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The Use of Translation in International Organizations

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Many of the references are from the late 1990s, now woefully out of date.

1. Overview

In the year 2000 there were almost 30,000 non-profit international organizations in the world. They range from the highly developed institutions of the United Nations system to the smaller informal associations developed for regional issues, embracing anything from ecology to Bible study. To the extent that they cross cultural and linguistic borders, most of these organizations may be expected to use translation—here including interpreting as spoken translation—to some extent, although the degrees and modes of use depend very much on factors such as the size and structure of the organization, as well as the relative availability of lingua francas. Although the following survey of this vast field will address the historical reasons behind this diversity, the focus will more specifically be on the use of translation in the United Nations and the European Union systems.

2. History and Types of Organization

The *Yearbook of International Organizations* for 1999-2000 contains entries on 29,495 non-profit organizations active in 289 countries and territories. These are divided into 24,325 international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 5,170 intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), which means there are almost five times as many NGOs as IGOs. The distinction is of extreme importance for translation services, basically because the institutional foundations of IGOs tie them to the nation state and its corresponding language policies. IGOs, from the United Nations system down, will typically privilege multilingual policies for symbolic reasons and then attempt to reduce the high translation costs that ensue from those policies. NGOs, on the other hand, rarely have the funding necessary for symbolic translation practices; their use of translation is closer to what might precariously be termed “real needs”; they are far less likely to employ in-house staff translators or interpreters.

The differences between these main types of organizations are also partly historical. If we look for distant antecedents of contemporary IGOs, we would probably have to consider the structures of the classical multicultural empires, with their mixes of imposed lingua francas and respected national languages. In such circumstances, translation operated as a means of often symbolic unification (see Esther 8:9). In Europe, the weak and largely cultural Holy Germanic Empire was linked to translation projects under Fredericus II Hohenstaufen and in the candidacy of Alfonso X of Castile-Leon. That might be one kind of distant background for the use of translation such as we find it in the European Union, where the central political

figure is traditionally weak, decision-making power remains with the major nation-states and their preferred languages, and translation foregrounds the symbolic plurality of those languages. Intergovernmental undertakings may nevertheless also be associated with the various military alliances that have required rather more efficient communication solutions. The weak imperial model that might underlie the many official languages of the EU is thus not the same as the one justifying the more restricted use of translation in an alliance like NATO (which has English and French as working languages).

NGOs would probably have to look for their antecedents in the structures and practices of the multinational churches, where ideology, shared interests, and various senses of mission tend to override the symbolic values of language loyalty. Although there are obvious and important differences between the Latin of Catholicism, the Classical Arabic of Islam, the Hebrew of Judaism, or perhaps the American English of some evangelical groups, the international churches tend to use translation as a means of radiating out from a main source language (sometimes considered sacred) toward any number of “branch” target languages. Since this model combines centralized power structures and relative efficiency, it tends to be the general rule of NGOs, and indeed of restricted-domain IGOs such as the European Free Trade Association (which had English as its *lingua franca*). Further, the demands of efficiency increasingly bring about situations where language-learning policies (mainly the learning of the central language or languages) reduce the actual need for translation within the actual organization structure. In such situations, translation may even be restricted to communication with external entities only.

One thus cannot assume that translation is of importance to all international organizations, or that the growth in the number of organizations means a necessary growth in the demand for translators. Catch-cries such as the “multilingual information society” may point more to the number of languages in which individuals are able to send and receive information rather than the actual need for translators to intervene in communication flows.

The spectacular rise in the number of international organizations has been since the Second World War. This is firstly because the foundations of the UN and EU systems of IGOs were established by the victors of that war, with attendant selections of official languages and correspondingly decentralized translation policies. Their patterns have largely been followed by the growing coordinated institutions sector, where organizations are basically limited to arranging contacts and agreements between national or governmental entities in specific domains such as health, telecommunications or banking. Yet the rapid growth since the beginning of the 1960s has been in the number of NGOs, which may be seen as a response to the growing inadequacy of the nation-state as a unit of economic control, at the same time as the advent of cheap international communications has allowed civil society to cross political borders. Organizations such as Greenpeace or *Médecins sans Frontières* manifest ways in which an internationalized civil society seeks to pressure or complement the work of governments, but they do so on necessarily restricted budgets that often call for “user-pays” translation policies or the employment of translators on a voluntary basis. In these cases, the need for efficiency radically reduces the number of working languages, in effect bolstering the status of international languages such as English and French, which also dominate the main IGO systems. The International Olympic Committee, which is an exceptionally wealthy NGO, has French and English as its official languages and then

