

# Don't ask what you have done for Europe...

by Andrew Joscelyne



In its thirteen years as the flagship news and view magazine for the language professions, *Language International* has, explicitly or implicitly, charted the transformation of the translation business from a scattered skills supplier to an embryonic service industry. I had the privilege of helping to report on some of the changes that were taking place specifically in Europe during this exciting period. So let me recall a few Euro verities in this vaudeville issue. And remember that it took a European publisher to seize the opportunity to explore this fast-moving field in the wake of Geoff Kingscott's pioneering effort in creating a trans-national community of informed language workers.

Now that this publishing venture is, alas, coming to an end, and as Europe readies itself for another convulsive geolinguistic shift, it might be worth looking at the major policy achievements that underwrote Europe's institutional commitment to a multilingual information society, predicated on a profound, albeit *sotto voce*, belief in the role of translation as an enabler of communication in business, government and civil society.

This is not mere Euro-jingoism. The fact is that for the first time in history a supranational entity has taken the decision to support radical multilinguality as a defining feature of its communicative practices—an extraordinary challenge for the language professions, and one for which no one was particularly well prepared. The rapid emergence of the Internet and the Web in the mid-1990s has only fuelled the need to explore how best practices in the complex domain of translation and localisation can be measured,

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shared and sustained. And since we have nothing against which to compare the results of such top-down policy actions, we need to stay informed and be prepared to evaluate how well they match

the needs of the industry—as well as those of our rulers.

Industry, you say? Well, how else do we describe a sector composed of many large-scale users of translation; a vast army of individual or micro-enterprise translators, technical authors and editors of all sorts and conditions; an increasingly consolidated regime of regional/global translation enterprises who employ many of the latter in cascading production chains; a network of R&D labs and suppliers developing translation tools as part of a spreading infrastructure of digital language technologies; and a swathe of professional associations, terminology networks and local policy makers attempting to develop industry-wide standards for technologies, translation quality, transactions and training packages?

Within this nascent industrial nexus, one of the key novelties of the past decade and a half has been a concerted effort in translation engineering and technology, both for individual translator work and within the broader perspective of global information society policy-making. And above all in Europe. *Language International's* reign began as the ill-fated but highly influential Eurotra project of building a machine translation infrastructure for the European Union slouched to an end. One of its more lasting effects was to prompt the relatively rapid creation of new language technology capabilities and national awareness of the challenges in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Denmark. And as Eurotra wound down in 1993, the grandiose Verbmobil project ramped up in Germany to develop not just industrial strength speech translation but a constellation of commercial spin-offs destined to push the technology envelope into a new generation of commercial applications.

In 1994, the European Commission (EC) launched a Fourth Framework Programme for Research and Technology Development, with a strong language engineering component, dedicated to transforming fundamental computational linguistic research into operational pre-market systems built around reusable resources and generic tool sets. Though essential to developing multilingual capabilities for the region's information technology systems, few of the projects were relevant to the workaday world of the translation community, though one of them attempted to specify requirements for a translator's workbench.

However, in 1996, realising it was time to take a serious look at how it could give a pan-European spin to the unsung and

under-capitalised activities of national translation activities, the EC launched the MLIS (Multilingual Information Society) programme, probably offering many European readers of *Language International* their first entanglements in Euro red tape when submitting proposals for funding.

This effort focused explicitly on building a community of good practices in multilingual service provision, addressing such issues as terminology management, translation enterprise quality harmonisation and,

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to a limited degree, the analysis of translation market statistics, a potentially valuable source of planning data that Europe has been woefully poor at tapping. As far as I know, MLIS has never been publicly reported on as a whole, making it hard to evaluate the full impact of what may well be the world's first cross-border programme devoted to fostering joint actions in the commercial translation sector as we know it.

The cycle of EC R&D efforts continued in 1999 with the Fifth Framework Programme, this time focused among other things on integrating more market-ready multilingual language technologies into applications for e-commerce and mobile commerce. For the EC, this programme marked the end of one complete R&D cycle, since the about-to-begin Sixth Framework Programme appears to be dedicated to funding projects with a more fundamental research focus, aimed at inventing the next wave of interfaces and knowledge management systems within which language technology and tools will form *embedded* components rather than



stand-alone applications as we think of them today.

