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Studies on translation and multilingualism



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Contribution of translation to the multilingual society in the EU

English summary



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The whole report is available in French on http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/index_en.htm

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Synthesis of the study on the contribution of translation to a multilingual society

Context

Translation (transposing a text from one language into another) unquestionably plays a major role in today's world (daily life, information, interaction, cultural and economic activities, etc.) – and that role is growing with globalization and the consequent proliferation of interactions in which the partners speak different languages. In an ordinary day, a European citizen may drink coffee imported from Peru, on which the label has been translated, read an article in a newspaper translated by a news agency, check his or her emails on a localized interface installed on a computer with a localized operating system, read a translated Finnish novel in the bus or tube, operate a machine tool at work, of which the manual is translated, use an automatic translation website to obtain up-to-date news on events in Iceland, go home to watch a TV series with subtitles, and so on.

Given that translation dissolves in the flow of texts and, more generally, in the information that we receive, it is often perceived as a technical activity (and rightly so), which is inferior to the production of original content. As one of our interviewees commented, “translation is usually an invisible activity; if it becomes visible, it means there's a problem” .

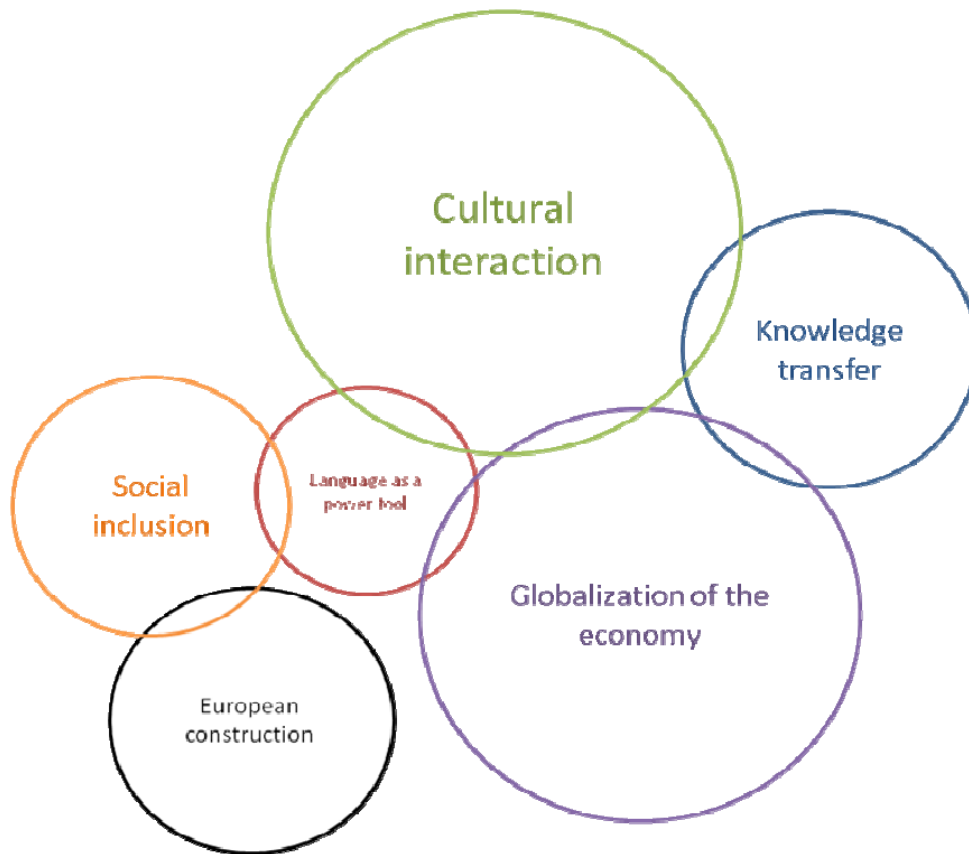
The fact that translation is a largely invisible activity is not a problem per se; firms and administrations working in an international context still use it daily. On the other hand, the Directorate General of Translation (DGT) at the European Commission (and many experts and professionals that we contacted for this study), believe that by constantly remaining in the background, translation and especially human and professional translation may eventually be perceived as a superfluous activity, a cost that is not necessarily justified. If this perception were to spread among the citizens of Europe it could rapidly become a threat to European multilingualism, for which the translation activities in European institutions provide a solid base.

DGT therefore wishes to contribute to the debate by pointing out the range of positive impacts that translation has on a society, as well as some of the perceptions of translation found in European countries. Based on multiple sources (scientific articles, the press, numerous interviews), the present study describes, discusses and illustrates fields of impacts defined with the help of a panel of experts. In so doing it lays the foundations for enlightened debate and possibly for further studies.

Main impacts

Use of a concept-mapping technique to facilitate the work of a panel of nine European experts enabled us to identify the fields of impacts presented below. Without going into details on the methodology, it is important to note the following: - in many cases the advantages mentioned below could also be due to multilingualism or any other form of intercultural communication; - our choice consisted in separating the importance of the impact (is it important for the society?) and the role of translation (without translation, could this

contribution be obtained?), which was not always easy to do; - the size of the circles is proportional to the relative importance that the experts ascribed to the various fields; - and finally, the different fields are porous, as the diagram shows, which means that an impact is in one field rather than another as a result of the experts' choice.



Translation supports **cultural interaction** in two ways. First, between individuals of different cultures it facilitates mutual understanding, meetings and transactions. Second, translation allows individuals access to foreign cultures as well as ancient ones, and makes it possible to spread a culture or outlook towards the rest of the world. Certain states, regional authorities and organizations implement policies with this very objective, for example to consolidate a language with a view to strengthening the identity of a people or group.

Given that it facilitates economic interaction between linguistic communities, translation is a crucial driver of **globalization of the European economy** and single market. It allows for a swift, reliable exchange of information, goods and services, reduces risks related to the linguistic dimension of an international activity (e.g. on the terms of a contract), and facilitates the internal functioning of multinationals.

With regard to regulatory or security constraints, translation also enables firms to penetrate markets with goods or services produced in another language, and facilitates their adoption by consumers who are not multilingual.

For a territory, generalized translation is also a condition for the development of mass tourism, along with policies to promote multilingualism.

Finally, albeit to a lesser extent, translation is itself the source of certain interactions and new markets, for instance through the retranslation of previously translated works, or the exchange (free or not) of books, services or products translated by users (translations, authorized or not, of the works of amateurs, or fansubbing, but also localization of intangible services, notably by users).

Translation also allows for **knowledge transfer** by facilitating the exchange of cultural, technical and scientific knowledge and its dissemination to large numbers of people. In particular, it makes a significant contribution to scientific debate by guaranteeing the precision of concepts and reasoning (mainly with regard to the use of a language of communication). Moreover, the retranslation of scientific, technical, political and philosophical works can, in itself, shed new light on a subject. It thus enables members of the scientific community to have as many perspectives on a subject as possible, which the experts maintain is a requirement of creativity and innovation.

Translation contributes to **social inclusion**, especially of two types of community: minority native linguistic communities in a territory; and migrant linguistic communities. The role of translation is primarily to allow access to all basic services (e.g. education, health) and to justice, thus ensuring equal treatment of individuals and favouring a better quality of life for everyone. In the workplace, translation (e.g. instructions) improves the employability of monolingual individuals, especially when they are also less qualified. Finally, and more generally, translation allows access to resources (e.g. cultural) and services (notably on-line) that would otherwise be reserved for a multilingual fringe of society – often the wealthiest – in a territory.

As one of the basic elements of relations between Member States, translation contributes to **European construction**. Systematic translation, notably of legislation, is part of the pact guaranteeing European cohesion and thus facilitating the entry of new Member States. The translation of legislation into the national languages adopted as the official languages of the European Union is moreover a condition underpinning a country's adhesion.

Translation enables all citizens to have access, without an intermediary, not only to legal texts but also to the decisions requiring their participation, for example during referendums. It is one of the catalysts of interaction between citizens of all countries, so necessary for the forging of a common identity and a sense of European citizenship.

Finally, translation has impacts in situations of **conflict** and **domination**. It facilitates both military operations and peace-keeping missions. In general, in situations of crisis, and not only from the mediator's point of view, translation is a key tool recognized by all the stakeholders. Some may even be tempted to manipulate it in conflicts (for example by choosing biased, truncated or inaccurate translations).

Under authoritarian regimes the monopoly on translation (of books and especially news) is an essential means of control. More generally, and notably via the pivotal role of news agencies, it is a way of implicitly or explicitly supporting a point of view on international events.

Types of impact

Like other modes of intercultural communication, translation acts in one way or another on:

- The distance between an individual and a resource produced in another language;
- The speed of access to a resource;
- The precision of access to the resource obtained;
- The number of resources available;
- The extent of access to those resources;
- Agents' autonomy in a particular field or place.

Perception in the Member States

Translation is rarely a subject of public debate because it is usually invisible to most citizens. When it does become apparent, this is often because there is a problem: the translation has a shortcoming, is of a bad quality or is controversial. Studies of the press have revealed that the main public debates over translation concerned the following: the feeling among some citizens that European communication is translated less and less; issues of dubbing and subtitling; machine translation and its comparison with human translation; the cost of translation (especially the idea of a "fair price"); and, finally, the professional quality of translators.

In the absence of existing data on Europeans' perception of translation in general, the subject has been treated by means of a survey on the stakeholders of translation: professionals, researchers and public officials. Although the survey results are based on 150 answers, they are by no means representative. They do however enable us to posit the following, which would need to be validated by further research:

- Individuals generally have very little awareness of the use of translation in their daily lives, especially in the British Isles. Awareness seems to be greatest in the Benelux countries, the Baltic countries and Finland;
- Europeans' opinion of translation is neither particularly positive nor particularly negative. It is above average in Germany, Austria, Benelux and Denmark, and below average in Spain, Britain, France and Italy. The respondents' seem to consider that translation as a profession is not recognized by the public.
- In certain sectors and for certain services, large firms and administrations are prepared to pay for high-quality translations. On the other hand, small businesses and administrations in which multilingual exchange is not part of the core activity tend to see professional translation as a heavy expense that will reduce an SME's profits on small contracts. These organizations prefer to rely on their employees' linguistic skills or on automatic translation.
- Finally, the media do not give a particularly positive or negative image of translation, except perhaps in the British Isles where they tend to present it negatively.

Recommendations

Our proposals, set out in the study, can be summed up as follows:

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 concept-mapping 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 crowdsourcing of works in the public domain.

