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Translating for Europe – citizens first!

Abstract

Γιατί τελικά είναι τόσο σημαντικό να κατανοούν οι πολίτες τι συμβαίνει στις Βρυξέλλες και πώς η Γενική Διεύθυνση Μετάφρασης (DGT) της Ευρωπαϊκής Επιτροπής συμβάλλει σ' αυτήν την κατανόηση;

Πώς μπορούμε να είμαστε βέβαιοι ότι τα χρήματα που καταβάλλει σε φόρους ο Ευρωπαίος πολίτης τυχάνουν σωστής διαχείρισης;

Και με ποιο τρόπο η μετάφραση βοηθάει μια πολιτικά έντονη Ευρωπαϊκή Επιτροπή να επικοινωνεί σωστά με τους πολίτες;

Αυτά είναι μερικά από τα ζητήματα που αναλύει ο Αναπληρωτής Γενικός Διευθυντής της Γενικής Διεύθυνσης Μετάφρασης, κ. Χρίστος Ελληνίδης, στην ομιλία του κατά τη διάρκεια του Συνεδρίου.

It is a pleasure for me to be here today, addressing an audience which promotes the study of European languages and encourages linguistic and cultural diversity within Europe. You are all helping to create the linguistic infrastructure needed to make communication possible between people who do not have a common language.

Every day the European Commission puts into practice its commitment to communicate with all EU citizens in their own language ... in fact we consider this both an absolute obligation and an unconditional responsibility.

Over the next few minutes I am going to speak to you about how we, the European Commission's translation service (known as the Directorate General for Translation – DGT), constantly strive to facilitate communication between the Commission and the citizens of member states – because, for us, ***citizens will always come first!***

Communication is now more important than ever – people are becoming more critical of their governments and of the EU. 'Euro-scepticism' is growing and today we are confronted not only with a financial crisis but also with complicated humanitarian issues such as the wave of refugees into Europe. These are exactly the reasons why the EU institutions need to be citizen-centric and able to communicate with all levels of society in the Member States. Citizens want value for their tax money and they are right. It is our job to inform them of what we are doing, why we are doing it and how we are doing it, in a language they understand.

1. Marketing ‘Europe’...

Since its inception, the EU has advocated the right of citizens to contact the European institutions in their own language and to receive a response in that language.

This principle is cherished and protected in the EU Treaties. In fact, the EU’s first piece of legislation, still in force, clearly states that all EU regulations and other documents of general use by citizens must be drafted in the Union’s official languages. In this way we want to empower people by informing them about what the EU is doing, but more importantly making it possible for them to address the EU institutions in their own language.

And as I said, we do not consider this just a legal obligation. No, it was a conscious choice by the founders of the European Union to make sure people could have access to laws and information about the EU in their own language. It was a rational choice but also a moral responsibility: ***if you want to engage people, you should do it in their own language!***

If we want European citizens to care about Europe, we need to care about them. It can be easy to forget that people interact, receive services and discuss Europe in their own language. Politicians at national level speak to people in their language; and we, the European institutions, should do so too.

How can we, in these challenging times, maintain enthusiasm for the European project and our Union? What is the best way to get the message across? I sometimes hear people say that the Commission could save time and money by using only English as the official working language.

Nowadays the EU consults and involves its citizens as never before. We in Brussels can do this better if we reach out and interact in a language people understand, so that they can become part of the conversation. This is why our **translators and interpreters have an increasingly important role to play and where they have real and significant added value in the communication process.**

Europe is not just about ideals, but also about making peoples’ lives better. As President Juncker said in his State of the Union speech last month, the European Union is a project **to serve its people.**

He emphasised the fact that we need more union in Europe ... and more solidarity. I would add that **translation is indispensable for creating this union and for making it work.** And solidarity is easier if people understand what the EU is trying to achieve.

