

# On a proposed European Masters in Translation

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## The documents

I am looking at an 8-page document called “European Master’s in Translation (EMT)”, issued by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Translation. No date is given, but the PDF Properties indicate the document was created and updated in 2006. And here is a 7-page document called “Compétences pour les professionnels de la communication multilingue et multimédia”, signed by Yves Gambier “au nom du groupe d’experts EMT” and dated February 2008. The two documents would seem to go together, but it is not immediately clear how. Why the two different authorships? And why the shift from “translation” to “professionals in multilingual and multimedia communication”? This second question is easy—the ideas and words, and perhaps the list of competences, are straight from Daniel Gouadec. So why the confusion with the European Commission?

The first text outlines the institutional author’s desiderata for Masters programs in Translation across Europe. This intervention is justified because, we are told, “[t]he EU is a major employer of translators and an important player on the European translation market.” Fair enough. The EU institutions do engage a certain number of new translators every year, and they should indeed express a direct interest in the nature of the programs that provide those translators. This can and should be done along the lines of the [European Masters in Conference Interpreting](#), whose Consortium has been operating since 2001. That is all well and good.

## Some doubts

There are, however, several reasons why the document should not be taken as a blueprint for Masters programs across Europe. Here I briefly list those reasons:

1. For most language combinations, the annual intake of in-house translators by the EU institutions can scarcely justify one Masters program per country. There is no reason why all the other programs (most countries have more than three) should be concerned with the interests of this one employer. There are many other employer groups on the market.
2. The EU institutions are very specific employers in that a) they require at least two foreign languages, b) they operate with only certain kinds of texts and fields, c) their work processes are those of a bureaucracy, not of a company, and much less those of a localization company, d) for political and ethical reasons, they place more priority on accuracy than on productivity. This results in processes that, by the standards of private industry, are inefficient—when you divide the total cost of its translation and redactions services by the number of pages produced, the result is above 120 euros per page.

3. In some EU countries (Germany, Austria, Spain, Italy, at least) there are well-established degree programs in translation (i.e. three-year or four-year programs prior to the Masters level) which already incorporate most if not all of the components listed in this program. The Directorate-General's proposal seems to overlook their existence. More seriously, it is apparently unconcerned about any division of aims and contents that might operate between the Bachelors and Masters levels.
4. Every training program has a local context, whether it likes it or not. Most programs are thus able to play to their strengths, particularly when it comes to selecting areas of specialization that coincide with job placements in the local labor market and with the availability of expert professionals as teachers. A Masters program might thus choose to specialize in just one language pair and/or field (legal Catalan, for example, or English-French audiovisual. or multilingual localization). The extent of this specialization touches the very definition of translation involved; it goes well beyond any centralized guidelines.
5. Thanks to the same local logic, a program that is established in one specific field can draw students from far and wide. This should logically involve significant doses of distance learning, since student mobility at this level is limited (we are often talking about professionals who want to upgrade their skills, and for whom distance learning is a clear preference). This whole area of education needs to be catered to at Masters level.
6. As much as the Directorate-General for Translation should know something about translation, what particular experience does it have in the matter of academic training? How is it suddenly so aware of the specific criteria that are involved in a university setting? Is it prepared to recognize the fundamental distinction between "translator training" (the exclusive reference in this document) and "translator education" (the wider institutional concern with the entire set of knowledge and skills with which we provide our future professionals and citizens)?
7. In the same line, what particular experience does the Directorate-General have of the use of distance learning and blended teaching methodologies? After allowing that a percentage of e-learning may be used, the proposed Masters stresses, "However, personal contact between the trainees and the trainers is vital...". That recommendation may be entirely valid, but if you have no prolonged experience of distance courses in this field, should you be so quick to opine? (In Tarragona we have been offering 100% distance courses for the past six years, and we carried out empirical research on them for three years—we could offer some rather more nuanced advice, if anyone is interested.)
8. The EU Commission being what it is, with its official commitment to multilingualism, a few viable possibilities would be ideologically difficult in this kind of document. For example, I would like to recommend that all graduates have English as one of their working languages, if only to ensure future long-term employability (and the use of the lingua franca as a pivot language—but that is another argument). That is sometimes even rumored to be part of the Bologna Process. But such a recommendation would be hard to put here.
9. The application of a centralized set of standards undoubtedly has certain benefits with respect to the control of quality. However, it also has negative effects on the beneficial effect of competition, including innovation and available diversity. Whatever one thinks ideologically about the benefits of the market, translator

training, particularly with regard to the impact of new technologies, is a field in which innovation and diversity are serious virtues,

### **An alternative landscape for Masters in Translation**

Personally I would like to see an educational landscape in which there is a very wide range of very different Masters programs. Some can be very focused, others broad; some can be extremely expensive (for the Arabian princes and Asian heirs), others accessibly cheap (for example, to enhance youth employability); some might demand a broad range of languages (I needed at least four in order to study Comparative Literature), others might need none (for instance, to provide project-management skills). The important point to make here is that there are many different kinds of student demand, and that the employer demands of the EU institutions are extremely limited in comparison.

