

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT  
AMERICAN ACADEMY LIMASSOL**



**The Role of the European Parliament  
(through Education)**



**European Parliament - an overview  
Multilingualism**

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## Multilingualism in the European Parliament

**In the European Parliament, all Community languages are equally important: all parliamentary documents are published in all the official languages of the European Union (EU) and every MEP has the right to speak in the official language of his/her choice. What better way to guarantee the transparency and accessibility of Parliament's work for all members of the general public.**



Firmly rooted in the European treaties, multilingualism is the reflection of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the European Union. It also makes the European institutions more accessible and transparent for the general public, which constitutes a guarantee for the success of the EU's democratic system.

The European Parliament differs from the other EU institutions through its obligation to ensure the highest possible degree of multilingualism. All EU citizens must be able to refer to legislation directly concerning them in the language of their country. Furthermore, since every European citizen has the right to stand for election to the European Parliament, it is unreasonable to require Members to have a perfect command of one of the common languages. The right of each Member to read parliamentary documents, to follow debates and to speak in his/her own language is expressly recognised in Parliament's Rules of Procedure. In addition, in its role as legislator the European Parliament is obliged to guarantee that the linguistic quality of all the laws which it adopts is beyond reproach in all official languages.

The Treaty provisions also allow all European citizens to follow Parliament's work, to ask questions and to receive replies in their own language.

## How many languages are used in the European Parliament?

**What a long way we have come since the end of the 1950s, when four languages only were spoken in the institutions of the European Communities! Today, no fewer than 23 official languages are used in the European Parliament, which is an immense linguistic challenge.**

The first regulation adopted by the European Communities in 1958 laid down that the official languages of the institutions would be the four languages - Dutch, French, German and Italian - of the founding countries, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

With each successive enlargement the languages of the new Member States were added. In 1973, Danish, English and Irish were added (Irish with a special status as 'Treaty language' meaning that Ireland's Act of Accession and the basic texts relating to Ireland were translated), followed by Greek in 1981, Portuguese and Spanish in 1986 and Finnish and Swedish in 1995. In 2004, Czech, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak and Slovene became official EU languages.

Since 1 January 2007, the European Union has had a total of 23 official languages following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, Irish having also become an official language on the same date.

These 23 official languages make a total of 506 possible combinations, since each language can be translated into 22 others. In order to meet this challenge, the European Parliament has set up highly efficient interpreting, translation and legal text verification services. Very strict rules have been put in place to guarantee the efficiency of these services and to hold the budgetary cost down to reasonable levels.

## Translation

**To produce the different language versions of its written documents and to correspond with citizens in all the EU languages, the European Parliament maintains an in-house translation service able to meet its quality requirements and to work to the tight deadlines imposed by parliamentary procedures. It also has recourse to freelance professional translators for non-priority texts.**



Parliament employs almost 700 translators in its translation services whose job is to translate into all the official languages several categories of documents, including:

- plenary documents and committee documents: agendas, draft reports, amendments, adopted reports, opinions, resolutions, written and oral questions, minutes and reports of proceedings, notices to Members, etc;
- documents of other political bodies, such as the joint parliamentary assemblies consisting of Members of the European Parliament and national MPs or elected representatives of third countries;
- decisions by the European Ombudsman;
- information for the citizen and for the Member States;
- decisions of Parliament's governing bodies (Bureau, Conference of Presidents, Quaestors).

As a general rule, translators translate into their mother tongue. However, with the latest enlargements to 25 and now 27 Member States and the increase in the number of possible language combinations to 506 (23 official languages which can be translated into 22 others), it is sometimes difficult to find someone able to translate from a given source language into a given target language, especially in the case of the least widely spoken languages in the Union.

To translate texts written in these languages, the European Parliament has therefore put in place a system of 'relay' languages: a text is first translated into one of the most widely used languages (English, French or German) and from there into the minor languages. Other major Community languages (Italian, Polish and Spanish) could also become relay languages in due course.

## Interpreting

**The main task of the European Parliament's interpreters is to render orally the speeches given by MEPs faithfully and in real time into all the official languages. Interpreting services are provided for all multilingual meetings organised by the official bodies of the institution.**



Whereas translators work with the written word, translating documents into the various languages in which they are required, interpreters are there to ensure that meetings can take place smoothly as if everyone present were speaking the same language.

The European Parliament's Interpreting Directorate employs approximately 350 staff interpreters and has at its disposal a reserve of some 2500 freelance interpreters (auxiliary conference interpreters) whom it calls on very regularly as required to cover its needs.

Interpreting is needed mainly for:

- plenary sittings;
- meetings of EP committees, parliamentary delegations, joint parliamentary assemblies;
- meetings of political groups;
- press conferences;
- meetings of Parliament's governing bodies (Bureau, Conference of Presidents, etc.).

Between 800 and 1000 interpreters are on hand for the plenary sittings of Parliament, at which simultaneous interpretation is provided from and into all the EU's official languages. For other meetings, interpretation is provided as required.

In principle, each interpreter works into his/her mother tongue out of the original language of the speaker. But with 506 possible language combinations (23 x 22 languages), it is not always easy to find someone who can interpret from a given language into another and in such cases a relay system is used, whereby the interpretation from one language to another passes through a third, the 'pivot' or relay language.

## Careers in interpreting

***To work as an interpreter for the European Parliament, an interpreter must:***

- hold a recognised university degree in conference interpreting or
- hold a recognised university degree in any subject and a postgraduate qualification in conference interpreting or
- hold a recognised university degree in any subject and have documented experience in consecutive and simultaneous conference interpreting (not to be confused with court interpreting, liaison interpreting, etc.)

To cover its needs while maintaining the requisite flexibility, the European Parliament employs both staff interpreters (officials), on a permanent basis, and freelance interpreters.

While all official EU languages are treated on an equal footing, the ability to work from a less widely known language is a considerable advantage. Language combinations should also include the more widely spoken languages, such as English, French, German, Italian and Spanish - especially for two-way interpretation.

## The European Parliament's Interpreters

**The European Parliament has often been compared to the Tower of Babel in terms of the number of languages spoken within its walls. But, while communication failed in the Tower of Babel, the European Parliament very obviously doesn't have that problem. The difference is due to the interpreters: they make it possible for members of Parliament to speak their own language and still be understood.**

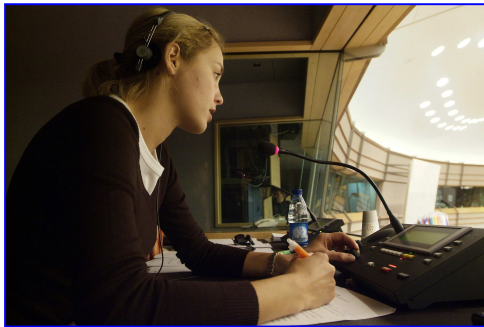
MEPs are elected in order to represent their political constituencies and not on the basis of their language skills. In order to make the European Parliament completely equitable, all MEPs have the right to use the official language of their choice during meetings. This right is clearly stated in the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament.

The EP is the biggest employer of interpreters in the world with 350 permanent interpreters, joined by about 400 free-lancers during peak periods.

Whenever a parliamentary meeting takes place, the interpreters are a familiar presence. Working from sound-proof booths situated along the meeting rooms, they faithfully transmit the speaker's message into up to 20 official EU languages. Visible to the audience but never in the spotlight, they are the voice for all speakers.

## Some facts and figures

It all began with four languages (French, German, Italian, Dutch), back in the 1950s, when Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands set up the European Coal and Steel Community. Four languages means only 12 language combinations, so interpreting went smoothly. Gradual enlargements up to 1995 brought more languages and added complications, particularly for example for Finnish, of which there were very few non-native speakers. The solution was the so-called "retour" system translating out of the mother tongue into another language. Normally, interpreters work from a foreign language into their mother tongue; the Finnish interpreters were the first ones to do "retour" in 1995.



EP interpreter at work

The 2004 expansion almost doubled the number of languages used in the Parliament. Aside from Cyprus, which uses Greek, all the new Member States brought their own languages (Czech, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, and Slovenian). Finding interpreters with the appropriate language skills has not been easy, particularly for the less spoken languages, including Maltese, with only 400,000

speakers.

The European Parliament now works in 20 languages, which means 380 possible combinations. The use of the "retour" system has risen as has "relay" interpreting, whereby one language is translated into another via a third "pivot" language, but as interpreters learn new languages more will be interpreted directly. Interpreters work as a team, with 3 per booth. The full team for a plenary sitting is 60 interpreters.

And it doesn't stop there, with Romania and Bulgaria set to join in 2007, interpreters have already begun work to provide their compatriot observers with the possibility to listen to the Parliamentary debates in their mother tongue. In future, the Parliament may be called upon to provide interpretation for Irish. Croatia and Macedonia have applied to join the EU. There is a proposal by the Spanish Government to add Catalan, Galician and Basque during plenary sessions. And so it goes on.

## To be or not to be...an interpreter

Interpreters speak their mother tongue perfectly and have a very high proficiency in at least two other languages. "To be an interpreter, you have to like languages," said Gertrud Dietze, a German interpreter, "to like the effort that goes into learning and maintaining a high level of a language". Most interpreters have four or five working languages, some seven or eight,



Interpreters listen and speak at the same time

and they know all of them very well. It is essential for them to understand perfectly what is said because they do not have the time to open a dictionary or to ask their colleagues; an interpreter relies only on himself/herself.

However, language knowledge is only a tool; interpretation involves transmitting the message of a speech. Lots of people can speak foreign languages well, but only a few make good interpreters. It is a skill that needs to be taught.

As the range of subjects covered in parliamentary debates is almost unlimited, the interpreter is required to have a solid general knowledge and expertise in all areas of EU activity. Being familiar with an MEP's political opinions can help an interpreter grasp the speaker's intentions beyond mere words.

The interpreters are communicators, their feelings about what is said being irrelevant. "I make people understand each other whatever they say, even if they say the opposite of what I hold as true," said Ms Dietze. "We are impartial and this is easier for people who have a talent for acting, who can put themselves in the frame of mind of the speaker...you are on the same wavelength".

## **The interpreters' work**

Interpreting is not word-for-word translation but the transmission of a message, captured in one language and faithfully rendered in another. Working in real time, interpreters have to perform under pressure, simultaneously delivering the message of the original speech into another language. They listen and speak at the same time, so they listen selectively, focusing on the message rather than on the words.

Having little time for thought in the booths, interpreters spend a lot of time preparing in advance, reading relevant documents in their working languages, trying to keep pace with changes and new terms. Another essential part of the job is reading the press regularly and in different languages, to keep up-to-date with the international political situation and the latest developments. "You need to understand the concepts, then things come to you naturally; otherwise you have to rush and cling to the words," said Ms Dietze.

Most Parliamentary meetings are in Strasbourg and Brussels, but there are times when they take place in other countries, meaning the interpreters have to travel a lot. It is tiring, but interesting and a good opportunity to learn. Lifelong learning is part of the interpreter's job: "There is hardly a day when I get home and I cannot say 'today I have learned something new,'" said Ms Dietze.

## Verification of legal texts

**The legislation adopted by the European Parliament affects almost 500 million people in 27 countries and 23 official languages: it must be identical and unambiguous in all the languages. Verifying the linguistic and legal quality of the texts is the job of Parliament's lawyer-linguists.**

The European Parliament has a team of about 170 lawyer-linguists responsible for ensuring the conformity of legal texts in all EU languages. In particular they:

- verify the linguistic quality and the legal conformity of texts put to the vote in the parliamentary committees and subsequently in plenary sittings;
- check and register the amendments tabled;
- provide Members with information and advice on all theoretical and practical aspects of parliamentary procedures from the initial drafting of texts up to final adoption in plenary;
- prepare voting lists for all documents put to the vote in plenary.