paid attention to the dress habits of our New York colleagues. We would be interested to hear from anyone who gave her shopping tips!
Student contribution from Spain

Katherine Gun was a translator at the UK’s Government Communications Headquarters who was “outraged at what she considered an attempt to subvert the U.N” through efforts to spy on members of the Security Council. She is awaiting trial for allegedly violating the country’s Official Secrets Act.

The quote is taken from the Time Europe article sent to us by the 2003-2004 Liaison Interpreting Class of the Universitat Jaume I in Castellón (Spain). We thank them for their interest and here reproduce an excerpt from their letter on translators and interpreters:

“As professionals with important responsibilities to their clients they must conscientiously observe their obligations of integrity, professionalism and confidentiality. One of the main points of this ethics is professional secrecy that can be considered as a moral question. But what happens when this “professional moral” conflicts with a personal one? Katherine Gun is a good example of this dilemma. She made an act of conscience according to life ethics in her own best judgement and discretion and has had to face the consequences.

We would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those professionals who are on the front line and whose work goes unnoticed.”

Recommended citation format: