Book review: German as a conference language in the European Union

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Jacquy Neff
Deutsch als Konferenzsprache in der Europäischen Union.
Eine dolmetschwissenschaftliche Untersuchung
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This book satisfies a long-felt need! It closes a gap not only in interpreting studies, but also in intercultural German studies and German sociolinguistics. It is thus intended primarily for readers with a particular interest in these fields of research and those who are themselves academically involved in these disciplines. However, it also contains a wealth of information for all those who are personally active in the practice of conference interpreting and who sometimes stop to wonder about their future on the market; it is above all also important reading for those responsible for training future generations of interpreters, since they would be well advised to ensure that they do not train their students with a total disregard for what the market actually needs.

In his dissertation, Jacquy Neff adopts a contrastive approach to the demand for German and the supply of interpreters with German in the countries of the European Union before the last expansion, presenting the situation against the background of such trends as globalisation and the advance of English, with which every interpreter is familiar. For this purpose, he conducted a total of 4 surveys between 1998 and 2003, involving 19,000 conference organisers and 3,300 conference interpreters, yielding data on the basis of which he identified a number of indicators that can be used to describe the position of German on the European conference scene. These include conference-typical parameters (type and length of meetings, languages and subjects concerned, interpreting modes), market-relevant data (stratification and typological differentiation of conference organisers, market breakdown, potential numbers of assignments for conference interpreters with German), language-specific aspects (language requirements in active and passive languages, language combinations) and interpreter-related data (structure of professional activity, assignment potentials etc.). In addition to the results regarding the actual situation in the base year 1998 and developments between 1993 and 2003, the perspective consideration of possible trends appears particularly interesting. The author rightly points out that conference interpreters often tend towards a somewhat subjective and selective assessment of developments and future prospects, based on personal experience, which fails to take into account the totality of the parameters affecting a market. It is therefore highly instructive to see all the well-founded data he has gathered, which offer clear evidence of the important position of German on the conference scene and also demonstrate that its future prospects are rosy. It is, however, also clear that there are considerable fluctuations in the
demand that can be expected, depending on whether one is looking at events in Germany or on the markets in other countries, who the organisers are and in what fields and at what kind of conferences interpreting is used. Taking Europe as a whole, for example, a more pronounced demand can be expected at the institutions of the EU, while on the national level there is likely to be an increase among trades unions, administrative authorities, educational facilities, ministries and also in industry. As a specialist language, German plays a particularly important role in the fields of economics, technology and law, but only to a lesser extent in politics and science. German as an A or C language must be regarded as more attractive than German as a B language. Ultimately, the prospects of German in competition with other languages (especially English of course) depend on the willingness of the German-speaking countries systematically to promote their language, and above all on the willingness of German-speaking conference participants actually to use their own mother tongue in multilingual communication events.

The impressive scale and the high academic standard of this magnum opus should not deter the more practically orientated reader. At no point does Jacquy Neff begin to wallow in impenetrable scientific jargon. All the terms from the fields of translation sciences, sociolinguistics, empirical social research and statistics are clearly defined and explained, while the text reads fluently and in some parts even excitingly. The hurried reader will find an in-depth introduction to the subject of the research in chapter 1 and a detailed summary of the survey results in chapter 6. However, anyone who takes the time to read the entire book attentively will not only find the answer to the central question but will also come across a vast amount of fascinating information on smaller details, such as the (surprisingly large) number of permanently employed conference interpreters in the private sector, the growing importance of videoconferences, the relationship between a relevant degree or membership of a professional organisation (and specifically which one) and the number of interpreting days, the age pyramid of the interpreter population or finally a (non-existent) sex-specific preference for particular technical fields. In contrast to this, it becomes clear that the assessment of the importance of the different specialist fields tends to vary according to age groups. It is also worth mentioning that the subject of the historical development of conference interpreting, which has also been dealt with in many parts of the literature, is described particularly clearly here and is presented specifically with a view to the importance of German. The author also breaks new ground with his comprehensive description of the position of German in the case of international institutions based in Europe. Interpreters who work for the EU, will probably find the analysis of the past, present and expected future practice of the Union regarding languages particularly interesting.

Anyone who would like to delve into the subject more deeply can turn to the CD enclosed with the book, where he will find the questionnaire and all the data from the study.

The author has developed a language combination model that belongs under the pillow of every conference interpreter, interpreting student and above all interpreting teachers. It provides a table offering an overview of the demand for certain language combinations that can be expected on the market up to 2010, broken down into the sub-markets of the private sector, EU institutions, international organisations and ministries and administrative authorities. It differentiates according to A, B and C languages and according to the immediate demand, the demand in three to five years (beginning in 2004) and in seven to ten years. There is also a very graphic illustration in the table showing the demand for combinations of specialist subjects that can probably be expected up to 2010; these are broken down into the individual market segments of economics, technology, science, politics and law and impressively illustrate where the focus will lie in future.

The only shortcoming is the absence of an index, but in view of the vast number of entries that would have had to be included, this would probably have been an extremely laborious enterprise.

Even at this stage, it is fairly safe to predict that this book will become a standard work of reference.
in translation sciences. It is highly recommended reading for every conference interpreter.

English version by Tony Rich.

Recommended citation format: