

European Commission. *Étude portant sur la contribution de la traduction à la société multilingue dans l'Union européenne*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2010. 78 pp. ISBN 978-92-79-17602-9. Free at EU Bookshop. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/index\\_fr.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/index_fr.htm).

English summary:

European Commission. *Contribution [sic] of translation to the [sic] multilingual society in the EU. English summary*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2010. 5 pp. ISBN 978-92-79-17602-9. Free at EU Bookshop. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/index_en.htm).

**Reviewed by Anthony Pym (Tarragona)**

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) wants to do Translation Studies, and we must welcome the intention. Part of its plan involves the production of a series of reports on key issues in the field. This makes sense because Europe massively depends on translation for its governance, and thus invests significant administrative resources in translation services. If translation is important anywhere, it should be in Europe. If it should be studied anywhere, it is in Europe.

The 2010 report on the “contribution of translation to the multilingual society in the European Union” uses myriad pretty graphics to present the opinions of nine academic “experts,” perhaps more fairly described as scholarly passers-by (only two of them have published actual numbers on translations, and one of them has only one European language — but since I was one of the experts, I will not complain too much). The report is of interest not so much for what it finds from these “experts,” but for what it leaves out.

The study begins from a list of no fewer than 84 “assumptions,” gathered from an extensive and original literature survey, about what translation can do in a society. The items run from things like translation “enables exports to foreign markets” (an incredibly important and often overlooked point) and “speeds up economic globalization” (no glimmer of an idea how), to brave assertions like translation “avoids the misunderstanding of concepts caused by the use of a lingua franca” (of course the list was written and commented on in English). Following responses from the “experts,” these 84 fairly random possibilities were categorized

into six “groups of effects,” which we might list in order of declining numbers of assumptions they include: 1. cultural interaction, 2. globalization, 3. knowledge transfer, 4. European construction, 5. social inclusion, 6. language as a power tool (English summary, p. 2). So far, so good, although I personally use power tools to drill holes in walls (“tools of power,” perhaps?). The 84 assumptions and six groups are presumably far more than most policymakers, in Europe or elsewhere, were likely to contemplate previously. The report thus very usefully widens the theater of possible action. Translation must surely be of more importance than previously thought, and perhaps therefore worth investing in.

The 84 assumptions and six groups are nevertheless clearly too numerous and disparate for any actual policy decision. So the report offers four specific recommendations, which we cite here from the English summary (p. 5). The Directorate-General for Translation should, we are told:

1. Provide facts and figures on translation in Europe, in order to contribute fully to the European public sphere. This would require the consolidation of this study by means of a new conceptmapping [sic] exercise with participants from all the European countries and all sectors, with a view to reaching consensus on the advantages of translation.
2. Contribute to organizing the translation profession by developing consensus on subjects of importance to the community. The EMT (European Master’s in Translation) is one of the first steps to take. It would also be necessary to envisage the creation of thematic networks of trainers, researchers, professionals and public officials.
3. Draw on the funds of other Directorates General of the European Commission to promote the role of translation in European policies. Many DGs are likely to launch projects that make use of translation, and DGT is capable of helping them to see the advantages of translation for their projects.
4. Promote citizens’ involvement in translation, for example by favouring crowd-sourcing of works in the public domain.

Again, all is well and good. Recommendation 1 should provide more work for the concept-mapping research agency that is making the recommendation, so it is only to be expected — as indeed is the courageous presumption that research will not discover any “disadvantages” in translation. Recommendation 2 cannot be wrong when it sees training and networking as ways to build a profession, and “thematic networking” has long been a great way to visit our friends across Europe. Recommendation 3 is purely organizational. And Recommendation 4 is commendably innovative in calling for “citizen involvement.”