requires that, for each Olympiad, information on all sports be published in “the language of the host country” (1999, article 60, bye-law 1), at the cost of the local organizing committee. In the case of the 1992 Barcelona Olympiad, this reference to “country” meant that translations were carried out into both Spanish and Catalan (Pym 1996). Yet the resulting four-language translation policy remains one of the very few occasions on which the internal multilingualism of nations has affected international schemata.

3. Language Policies in IGOs

The language policies of many IGOs remain officially based on the Romantic principle of “one nation, one language”. This is apparently despite the fact that the very rise of these organizations ensues from the decline of the nation state as an effective decision-making unit. Perhaps the most extreme case is the European Union, which with 15 members at the end of the millennium had 11 official languages. Since the possible language combinations are given by the formula $n \cdot (n-1)$, an EU of 11 languages must allow for $11 \times 10 = 110$ combinations. In practice this organizational nightmare is mostly avoided by a number of real-need measures, the foremost of which is a pragmatic restriction of the central working languages to English and French, although attempts were made to enhance the role of German (for background, see Volz 1993). Coulmas (1991), in a wide-ranging critique of what was then the European Community of 12, calculated that even with the reduction of working languages, the multilingual policy accounted for some 40% of the total administrative budget (which means it was about 2% of the total budget) and there seem to be few reasons to downsize the estimate now (cf. Heynold 1994: 13). Coulmas saw these costs as defending national languages against the growth of international English, concluding that “the European Community has been used by member states to defend their languages’ privileged position rather than being given the chance to produce a language policy of its own” (1991: 8). A similar gap between idealist democratic policy and motivated pragmatic restriction can be seen in the United Nations. The UN’s six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) represent different moments of international expansion rather than nation states as such, yet few organizations within the UN system actually use all six languages.

When the AIIC Training Committee advises students about finding employment as conference interpreters, it provides notes on 44 international organizations. Significantly, all of these are IGOs, since NGOs tend not to have staff translators or interpreters. All 44 of those interpreter-using organizations have English as one of their working languages, 43 have French (the one exception being the Washington-based Pan-American Health Organization, which does use French occasionally), 31 have Spanish, followed by 19 Arabic, 19 Russian and 14 Chinese (these three languages are used notably within the UN system of IGOs), ten German (mainly in the EU system), eight Portuguese (mainly in the Americas), and the remaining languages are official in three organizations or less. This indicates quite massive concentration on just a handful of international languages. Even within the relative pluralism of the EU system, the input languages for written translations in 1997 were predominantly English (54.3%) and French (40.4%), with the next language being German at 5.4% (European Commission 1999). This means that, even when translations are being carried out into a wide range of target languages, the actual operation of organizations may

be restricted to just one or two working languages. Obviously, in such situations not all official languages are used in all meetings or for all internal written communication. Opposing the pragmatic tendency to reduce the number of working languages and thus economize translational resources, there are firm ideological arguments in favour of widening the number of languages used and thus promoting increased use of translation. It is pointed out that the very function of most IGOs, particularly within the UN system, is to check the power imbalances that would predominate in direct relations between nation states. Indeed, since many disputes come to IGOs precisely because of different views and interpretations, the function of the organization could be to manifest the cultural and linguistic dimensions of those differences (Jastrab de Saint-Robert 1978). Tabory (1980) associates multilingualism with the doctrine of the equality of States, also arguing that, in tune with notions of linguistic ecology, in the drafting of legal documents “the use of more than one language may clarify or focus on problems of formulation” (1980: 145). Such arguments need constantly to be restated in the face of financial pressures. Although various official resolutions passed by the UN do ostensibly tie translation services to “needs” rather than budget constraints, changes in the nature of international communication may leave such moves as little more than pious hopes.