If one can embrace this diversity, it is absolutely essential that measures like the European Diploma Supplement be taken seriously. That is, each degree must be accompanied by a description of exactly what the student has done. On that level, centralist intervention is highly desirable. I am personally rather less enthusiastic about student portfolios and the like, since employers rightly prefer to test employability themselves. But as long as open competition is accompanied by honesty and transparency, we should welcome anything in support of those virtues.

### **On the competencies**

The second document, the one in French on the competencies for the Masters blueprint, confirms some of the above suspicions. For example, it makes no reference to any training prior to the Masters level. It thus assumes that translators are only to be trained at the Masters level, so all the competencies have to be put in there. This is simply a way of imposing a French model on the whole of Europe.

Some minor points of interest in the list:

- Translation theory, mentioned in the first document, seems to have disappeared in this one.
- The “interpersonal competencies” concern only business relations. There is no reference to personal ethics, citizenship or career planning.
- Only two languages are mentioned (A and B, source and target).
- No mention is made of area studies (i.e. studies of a specialized field of knowledge). It seems to be assumed that Masters programs are not to be specialized in this way,
- No mention is made of the levels at which the competencies are supposed to be acquired (novice, professional, expert, etc.).

The rest is fine. The list has no doubt worked well in Rennes, France, where Gouadec has been developing these things for years. But there is no reason why it should work well all over Europe, in all local contexts, without attention to the necessary diversification of professional training programs.

### **How to plan a Masters in Translation**

When I plan a new Masters in anything, as I have been doing for the past few years, my proposal has to jump through a whole series of hoops: approval by our department, by our faculty, by our university’s “technical services” (currently a mafia of competence-attitudes-skills analysis, with exact hours calculated for each little item, like a Soviet five-year plan), by our university, sometimes by the education commission of our regional government

(which actually makes quite good suggestions), these days by the Spanish national committee (which requires dossiers quite different from all the above), and then, if all goes well and the proposal is still within our national law governing postgraduate studies (which seems to change every two years), we get approval by our central government. As I say, I have been doing this for the past few years.

At the same time, on the other side, I have input from all the students and teachers we have been using in our previous Masters and short-term courses for the past eight years, plus feedback and desiderata from the employers who participate in our job placements, plus advice from those of our teachers and former students who are professionals in the regional translation industry (most of them), plus what we read about current technologies and trends in the localization industry, plus what is being done by our direct competitors at the national and international levels.

Get the picture? There is quite massive input from the academic institutional side, and equally massive guidelines to be found in past experience, contacts with the labor market, and the logic of competition, if you know where to look. Now, given all of that, do we really need yet another group of people to tell us what to do?

Well, yes and no. Since I feel I know my local markets and established niches, I am quite happy to disregard anything the Directorate-General throws at me. On the other hand, if someone at my local, regional or national levels of academic dogma were to argue against what I decide should be done (for example, they will not allow a very high percentage of practical classes, or they are against the employment of professionals as teachers), then I would take about two seconds to flash the Directorate-General's sound advice in their face, and claim that this European Masters project was written with the divine light of eternal truth. In academic politics, any expert helps, as long as they are on your side.

### **Who designed the proposed Masters?**

Without any disrespect for the Directorate-General for Translation, I do not think that many of the words in the initial proposal actually came from them. Almost all the points are in tune with the discourse of a handful of contemporary translator trainers (and theorists of the same); they come from a certain university discourse that is trying to look toward the market. For some particular points, I can more or less guess the name of the academic who insisted on them.

There is nothing particularly wrong with this. As I say, if it helps the Directorate-General get the translators it needs, why not? However, if this set of guidelines has a wider ambition, as seems to be the case, one wonders why the academic discourse has to hide behind the Directorate-General's name. Why should these self-proclaimed end-of-career experts be so keen to give free advice to all and sundry?

Some greater degree of honesty and transparency would be appreciated, if only because these are the best things that centralist intervention can contribute to future Masters programs.