Now, the amazing thing is that none of these recommendations finds any anchor at all in the initial 84 assumptions; they were thus not mentioned in the

questionnaires sent to the “experts”; the report therefore offers no empirical basis for them. Granted, that does not make them wrong in any way. Consider, though, some of the internal contradictions involved. The call for “citizen involvement” (Recommendation 4) would seem to be on a collision path with “professional training” (Recommendation 2), especially since the latter implicitly recruits the expertise of the European Commission Translation Service (“public officials”) and the newly created European Masters in Translation (designed to separate approved training from the rest). If you want citizen involvement, why insist on exclusive training for high-level professionals? And if you want cross-cultural communication to create anything like grassroots involvement, why draw on officials who translate some of the world’s most anodyne documents, and in the most anodyne ways? One senses that the Directorate-General for Translation, which presumably paid for the report, happily received the recommendations they wanted, albeit without a clue about how to achieve “citizen involvement.”

Such are the points that were highlighted. So what aspects were left out of the spotlight? At one point the “experts” were asked to what extent translation contributes to positive social effects. The following were the “most consensual” items, i.e., the ones that the respondents most agreed on (Euréval 2010, 2). We said that translation

1. enables mass tourism by facilitating certain aspects of the tourists’ experience,
2. can give more visibility to the culture of small countries,
3. helps to ensure the legal rights of immigrants (e.g., fair trials),
4. guarantees equal treatment in legal affairs,
5. improves the general quality of life of immigrants who do not know the host language well.

This short list makes good sense: tourism, as the world’s largest industry, surely deserves to be at the top of the list; the visibility of minor cultures, whose languages are not widely learned beyond their borders, is also another logical cause in Europe, to be defended in the name of diversity. But then points 3, 4 and 5 all seem to run in an almost opposite general direction, indicating needs that are remarkably different from anything highlighted in the report’s final four recommendations. The main contributions of translation, beyond making money and promoting autochthonous diversity, may well be to immigrant populations and their general right to justice. This is what the “experts” appear to have seen as they waded through the questionnaires, and this is quite remarkably what the authors of the final report did not care to highlight. Yet it is certainly there.

As a former Australian, I take alien pride in claiming that Europe is slowly discovering a few of the things that Australia learned somewhere around the late 1980s (cf. Lo Bianco 1987, 1990; Ozolins 1993). Translation is not just about

official documents being available in big official languages: it must be seen as part of a general language policy, alongside language-learning, and particularly as a key element of justice within a fragmented, fluid, multilingual society. That might be the general sense of the five functions left in the penumbra. If you only read the four final recommendations, you might believe that the languages being translated are the 24 official EU languages, the ones of the nation states and the centralized official experts. On the other hand, if you read the five “consensual” items, there are potentially many, many more languages involved — all the languages spoken in Europe, by all the minorities, both autochthonous and immigrant.

The Australian case is also remarkably different in that its policies eventually led to the setting up of a National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). NAATI’s mission is to “strengthen inclusion and participation in Australian society” by accrediting translators and interpreters (NAATI 2011). Much as one might quibble at the complexity of its system and the extent of official involvement (NAATI is actually a company owned by the various Australian governments), the initiative remains highly laudable, particularly since the accreditation system allows for various levels of expertise, from ‘language aide’ to ‘paraprofessional’ through to ‘conference interpreter (senior)’. The one thing the Directorate-General for Translation should clearly be doing is to set up something similar in Europe, nominally for its own employment purposes (since it has no official mandate in the field of education), but in practice to fill what is a huge social demand in many EU countries. What is the main contribution of translation to intercultural relations? The simple answer must be translation errors, by intermediaries whose worth very few people can currently judge, since most segments of the market have no adequate mechanism for signaling quality. Amazingly, the EU report never considers the mistakes, never questions the quality of translators, and consequently overlooks the most obvious and most needed interventions: multi-level examinations and certification systems, as has been done in Australia.

Comparing Australian and EU translation policies, Podkalicka (2007, 249) observes “the disjunction between the official EU language policies and lived cultural and linguistic heteroglossia,” and that is certainly part of what is being picked up here. She also points out, very correctly, that policies need to operate “at the level of populations rather than political and economic elites” (*ibid.*), and that EU policy-making thus requires “greater diversity of sources, including voices of ‘real’ people rather than ‘experts’” (253). I am almost ashamed to have become anything like a European “expert,” roped into official reports where conclusions are concocted for elites.

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