



# Focus

## 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.

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, 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.

## More than words

An interpreter's job is not as easy as it might look from the outside. MEPs rarely bear in mind that their discourse is simultaneously interpreted into other languages, so they often use colourful language, jokes and wordplay, which can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to translate. Numbers, fast-speech and reading from notes don't make an interpreters' life easier either.

A play on words is one of the biggest challenges for an interpreter. "There are times when you can translate, when you find something which is suitable in your language, but it is risky because it can be interpreted differently from the original words and the MEPs listening to your translation can react to your own words rather than to what the speaker said originally," said Bernard Gevaert, a Dutch interpreter.

The very limited speaking time allotted to each person during plenary sessions can also be a source of trouble. As they want to say a lot, MEPs speak very fast, sometimes reading from a paper they have prepared beforehand. Fast talking might not be a problem if the MEP ad-libs; the nightmare begins when the speaker reads a written text.

### **"It is important to see the meeting room"**

Part of the message interpreters have to transmit is non-verbal so they need to pick up non-verbal clues like tone of voice and body language, making it essential for the interpreter to be able to see the speaker and the audience, to see different reactions.

"I am constantly looking around the meeting room," said Ms Dietze. "It is important to see who is coming in and out, or other things like the chair whispering to his assistant; things might take an unexpected turn and they will find you prepared if you foresee them."