Within translation studies, criticisms of such policies tend not to concern the selection of working or official languages as such, although it has been argued that an EU with just one working language could then use the savings to enhance democracy by translating into the 50 or so regional languages of Europe (cf. Pym 1999). Translator-trainers and theorists tend to be more concerned about the effects that centralized international bureaucracies are having on the various registers of official languages (cf. Goffin 1994). Gambier (1998: 299) claims that EU accession has actually reintroduced into Finnish legal prose some of the long convoluted sentence-constructions, excessive nominalizations, connected subordinate clauses, ambiguities, and general jargon that the previous historical tendency had been eliminating: “From the Finnish perspective, the composition and style of Finnish EU texts has meant a historical regression” (Gambier 1998: 300).

Given the high costs involved and the difficulties of ensuring consistent quality, organizations in the UN and EU systems have sought to reduce translation needs in various ways. Many meetings, especially in the more technical areas, may effectively take place without translation services because delegates have adequate competence in English or French. In some cases this may involve solely passive competence, so that a meeting can take place in several languages, all of which are at least understood by all delegates (Dollerup 1996: 300-306). Statistics on actual use of this “passive multilingualism” are nevertheless hard to locate. It would seem that the fundamental options remain either the use of lingua francas (i.e. non-translation) or various modes of low-cost translation (see Pym 1997). This in turn influences the way translators and interpreters are employed.

4. Modes of Translator Employment

When the larger entities of the UN or EU systems were founded, the centralized organization cultures of the time promoted the creation of in-house translation and interpreting departments, able to provide most of the communication services required within the organization or for a set of related organizations. Such in-house structures

ensured a supply of skilled professionals with experience in the specialized areas of individual organizations, with elaborate revision practices allowing certain quality standards to be maintained. However, the employment of full-time staff translators and revisers has in many cases been found to be expensive and restrictive. In particular, it has proved unable to provide the greater flexibility required by factors such as increases in official languages (within the EU system), new areas of technical expertise, the irregular timing of translation and interpreting needs, and various demands for more “remote meetings” (i.e. those held outside the main headquarters).

Many in-house services have thus been reduced in relative size. This may involve a concentration of language options, since the pragmatic reduction to one or two working languages means that communication flows are increasingly from those central languages (either as languages of original text production or as “pivots”) to a range of target languages. Combinations of non-central languages (for example, two-way competence between Finnish and Greek) would thus be required for little more beyond interpreting at high-level public meetings; professionals specializing in such combinations would then tend not to be employed on a full-time basis. Thus, the recruitment of staff translators and interpreters is becoming increasingly focused on the central languages.

Many in-house services have been significantly complemented by other forms of employment (Didaoui 1998). This clearly involves the use of more part-time staff or various on-call arrangements, particularly in the case of interpreters, where the role of full-time staff may virtually be reduced to the recruitment, evaluation and preparation of external professionals. In 1997, external freelance translators were doing some 17% of the workload of the European Commission’s translation service (European Commission 1999: 14), and this percentage was expected to increase. Many interpreters similarly work on an “ancillary” or “freelance” basis: Altman (1998) notes that only 7% of the conference interpreters who are members of the AIIC are employed as staff interpreters.

Full outsourcing nevertheless involves the contracting of entire external agencies, which would normally be provided with the available terminology banks and documentation required to complete tasks in a fixed domain. Didaoui (1998) reports that outsourcing of part of the translation work was recommended by the United Nations office of Internal Oversight Services in 1995, largely because of cost criteria, on the condition that “the contractors be proficient and experienced translators, familiar with United Nations terminology, whose work requires no further revision.”