The message implicit in this turn of the R&D screw is clear: first generation language technologies have now matured and been transferred to market through the 200 or so small and medium sized European language technology (not translation!) enterprises that peddle their wares with more or less difficulty on the software solutions market. In other words, the development of state of the art language technology should no longer need to rely on public funding.

And the same goes, of course, for the translation and localisation industry organisations and networks set up under MLIS and other programmes. While policy decisions have seed-funded a number of translation industry efforts, these must now choose appropriate business models and learn to sink or swim under commercial conditions of supply and demand. Similarly, the eContent programme launched in 2001 (in some ways a successor to MLIS) with funding to boost multilingual content production in Europe through innovative commercial projects, is a market-centric—rather than R&D—initiative. It should be noted, though, that there appears to be broad consensus that, subsidiarity *oblige*, governments should be called upon to fund the localisation of content in areas such as e-learning, e-government and legal publishing for markets and geographies that are too small to be competitive. Let's see if they will.

It's obviously hard to make any summary assessment of the impact of these various public funding initiatives designed to prime, in part, the translation/localisation technology pump in Europe. As I've suggested, one obvious problem is that we have no serious benchmark (e.g. from the USA, or more comparable multilingual geographies such as India or South Africa) against which to measure them. Another is the fact that no European player (Allied Business Intelligence and IDC among others provide a US perspective) has stepped forward to do a little serious market measuring that might establish some sound figures about who's doing what, and how well, with which technologies for which languages, in that intensely multilingual mosaic perched on the Atlantic's eastern tideline.

It is pretty obvious, however, that far more public money has gone into developing or bringing to market the components for automatic translation solutions than into efforts to establish, say, quality standards in the human translator community or a pan-



European translation observatory worth its name, or a Euro threshold translation/interpretation curriculum. And that, surely, is inevitable, given the cost of technology development and productisation, the size of the task of developing truly multilingual gisting/raw translation tools for the expanding numbers of official language pairs, and the fact that specifically translator community support is far more likely to be a language-based, national or association level issue, rather than a Community affair.

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If indeed it is a non-commercial question in the first place.

Notice I said 'components'—conventional wisdom has it that the EC will no longer finance translation technology systems as such, presumably leaving this up to market forces. But judging by trends in the EC technology funding agenda today, I reckon it is fair to say that, although there will naturally always be a massive role for human translators across a vast range of translation

tasks, the ultimate long-term vision of multilingual enablement in greater Europe is nevertheless firmly technology driven.

Like every other piece of the IT puzzle, translation components will gradually be pushed down deeper into the distributed digital fabric so that translation support becomes the equivalent of a *knowledge utility*—on a par with mobile telecoms, internet access, energy, and water. Software agents can be expected to scurry around the web knitting together the bilingual resources needed to carry out a given translation task, automatically triggered by a web service transaction, and deploying any kind of appropriate technology—statistical, rule-based, knowledge-based, whatever—that delivers the desired quality level in the blinking of an eye. Sounds easy, but of course it depends over the long term on some sort of semantic web, on new business models for knowledge delivery, on intelligent language resource repositories, and on lots of down 'n dirty middleware engineering.

Developing this sort of utility will probably sound like euros down the drain to most *Language International* readers, who rightly pride themselves on their personal skills as translators, and most probably share a more humanistic vision of the translation enterprise as one of hermeneutic mastery rather than lexical calculus. The technologists would retort that Gary Kasparov and Vladimir Kramnik used to think the same about chess. And rather as a chess program such as Deep Fritz grinds dumbly through a database of millions of previous games of human chess, so will our translation bots probably parse that vast heritage of bitexts lovingly created over the past two digital decades—yes, the *Language International* years—by human translators all over the world. So when voting time comes round again, don't forget to ask what Europe can do for you...or at least for your Intellectual Property Rights!

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