Our primary concern is to make sure that citizens understand the laws that apply to them. This is a fundamental principle, touching on the basic foundation of the EU. We respect diversity. So we publish EU legislation in all official EU languages.

But while this may keep lawyers and other members of the legal profession happy, it is probably not enough to inspire and stimulate our citizens.

In a way, involving people is all about marketing: and as any marketing expert will tell you, when you want to sell something you have to speak the language of your customer.

Willy Brandt, the former West German Chancellor said:

‘If I am selling to you, I speak your language. If I am buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen’ ... then you must speak German.

And to make sure that all 500 million EU citizens can understand what the Commission is doing, we communicate with them in **24 official EU languages**.

As you can imagine, this requires considerable coordination and a strategic approach to what we should translate and what not.

2. Communicating with the citizen – multilingual web presence

Let’s think for a moment – *‘what do citizens want?’*

Well, information, for sure. Our websites are an almost inexhaustible source of information. So much so that it is not always easy to find the right information.

That is why the Commission is now very busy revamping its websites on *Europa* so as to provide relevant, coherent and cost-effective digital services for all, in the languages that are needed for a particular site or service.

Some content will be available in all official EU languages and some content in fewer languages, based on evidence-based requirements and available resources in the Commission.

In May last year, the Commission carried out a survey to find out what people look for on our websites. The poll was conducted in 24 languages and over 100,000 people responded. The 5 areas that stood out as the most important for our citizens were:

- 1) EU legislation,
- 2) Research and innovation,
- 3) Funding, grants and subsidies,
- 4) Education,
- 5) EU strategy and political priorities.

As a result, we are improving our new web presence in line with the findings of the survey.

Like I said before, **it is all about putting citizens first!**

During the testing phase we upload translated versions of the websites directly for our citizens to see. Naturally people find these translated sites easier to use

than those in the original or source language! This confirms what many of us know, namely that we have a much better understanding when we do or read something in our own language, than when we use our second language. Translation therefore can indeed contribute to clear communication between the Commission and the public.

The Commission's new web presence will:

- 1) keep citizens up-to-date about the Commission's high-level political priorities, and
- 2) provide practical and relevant information, co-created by Commission departments to meet both institutional goals and peoples' needs.

The objective is to communicate more effectively, using clear content, social media integration, easy navigation and fewer websites.

This content then needs to be translated. Since translating for the web is very different from translating legal text, we have trained translators that master the skills required to produce web content. It is their job to draft content that is clear to the reader in his or her own language.

While DG Translation's direct customers are mainly other Commission departments, EU citizens and public administrations are the ultimate consumers of what we translate – **they are the final destination of our translations**. I strongly believe that our web pages are the most direct and easiest channel of communication between us and the citizens.

3. Machine translation

Wouldn't it be great if people could start using a public service in any Member State from anywhere and obtain the information they need in their mother tongue?

This is a Commission vision which is reflected in our initiative 'Digital Agenda for Europe'. It is an initiative that aims to develop cross-border public online services and facilitate the mobility of businesses and citizens. It is an initiative that envisages a true Single Market. It will give professionals and citizens new tools to create, exploit and preserve digital content in any language.

The Digital Agenda makes explicit references to multilingualism [and I quote]:

*'The Commission will [...] work with stakeholders to develop a new generation of web-based applications and services, **including for multilingual content and services**, by supporting standards and open platforms through EU-funded programmes.'*

We still have some progress to make towards meeting our target for an integrated pan-European digital market. This is partly because linguistic barriers still limit the free flow of information, services, debates and innovation.

There is no doubt in my mind that translation is, more than ever, a key factor in the development of this market. In a truly global economy, translation services should provide efficient solutions for our multilingual society.

There cannot be a ‘Digital Europe’ without multilingualism.

The Connecting Europe Facility, which is part of the Digital Agenda, will use automated translation services to provide multilingual, pan-European digital services for all Europeans, or, for that matter, anybody outside Europe.