Moves to partial or complete outsourcing have obviously been made possible by improving electronic communications. Standardized software programmes and online data bases allow staff translators to work on a distance basis, which may further enhance flexibility. Work-at-home arrangements were formally adopted at the IMF in 1995, based on a system whereby translators “provide their own computer equipment, but remote access to software, modems, and network security devices are supplied by IMF” (reported in Didaoui 1998). This mode of work was considered beneficial for translators who did not need to consult with colleagues. Yet technological change would seem to have had a much greater impact on the freelance sector, where “teletranslation” has become the norm. This has allowed external freelancers to replace many of translators formerly employed in-house on a short-

term basis. Teletranslators may work directly for an international organization on a contract basis or, perhaps increasingly, for a specialized agency to which the organization has outsourced.

The equivalent of teletranslation in the interpreting sphere is the increasing use of “remote” or “off-site” meetings where interpreters are recruited locally and solely for the meeting concerned. A 1997 meeting of the UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Improvement of Practices in the Translation Process nevertheless stressed that, “while the bulk of the work could clearly be performed efficiently off-site, there were real advantages in having a translation team on the spot, especially when drafting was taking place: they would be fully abreast of the latest developments and be able to respond immediately to emergency needs, not to mention side-benefits to the organization from the greater motivation and sense of participation of staff” (reported in Didaoui 1998).

One might thus expect to find creative combinations of staff and external translators in which a reduced in-house staff would control and orient the use of external agencies or freelancers. This may involve new versions of classical revision arrangements, which were once a trait of clear hierarchical working relationships within in-house translation departments. In the UN system, the job reclassification scheme introduced in the 1980s virtually did away with the system by which a “superior” reviser revised the work of an “inferior” translator, opting instead for various modes of “self-revision”. In the EU services, revising is mostly carried out by translators employed at the same level, avoiding much of the stigma of the hierarchical control of professions. Translators may thus work and revise in pairs or in reduced teams, effectively blurring the divisions between the various drafting tasks.

In complex organizations such as the European Commission, this blurring of divisions also affects text-production practices. EU legislation is produced as a series of drafts and revisions, with subsequent modifications theoretically being introduced into any one language version and then being taken to the rest. Further, translators may consult several prior language versions rather than just the one source text, and there is reworking and potential consultation between text originators, translators, revisers, and legal experts. All that means that pragmatic directionality (the direction in which any one translation act moves) becomes multiplied so many times that it is no longer possible to point to just one start text and just one target text, although it may well be possible to isolate a major “pivot” text in one of the central languages.

This mode of text production has important consequences for the way translators work. The resulting anonymity of the individual translator (and indeed, in many cases, of text originators) underlies the ethics of “collective responsibility” that is indeed an EU norm; the phenomenon of the “signed translation”, which would encourage and underscore individual creativity in the translation process, thus becomes a rarity in the larger international organizations, no matter how much this may contradict the various codes of ethics subscribed to by translators’ organizations. Further, as Koskinen (2000) argues, multiple directionality encourages translators to think in terms of the immediate factors of their institutional setting, working for their peers rather than with a lived image of actual readers beyond the organization. This would contradict much of the functionalist training that is

given in European translation schools. A correlative of anonymity and multiple directionality is institutionally required equivalence, which becomes a legal fiction necessary for the working of regulations and directives that are binding in all language versions (Pym 1999; Koskinen 2000). This belief in equivalence further contradicts the modes of thought dominant in translation schools and academic theories, where effects on readers are increasingly considered more important than any striving for linguistic equivalence. Budgetary and time constraints nevertheless mean that much translating is carried out at less than optimal level, effectively abandoning extreme beliefs in equivalence. This is where machine translation (notably Systran in the EU) provides significant help for the rough rendition of short-lived texts used for information purposes. The European Commission's Translation Service notes that some 200,000 pages were channelled through Systran in 1997, mostly on the basis of information scanning to see if the document needed further, more careful modes of translation. MT outputs require post-editing, most of which is carried out in the requesting department, which presumably has appropriate expertise in the specific field concerned.

In these circumstances, the future work of in-house translation departments may well be to develop the technological tools (databases, appropriate translator workstation software and training programmes) that can then be used both by a range of external translators and by client departments within the organization. A positive example of this is the Eurodicatom multilingual term-bank, which was developed by the EU translation services but is currently freely available on-line.

