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English, a rare language?

The European Commission is facing a serious language interpreting shortage over the next 5-10 years

The European Commission's interpreting service faces a potential succession crisis for linguists for a number of languages - and a shortage in several others. Without an increase in the number of qualified graduates from interpreter schools and universities, the EU Institutions will lose at least one third of their English language interpreters by 2015 due to retirement – and about half in a ten-year perspective.

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Interpretation wants to make sure that young people know that interpreting can be an attractive career choice for university graduates with a good knowledge of languages. In collaboration with sister services in the European Parliament and The European Court of Justice, DG Interpretation has produced a video clip to help young English speakers learn more about the interpreting profession. "Interpreting for Europe ... into English", addressed chiefly to a British and Irish audience, is launched today on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA2fWvtMPDU> and on a number of EU and national websites. It will be followed later this year by productions for French and German speakers. In 2008, the first such clip - for Latvian - was produced by the European Commission.

(See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS9yDc0o0iq&feature=channel_page).

Large numbers of native-speaker English linguists were recruited from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s after the United Kingdom's and Ireland's accession to the then EC in 1973. As they reach retirement age, they are not being replaced at the same rate. Thanks to continuous on-the-job training, retiring interpreters leave with more languages than can be provided by young colleagues coming in, which – combined with similar age-profile issues in other key bridging languages like French, German, Italian, Dutch – may create difficulties for the European Commission's interpreting service in making available all the many different combinations of languages that need to be covered in meetings.

The growth in the use of English as a means of communication worldwide has been accompanied by a corresponding belief that being able to speak English is enough for international contacts, both for one's work and for one's personal or social life. This applies to those who are not native English speakers as much as to those who are. However, it is safe to say that this perception has gained particular dominance in the English-speaking countries, where young people can see no advantage to themselves in learning another language.

There has consequently been a marked decline in the numbers of young people learning languages. This has been particularly apparent in the UK and indeed in English-speaking countries in general, but is also true of many countries throughout the world where learning English is considered essential but other languages are neglected.

Key messages

There is a tangible deficit in the number of English booth interpreters available to DG Interpretation at peak times. Although the universities are beginning to produce a steady flow of good candidates for our accreditation tests, as yet the numbers coming on stream are not sufficient to meet present or projected demand, particularly in view of the age pyramid in the English interpreting unit.

The staffing of the English unit is critical to the operation of the European Commission's interpreting service – and by extension for the Institutions and bodies it serves - as almost all meetings require English interpretation. This means that if no English interpreters are available, the meeting has to be cancelled, even if interpreters for the other languages can be found. The need for English mother-tongue interpreters will become increasingly acute.

Taking into account the current trend in demand and potential future, larger conference centres, we are looking at a need for about 300 English native speaker conference interpreters within the next ten years. To this we have to add the needs of other international organisations and, of course, business.

The knock-on effect has been a worldwide shortage of languages graduates. This is felt perhaps most keenly by the international institutions where there is a continuing demand for translators and interpreters, with both the EU and the UN institutions finding it ever harder to fill the posts falling vacant as the wave of staff that joined in the seventies and eighties reaches retirement age. The UN has been actively seeking candidates in Europe to fill its posts in New York, demonstrating that this is a global market in which various national and international bodies are competing for high-calibre staff. At the same time, the number of meetings is increasing and English is a key language in most of them.

English is not alone

Over the next ten years, the numbers of French, German, Italian and Dutch interpreters retiring are also substantial. Awareness actions for these languages are in the pipeline, starting already in 2009 with French and German.

Now, 5 years after the 2004-enlargement and 2 years after adding Bulgarian and Romanian, there is still a shortage of Romanian, Latvian and Maltese interpreters. For the Council of the Union, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, DG Interpretation can fill the need for interpretation into the most well-known EUR-15 languages (FR DE EN IT ES NL PT) at near 100%. Demand for Greek is satisfied at about 97%. Swedish, Finnish and Danish have satisfaction rates between 91% and 81%.

