



Multilingualism: It's worth paying the price

Marko Naoki Lins interviews Burckhard Doempke, a freelance conference interpreter in Brussels for over 30 years, to find out how he operates and what constitutes a typical day in the life of a Brussel

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Brussels would soon turn into a bewildering Tower of Babel without them: Almost 2,000 interpreters ensure that communication at the heart of multilingual Europe generally proceeds without a hitch. **Marko Naoki Lins** interviewed **Burckhard Doempke**, a freelance conference interpreter in Brussels for over 30 years, to find out how he operates and what constitutes a typical day in the life of a Brussels interpreter.

MNL: Could you describe an interpreter's normal working day?

BD: It depends on the assignment. At the European Parliament, for example, there are three main fields of work: first of all committee meetings, then meetings of the political groups and finally plenary meetings – each in different weeks. Interpreters know that things might get difficult in a committee week, because the subject matter is often very technical. Usually we find out a couple of days in advance which committee we will be servicing, and we can prepare by downloading information from the Internet. But sometimes there are last-minute changes: for example, instead of being assigned to the environment committee you are suddenly sent to the external trade committee. The interpreter has to make a rapid adjustment in such cases, but this becomes easier with practice and experience. In the political group meetings it is more a matter of political debate, while absolutely anything can crop up in the Strasbourg plenary weeks: in addition to the plenary meetings there are press conferences, meetings with visitors and much more besides... The work schedule is completely unpredictable, so sometimes you might start at 9 o'clock in the morning and still be working at midnight, although fortunately with lengthy breaks in between.

MNL: How long can an interpreter work in a day?

BD: That is strictly regulated at the Parliament, with the exception of plenary weeks: we start at 9 o'clock and work until 12.30. Then there is a two-hour lunch break. In the afternoon we work from 2.30 until 6.30. Exceptionally we might continue until 7 o'clock, but no later than that. If a committee meeting is likely to go on any longer, a new team of interpreters has to be booked in advance, to take over from the day team.

MNL: How many interpreters are there in Brussels?

BD: No one can say exactly. There are no doubt more interpreters per square metre in Brussels than anywhere else in the world. Some of the interpreters at the EU institutions and NATO are permanent employees: their numbers are known, of course. I think the total at the EU, for all languages, is currently around 450. That figure will rise due to enlargement. In addition, the EU – which is the biggest employer of interpreters – recruits up to 1,000 freelance interpreters per week. What is more, there are many other freelance interpreters who only work for private clients. It is also worth bearing in mind that access to the profession is not restricted: theoretically anyone at all who mediates between one language and another can describe themselves as an interpreter.

MNL: What other skills does a professional interpreter need? Is it enough to have a good knowledge of foreign languages?

BD: Language knowledge is a basic requirement, just as a pianist needs a piano. But not everyone with knowledge of languages can interpret. You have to be able to do several things at once, because as an interpreter you hear something in a foreign language and have to understand it immediately. Then you have to process what was said and reproduce it in another language while continuing to listen all the time. And you also have to keep listening to yourself, so as to be sure that what you are saying makes sense and is grammatically correct.

MNL: How many interpreters occupy an interpreters' booth?

BD: Yes, definitely. There are stressful moments every day. When I walk into the booth, sit down and look at the documents, I feel stress. It subsides once the meeting gets under way. It's like an actor who still gets stage-fright every time, even after many years of treading the boards. It wouldn't be such a good thing not to experience stress any more, because it would mean we were not taking our job seriously enough.

MNL: Does an interpreter dread certain speakers or subjects?

BD: Having to interpret someone like Jean-Marie Le Pen certainly goes against the grain. On the other hand, as a professional interpreter I don't let it show. On the contrary: the tendency is for the interpreter to over-compensate and formulate the message even more convincingly than the speaker himself, in order to prevent one's own convictions from showing through. The job has to be done, and you have to set aside your personal feelings.

MNL: Do interpreters have to keep updating their knowledge, and are they subject to quality control?

BD: Quality control takes place every day. Regular reports are written assessing interpreters. In addition there are training sessions focusing on particular topics – on the enlargement countries, for instance. Personally, if I had a bit more time, I would like to learn Czech.

MNL: Wouldn't a monolingual Europe be preferable on grounds of cost?

BD: Cost is only a relative factor. We must not forget the costs that arise as a result of misunderstandings. There are very few people who have such a good command of English that they can convey their message in it. Monolingualism would place us in a situation where an elected representative without excellent English would say not what he wishes to say but only what he is able to say. After all, we can't expect Members of the European Parliament to be elected because of their mastery of English; the main criterion has to be familiarity with the concerns of their electorate. In future the full array of languages will probably be provided only at EU summit conferences and plenary meetings of the European Parliament, whereas interpretation will be offered according to need at technical level, as is already the case nowadays.

For more information on this topic see aiic.net . [Mr Burckhard Doempke](#) can also be contacted for further details.

Several different models of interpretation are used in a multilingual setting, including the following:

1. **Symmetrical interpretation:** the ideal method. Interpretation is provided both from and into every language. With 20 official EU languages that would mean 380 combinations.
 2. **Retour:** the interpreter works into his own language and also interprets from his own into another language.
 3. **Relay:** here the interpretation is not direct. It is conveyed from the original to the target language via an intermediary – usually more widely spoken - language.
 4. **Asymmetrical language coverage:** participants may speak their mother tongue, but interpretation is offered into only a limited number of languages.
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