DG Translation has been deeply involved in developing a machine translation system called MT@EC, which allows for translation from any EU official language into one or more of the other EU official languages. MT@EC is the key component of the automated translation services that will be offered by the Connecting Europe Facility.

The system will be used for online services funded or supported by the EU, such as the Internal Market Information System; the online problem-solving network SOLVIT; the Online Dispute Resolution Platform for the Commission’s Health and Food Safety department and the e-Justice Portal of our Justice department.

Our target is to remove the digital barriers between public administrations in Europe and facilitate the exchange of information between European public administrations free from language barriers. MT@EC is a fundamental building block for the new, user-centric, European public services.

We currently have a pilot project running that involves some 500 people, including civil servants in Member States like Finland, Germany and Greece. All of these people have full access to the system. Member States are showing particular interest, especially in the area of judicial cooperation.

And that is not all: we have also granted access to the staff and students of a number of universities, so that they can use and test the system for teaching and research purposes.

You could say that machine translation is taking multilingualism to the next level, a step up towards interoperability between public administrations, making it easier for them to work together. In fact, I would like to refer to machine translation as a ‘multilingual enabler’.

DGT wants MT@EC to help public administrations to provide even better services for EU citizens and businesses. However, machine translation can only complement human translation; it will never replace it, since the types of texts that we produce have to be translated with extreme precision to guarantee legal certainty across the board, in all 24 languages. In other words, we need to ensure that everybody understands the same thing; something we refer to as legal concordance ... and that is ascertained by translators.

4. Translation and better regulation

Citizens are important to us and that is why we want to listen to them. To really make the EU work, laws must not only be available in all official EU languages but they must make sense. This is the drive behind the Commission’s Better Regulation initiative, led by Vice-President Timmermans. Better Regulation is about designing EU policies and laws so that they achieve their objectives at minimum cost. It ensures that policy is prepared, implemented and reviewed in an open, transparent manner, informed by the best available evidence and backed up by involving people on the ground.

One of the critical success factors in our efforts towards Better Regulation is simply to write clearly.

An American general once asked Churchill to look over the draft of a memo he had written. Mr Churchill returned it to the General with the comment: ‘Too many passives and too many zeds’.

The general asked him what he meant, and Churchill told him: ‘Too many Latinate polysyllabics like “systematize”, “prioritize” and “finalize”. And then the passives ... what if I had said, instead of “We shall fight on the beaches”, “Hostilities will be engaged with our adversary on the coastal perimeter”?’

DG Translation contributes to Better Regulation through its Editing Service, which also runs a campaign on clear writing. Editing improves the quality of Commission documents, making the language clear, accurate and more concise.

This helps avoid (costly) misunderstandings and ambiguities, saves time in the consultation process, and makes documents more understandable to the reader. As there are 24 official languages, any ambiguity in the original is multiplied by 23 other versions if we fail to detect it in time.

In addition, DG Translation works closely with other Commission departments to better factor translation into the Commission’s overall decision-making process.

As part of our translation strategy, we impose a maximum length on certain types of Commission texts such as white papers (15 pages), green papers (30 pages) and press releases (3 pages).

Not only does this reduce the translation workload, it also means that readers of Commission texts are not faced with voluminous documents which are difficult to read and understand.

After all, the purpose of publishing texts, be it laws in the Official Journal or information on our websites, is to inform and involve people. And **DG Translation translates more than two million of such pages every year for the benefit of Europe’s citizens.**

If we – and by ‘we’ I mean all of us – act as the custodians of multilingualism in Europe, we will be serving everybody’s interest. From our side, I would like to reassure you that we will continue to build linguistic bridges between EU public institutions and the citizens.

I am convinced that high-quality translation and interpretation contributes to better public services and helps foster a better civic society. This is why we are committed to promoting the language professions and to ‘walk our talk’ towards a European Union without language barriers.

And we take this role seriously!

Bibliographical information

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<http://www.efnil.org>