Table 1: Three scenarios in a 10-year horizon for staff and freelance departures from five bridging languages in the European Commission's interpreting service: including freelancers working regularly (10 days or more in 2008) for DG Interpretation

	English		French		German		Italian		Dutch	
	Staff	FL	Staff	FL	Staff	FL	Staff	FL	Staff	FL
Current total	70	123*	59	132*	61	111*	51	90*	34	50*
Best case	24	40	14	42	20	48	12	23	8	7
Worst case	48	75	30	69	36	75	32	48	21	29
Average case	35	54	18	55	27	60	18	35	16	18
Average drop	50%	43%	31%	50%	44%	54%	31%	39%	47%	36%

In the best case scenario above, all remain in active service until age 65. In the worst case, all interpreters take early retirement at 55. The average case – closer to observed practice – is interpreters retiring around age 60. More detail on the case of English language interpreters below in the background section.

For the more recently added languages, satisfaction of demand is generally at about 80%, except for **Romanian, Latvian and Maltese** where the satisfaction rate of the need for interpreters currently is about 70%

Table 2: Number of meeting-days supplied and satisfaction of demand in 2008 for new Member State languages added after 2004 for The Council of the Union, Committee of the Regions and European Economic and Social Committee.

Council , CoR, ESCE	CS	ET	LV	LT	HU	MT	PL	SK	SL	BG	RO
Meeting days	1099	660	861	984	1091	382	1630	1134	835	821	831
Satisfaction of need %	79.4	77.9	71.7	74.4	87.0	71.3	95.3	83.1	93.8	87.6	72.9

Due to increased globalization, the demand for **Arabic, Chinese and Russian** interpretation is also rising. There is not a huge, regular demand in absolute terms but the demand can increase suddenly in situations of urgency, creating difficulties for recruitment. Because meeting participants increasingly tend to prefer English, there is an growing need for interpretation between these three non-EU languages and English. Furthermore, there is keen competition in the European market between institutions, business and governments for those interpreters that are available.

Interpreting for Europe is a great career

As an interpreter, you will be helping people of different cultures and countries to communicate. As an interpreter for the EU, you will be at the very heart of the decision-making process, playing an essential role in enabling the nations of Europe to work together to build peace and prosperity.

What is more, by allowing people to speak their own language, you will be helping to preserve the rich diversity of the countries of the Union.

You will be working with colleagues from all over Europe –and sometimes beyond – on a vast range of different subjects and in all sorts of places.

As a staff interpreter, you will have security and the opportunity to move to other Commission departments if you decide you want a change of career later on; as a freelance, you will have the freedom to decide where and when to work.

Learning to be an interpreter will improve your language and presentation skills, as well as teaching you to analyse a message and convey it to others – skills which can serve you well in all sorts of jobs.

If you speak your mother tongue very well and understand at least two other EU languages completely, are a university graduate, you could train to become a conference interpreter. Once you have completed your training you can sign up for a test at:

http://europa.eu/interpretation/index_en.htm

And remember - you don't need a selection of "rare" languages to apply for a test. In fact, for interpreters working into English, the most sought after passive languages are German, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and Portuguese. And we will help you learn languages throughout your career

You can find more information about interpreter schools in the UK at the National Network for Interpreting:

<http://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/interpreting/>

and in Europe at:

http://scic.ec.europa.eu/europa/upload/docs/application/pdf/2007-08-20_list_of_universities_europa.pdf

The background:

In order to make sure that EU multilingual meetings can continue to be fully serviced by interpreters over the next 5-10 years as a large number of the current staff and freelance interpreters retire, the EU Institutions need to be working now on awareness-raising among young people.

We need to make sure that young Europeans know that language study can be important for a future career and that the Institutions offer a variety of jobs for graduates with a good knowledge of languages.

DG Interpretation has already run successful awareness-raising operations in the Czech Republic and Latvia. Working to make English a less rare language is starting now, and will be followed this year by campaigns for French and German interpreters and, in 2010, by similar steps for Italian and Dutch interpreters.

The shortage of graduates mentioned above is most acute for English native speakers. Universities in the UK and Ireland find it ever harder to fill places on their language courses. Postgraduate interpreting and translation courses have difficulty finding high-calibre graduates, with the inevitable result that only a few of the applicants pass the accreditation test to become freelance interpreters for the various institutions. At the same time, the graduates that we would want to recruit are highly sought after by other employers as well.