5. Impact on Translator Training

Despite some points of potential conflict, the larger international organizations have had major impacts on the development of the market for translation services. Military alliances were largely responsible for promoting the public role of the interpreter (at the Conference of Versailles) and for introducing the technology for conference interpreting (at the Nuremberg Trials) (see Delisle and Woodsworth 1995). The European Commission, with the largest translation bureau in history, has some influence on the translation market in Europe, partly with respect to actual employment but more effectively through its symbolic ideals of the profession's ideology. There are also complex and potentially conflictive relationships with the wider field of academic translator training. The Commission's Translation Service has its own traineeship program; its recruitment system does not require any external qualification in translation. With respect to interpreting, the more pronounced shortage of properly qualified professionals has probably been behind a change of approach. The Commission's Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (better known by its French acronym SCIC) abandoned its in-house training activities (cf. Heynold 1994) in favour of cooperation with a few carefully selected academic institutions. In 1998 it provided "experienced interpreter trainers" to some 27 university programmes; it gave subsidies to some 14 universities so that an "EU dimension" could be added to existing courses; seven training institutions are now involved alongside the SCIC in a European Masters in Conference Interpreting. This means a highly interventionist approach with respect to the open market, such that the European field of interpreting—much less so in the case of written translation—tends to have its standards and ideals based on EU "best practices" rather than on any competitive labour market.

The United Nations has had similar impact in a few cases such as China, where the Beijing Foreign Studies University was training interpreters specifically for the UN in the 1980s, constituting what appears to be the only specialized training programme in the country at the time (Caminade and Pym 1995). The general UN recruitment practice is nevertheless traditionally through public examinations organized by the various agencies, with increasing privilege being given to candidates with specialized background knowledge.

The incidence of UN practices on general training may be seen in the once moot question of optimal directionality. One orthodoxy proclaimed that interpreters should only work into their principle language (“mother tongue” or “A language”), whereas the traditional Russian position was that, since an interpreter’s miscomprehension of an incoming discourse would bring worse results than would a defective outgoing discourse, interpreters should work from their principle tongue. This dispute was variously waged in the Cold-War booths of the UN, not without highly politicized contradictions. Seleskovitch and Lederer note that “even the Russians, who continue to occupy foreign-language booths, hesitate to accept the logical consequence of their policy: they only have Russians in the Russian booths, and do not invite speakers of English, French or German to interpret into Russian” (1989: 135). EU institutions and the Association Internationale d’Interprètes de Conférence generally accept that translation and interpreting should be into the one’s principle language only. The adoption of this position is historically due in no small measure to the influence of Danica Seleskovitch, whose ideas on interpreting (known as the *théorie du sens*) voyaged from Paris to Brussels, were more or less adopted as a definitive theory of interpreting practice within EU institutions, and have informed several generations of practitioners. We thus find that a certain symbiosis between a specific instance of academic training and a major international organization can lead to an extremely durable orthodoxy.

Within this same sphere of influence, the translation profession has developed its own international organizations. The Conférence Internationale Permanente des Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes (CIUTI), officially founded in 1964 as an association of prestigious translator-training institutions seeking to guarantee each other’s quality, arranges consultations with “experts from the language services of several international organizations”(CIUTI 1995). The Fédération Internationale de Traducteurs (FIT) was founded in Paris in 1953 to protect and promote the interests of translators and interpreters; in 1970 it was recognized by UNESCO as a Category-A NGO. The Association Internationale d’Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC), also founded in Paris in 1953, remains the only worldwide body representing the interests of conference interpreters, interacting with international employer organizations. In 1999 the AIIC negotiated conditions and rates of pay for auxiliary session interpreters and freelance interpreters working for the institutions of the European Union. It is perhaps not gratuitous that all three professional organizations tend to prefer their official names in French.

Despite the increase in the number of international organizations, the actual use of translators and interpreters on the world stage remains highly imbalanced, weighted heavily in favour of the larger and richer organizations and their international centres. This can be seen in the membership of the AIIC, which in 1996 had some 3,000 members. Of these, roughly half were based in Brussels, Geneva, London and Paris, with about six times as many in Paris as in the whole of Africa (Altman 1998: 17).

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