Building Europe - or back to Babel?

Communication across language borders is at the heart of international relations everywhere. It certainly is in the European Union, where millions of words are translated and interpreted every day.

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The number of working languages in the EU is set to double with the integration of Central and Eastern European countries beginning in 2004. One would expect the EU to encourage translators and interpreters to meet this formidable challenge with the same enthusiasm and rigor they have shown in past enlargements - but one would be wrong!

The European Parliament has come up with a surprising equation for post-enlargement interpretation. Two times the number of working languages + greater workload for each interpreter = a 1/3 reduction in staff, they say. The secret of this new math, you ask? Simple: a revised skills profile for the job. Quality considerations have been bulldozed by the bottom line.

Strange? Professional linguists certainly think so, but they were not consulted in the lead-up to the decision made by EP administrators and politicians.

Now an AIIC-led coalition of staff and freelance conference interpreters is making it harder for them to turn a deaf ear. In an unprecedented joint general assembly on October 24th in Strasbourg (France) more than 300 EP interpreters voiced unanimous opposition to the plan and insisted on the practitioners' rightful place in efforts "to define an approach to multilingualism that is professionally, politically and financially viable." Support was fast in coming from EP translators, who face the same situation, the EP staff committee, and from staff interpreters at the EU Commission.

What is the EP's (not so) brilliant idea exactly?

Well, everybody speaks English, right? So interpreters from all climes must find it child's play to work into English. And if they all will do just that, they need not master three, four or five languages as they do now. Let them all work from English into their mother tongue and vice-versa. No fuss, easy as pie - and no English booth to boot! Native English-speaking interpreters? Who needs 'em? Can't savvy their formulations of speech anyway, don't you agree? And why not cut manning strengths while we're at it? Fewer bodies mean fewer salaries and fit into smaller booths which cost less too.

The saddest part of this rather improbable story is that it's true and playing live. And quality is not yet on the bill.

Bringing quality back into the equation

What makes for quality interpretation in a multilingual environment? The existing EU system, that's
Interpreters typically work directly from several languages into their mother tongue, in which they best master technical subtleties and nuances of expression.

If and when direct interpretation is not possible (because interpreters providing it are not available), interpreters work in the "relay" mode (i.e. they work from the rendition provided by another colleague, called a "pivot").

While relay cannot be excluded in multilingual meetings, it remains a second-best solution as it unavoidably introduces delays in transmitting information and a loss in precision.

If enough "pivots" working into their mother tongue cannot be found (there must be at least two per team, each working into a different language to assure back-up), translation into a language known to the rest of the team is provided via what we call a "retour". An example: currently few non-Finnish interpreters master that language, so colleagues in the Finnish booth frequently have to do a "retour" into a more widely-known language (usually English or German, but sometimes French or Spanish).

To institute "relay interpreting" as the rule rather than the exception is to invite confusion, but yet the EP "multilingualism managers" seem to be saying that such a loss would actually be a gain. They would have us believe that the Finnish experience proves their point. Finnish colleagues say it points to their ignorance of what is involved. They conclude from their experience that the risk of diminished content and accuracy increases when the relay is provided by someone working into a foreign language in which he/she is less versatile and confident than in his/her own language.

They also underscore the stress that comes from working under such circumstances and knowing that the whole team depends on their translation. What they fear most is the "Strasbourg syndrome": Intense stress-induced ailments stemming from working as the sole "pivot" for 10 other booths at the EP's plenary, a nightmare of technically complex, politically sensitive speeches usually delivered at break-neck speed.

The resolution adopted by last month's joint general assembly of EP interpreters accepts "retour", also called "bi-active interpretation", as a transitional measure after enlargement. But the interpreters insist that "Retour interpretation cannot be seen as a sustainable working method for the European Parliament in the long run" and call for "Immediate action that will lead to abandoning the use of retour from Finnish".

In addition, they criticize the wide-spread use of a sole "pivot" booth, as is still the practice for Finnish at the EP, and they set a deadline of 31 March 2002 to systematically apply the general standard of two pivot languages per meeting.(2)

Less is more?

In any case, the EP plan fails to meet its own goal, namely to save money:

"The proposed system (...) will not lead to substantial savings", the general assembly's resolution says, "as it has no impact on the number of interpreters per meeting". The additional workload of providing a "retour" can hardly justify a reduction in staff.

What the EP masterminds also failed to comprehend is that working into a foreign language is a different skill from working from other languages into one's own. Roughly one-third of EU accredited interpreters master that skill - mostly for the purposes of providing whispered or consecutive interpretation during missions away from headquarters or in small meetings. Most of them would neither be able nor willing to do the same in simultaneous, especially in technical
committee meetings or in the EP plenary.

Typically, interpreters decide at the beginning of their career which road to take: Concentrate on bi-active interpretation or on learning several languages in order to work from those into their mother tongue.

In the first case, they will mostly work in private market conferences with few working languages, mostly bi-lingual meetings. In the second, they will end up working for international organisations and/or conferences practicing multilingualism. Different careers, different professional practice, different training to prepare for it.

"Imagine," says Martin Wooding, editor of the EP's interpretation monthly Lingua Franca, "a large hospital with a dozen-odd departments. Each department has its own highly trained specialists who have spent an entire career perfecting their skills. The hospital suddenly faces the need to add a range of new specialties in response to increased demand. The hospital administration (a body which is proud to admit it knows nothing about medicine but everything about management) wants the new specialties but finds that they will cost too much money. It comes up with a brilliant plan. All the specialists will be trained to do a second job as well. The cardiologists will be capable of carrying out chiropody. The brain surgeons will be able to treat skeletal disorders. The nose, ear and throat bods will double up as molecular biologists. That will be bound to save a few jobs, in some department or other. It's a truly splendid idea, and only the most excellent of mandarin brains could have devised it. After all, what's with specialties? They're all doctors, aren't they?" (3)

Things haven't gone that far yet and it is our intention to assure that they never do. EP interpreters are committed to true multilingualism worthy of the name and they are committed to time-proven professional standards. In short, we are not prepared to go back to Babel.

"Our purpose should be", ends the Lingua Franca article, "to force some sound professional advice upon our employers, before it is too late to save this institution from itself."(4) Hear, hear!

(1) See "Resolution on the Management of Multilingualism at the European Parliament after Enlargement".
(2) See "Resolution on the Interpretation Out of Finnish at the European Parliament".
(4) Id.

Recommended citation format:

