

# As Europe Seeks A Stronger Voice, Words Get in Way

New Entrants Stretch Limits Of EU's Polyglot Approach; 380 Language Pairs Served

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BRUSSELS -- As the European Union expanded last May to 25 countries from 15, officials came to Ingeborg Smallwood with a problem: Only seven people in the world were qualified to interpret EU debates into Maltese.

With just 400,000 citizens and a government that operates in both English and Maltese, the island nation and new member country nevertheless was entitled to have every EU document and parliamentary speech translated into its native language. That's because the EU uses each of the 20 languages spoken in member countries to avoid offending any of them, a practice that will cost it nearly \$1.6 billion this year, up about a third from the year before.

So Ms. Smallwood, director of the language-interpretation program at the University of Westminster in London, hurriedly put together a program, scrounging up a former journalist and a local Maltese priest to help assemble teaching materials. The effort will send just another six new Maltese interpreters to Brussels next year, if they survive the intense crash program. EU institutions estimate they need about 60.

The EU's growing translation troubles highlight the central conflict of Europe's unique experiment in collective governance, in which 25 nations are now trying to act with one voice without losing their individual identities. The expanded EU is home to 455 million citizens and is bidding to rival the U.S. in political and economic clout. Yet its growing heft brings a rising threat of paralysis.

As sovereign nations, EU members don't easily give up their prerogatives in the name of common cause. Member countries can -- and often do -- exercise their rights to block key initiatives or keep inefficient practices in place. This past November, Italy held up the seating of the entire 25-member commission for three weeks by insisting on a nominee whose derogatory statements about gays and working women outraged many members of Parliament. National vetoes have kept Europe, struggling with a stagnant economy, from creating a single EU-wide market for financial services -- or even a single process to apply for patents.

The EU, which began as a coal and steel union of just six countries 50 years ago, remains hampered by other traditions held firmly in place by grudging compromises that would be extremely difficult to undo. The EU's presidency rotates every six months, giving each member a turn but diminishing the role of any one leader. And the entire 732-member Parliament, which approves EU laws, decamps from Brussels one week a month to an otherwise empty building in Strasbourg, France.

"To have all the institutions concentrated in Brussels would be an American solution, it would be effective, it would be clear," says EU commission vice president Guenter Verheugen of Germany. "But we can't do that."

Nothing demonstrates the EU's struggles with itself better than its handling of languages. EU laws and regulations have been delayed for months since the union added 10 countries and nine languages in May. A current backlog of 60,000 pages of EU documents waiting to be translated is projected to reach 300,000 by 2006. The commission's response: requiring each translator to process 40% more pages a year and vowing to write shorter documents in the future.

"We will never catch up to the U.S. if we go on like this," says Martin van der Mandele, president of RAND Europe, a think tank that is part of

Santa Monica, Calif.-based RAND Corp. "The European Union has become decidedly less easy to work with because of language issues."

The EU's language task is enormous -- and gets tougher with the addition of each new country. At the 191-member United Nations, representatives speak in their own languages, but their words are interpreted into a core of six languages. The EU attempts something far more difficult: two-way simultaneous interpretation among all 20 of the officially recognized tongues. At the moment, that means 380 possible two-language combinations. Anticipated new members over the next several years will push the number above 500.

"Finding a translator who can translate from Finnish to Maltese right now is like finding gold dust," says David Earnshaw, a project manager with EU translation contractor Bowne Global Solutions, a unit of New York-based Bowne & Co., a printing and document-management company.

The need for language specialists has shot up in the wake of May's expansion. At the European Commission, the EU's executive branch, the expansion raised the target number of staff translators by 42% to 1,840, while the number of needed interpreters ballooned by 65% to 910. The figures don't include free-lancers, who do more than half of the

interpreting and about 20% of the translating work, an EU spokesman says.

Bowne has doubled the amount of time it spends recruiting translators and interpreters. From its small offices in Warsaw and central Slovakia, managers fan out hundreds of miles to scour universities in search of prospects to handle the new languages. The company started a marketing campaign in Eastern Europe to attract more: "Language pairs: Any language, any combination."

Last year Andrea Kunze of Bowne worked on training a small group of translators in Hungary. But she found it difficult to find objective experts to evaluate their work because the evaluators started angling to get the jobs themselves. Meanwhile, formerly Communist countries are still updating their vocabularies to reflect modern-day economic realities, Ms. Kunze says, so equivalents for words like "accountancy" often have only recently entered the language.

Even tougher to find are interpreters who can translate live debates on the floor of the Parliament. Every plenary session of the EU Parliament now requires 57 trilingual interpreters at the ready. With black-tied waiters serving them coffee, the interpreters work three to a booth on custom-built consoles. (The Parliament tore out visitor seating last year to make space.) But the EU doesn't always have the right language

specialists on hand, so Parliament members' statements increasingly are bounced through multiple languages -- losing some meaning along the way.

Scanning sheafs of printouts highlighted in blue and yellow, the parliament's interpretation-planning director, Rita Silva, points out examples. Because of a shortage of Czech and Lithuanian translators at a recent session in Strasbourg, some speeches could take a circuitous route: One delivered in Czech would be translated into German then English and finally Lithuanian. "It is very sad when you have a double relay," Ms. Silva says.

EU officials discussed a more streamlined approach to their language problem ahead of the May expansion. They debated using only three official languages, or even just one: English, Latin, or Esperanto -- a 118-year-old language created by a Polish eye doctor that now has an estimated 100,000 fluent speakers world-wide. But members finally stuck with treating all the languages equally. "The less-bad solution was multilingualism," says Olga Cosmidou, director of the EU's interpretation service.

Some countries, particularly France, worry about the dominance of any one language. To fend off any moves toward an English-only bias, the French government has offered commissioners from new EU member

countries -- most of whom already speak English -- a free crash course in French over the summer at a chateau in Provence. Seven of the 10 new commissioners took advantage, with an eighth soon to follow, a French government spokesman says.

But critics are increasingly fed up with the unwieldy system. In early December new EU commissioner Charlie McCreevy of Ireland complained that translation delays were holding up rules designed to improve the safety of the world's financial system. Other officials have complained about delays in laws aimed at helping developing countries import drugs, patenting inventions such as mobile phones and DVD players, and requiring quarterly reporting for Europe-based companies.

This comes after the EU's new member countries already had to spend years translating and ratifying a 9-foot-high stack of EU laws in order to join. Until last year, the EU failed to identify which of the 80,000 accumulated pages of rules and amendments were still relevant. So in Hungary, which began the mammoth task in 1998, translators completed work on more than 15,000 pages that ultimately weren't needed. "It was a lot of wasted effort and resources," says Kinga Szentmary, coordinator of the project at the Hungarian Ministry of Justice.

The EU's job was easier when language specialists could both translate documents and interpret speeches. But the EU's own rigid requirements

for each skill has helped split the field in two. Interpreters are plucked from educated backgrounds so they'll have knowledge and experience beyond languages, and only one of 10 applicants is accepted.

Panayotis Mouzourakis, a longtime Greek interpreter, was a particle physicist at the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva before he made the career switch. Full-time EU interpreters and translators can earn from about \$65,000 to more than \$80,000 a year. Interpreters rely on cultural understanding to avoid making damaging gaffes, and often err on the side of not interpreting what doesn't make sense. "You know that a Greek will never say that tobacco growing has to be stopped," says Mr. Mouzourakis, 54 years old. "You know what these people will never say, so if you get them saying something in contradiction then a bell starts ringing."

When documents have to be routed through two intermediate languages to get the job done, accuracy becomes an increasing worry. Incorrect technical information, for instance, could lead to product recalls, Bowne's Mr. Earnshaw notes. Bowne proofreader Denise Kramer recently caught a minor mistake in EU rules on producing and distributing homemade honey. Bowne's one Latvian-to-German translator, a free-lancer, had been on vacation, forcing a relay through English, and the Latvian phrase *Ja atbilde ir apstiprinosa*, which means



"if the answer is yes," had gotten garbled. It wasn't serious, only changing the word "yes" to "affirmative."

In the case of Maltese, a blend of Arabic, Spanish and Italian influences, a lack of interpreters and translators means it won't be recognized as an official EU language for three years. When it became apparent that Malta not only had very few interpreters or translators, but also no history of training anyone to do something like that, the EU stepped in to help. Patrick Twidle, the parliament's deputy interpretation director, led a delegation to Malta that selected 10 promising Maltese from more than 60 applicants to the Westminster program. But in the weeks leading up to the September start of the course four candidates dropped out, citing personal reasons.

At Westminster, instructors give speeches in Maltese or English to the Maltese recruits, who then interpret the work into the opposite language. In the spring they will work up to simultaneous interpretation in a booth-like environment that replicates what they would be required to do at the EU.

Ms. Cosmidou says it will take a "generation or more" to train enough Maltese interpreters to cover all the languages of the polyglot EU. And she worries the Maltese example will spur multi-language states such as Ireland, Luxembourg and Spain to demand more interpretation for their

languages. The Spanish government has already requested official-language status for four regional languages -- including Catalan and Basque -- and the Irish have also said they intend to propose that Gaelic be included as well. The European Parliament decided in October to let members talk in any language they want to -- but reminded them only official languages would be translated.

That didn't satisfy Sean Neachtain, an EU Parliament member from Ireland, who briefly insisted three months ago on speaking in Gaelic during parliamentary sessions. He reacted with disgust when interpretation wasn't provided. "I will speak English when I have to," he says. "But my own language comes first."