

THE EUROPEAN TRANSLATION PLATFORM

by Geoffrey Kingscott,
Praetorius Limited

Geoffrey Kingscott talks about The European Translation Platform. This is a forum which brings together representatives of all the different elements of translation and interpreting activity in Europe. It acts as something of a European summit for translation activity.

The story begins in 1994. The European Commission's Directorate-General XIII, which is responsible, *inter alia*, for the information market, was concerned at the impact of the so-called Information Society on the languages and cultures of Europe. It is the official policy of the European Union to promote the multilingual diversity of Europe.

One of DG XIII's concerns was whether the translation infrastructure in Europe was capable of rising to the challenge posed by the information society. They wondered whether translation suppliers might be too scattered, too unorganised, too unstructured.

DG XIII took advice from a number of individuals, and benefited in particular from a memorandum written by Mr Jaap van der Meer, whose name will be known to many of you. Mr van der Meer was one of the co-founders of the Netherlands translation and localisation company INK, which later became part of the Donnelley group. At that time Mr van der Meer had left Donnelley, and was acting as an independent consultant.

In October 1994, accordingly, the Commission called a meeting in Brussels of representatives of translation companies one from nearly every country in the European Union, to discuss the problem. The Commission often do this, that is, call in

'experts' to advise them on an issue.

It was a fairly arbitrary selection. Some of the companies represented were among the largest in their respective countries - RWS in the UK, Mendez in Belgium, Opera in France, Logos in Italy - while others were modest in size. The translation world being prone to jealousy and suspicion, controversy immediately broke out as to why some companies had been invited and not others. But the Commission was only using the meeting as an informal 'sounding board'¹, and the meeting had to be kept small to be effective.

The author of this paper was brought in to act as rapporteur for the meeting, because I had a contract with the Commission at that time which enabled them to make use of me for miscellaneous tasks of that nature. I have to emphasise that the comments and observations in this paper are purely personal, and I have not 'cleared' it with the European Commission or with the European Translation Platform itself. The Commission and the Platform therefore have no responsibility for the contents of this paper.

The Commission's representatives at that first meeting made it clear that the Commission could not itself restructure the European translation industry; any initiative had to come from the industry itself.

There were further meetings throughout 1995, a lot of discussion, and what might be called false starts, which it would be tedious to describe in detail. But eventually there emerged what has become known as the European Translation Platform. This takes the form of a forum which brings together representatives of all the different elements of translation and interpreting activity in Europe, some of whom had never sat round the same table before. It acts as something of a European summit for translation activity.

First of all we have the *Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs* (FIT), which is the world organisation to which nearly every translator association belongs. It is usually represented at the Platform meetings by its secretary-general, Liese Katschinka, who is based in Vienna, and by the chairman of its Regional Centre for Europe, Jeannette Ørsted of Denmark, though on one occasion Jeannette Ørsted could not attend and her place was taken by the FIT world president, Dr Florence Herbulot. I should explain that the various organisations represented can change their delegates at will.

Alongside the translators we have the *Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence* (AIIC), which is the world organisation for conference interpreters, usually-represented by one of its leading figures, Benoît Kremer.

Translation companies are represented by the European Union of Associations of Translation Companies (EUATC). Its delegates are usually the secretary-general, Anton Gerada of Italy, and the secretary of its largest member organisation, Geoffrey Bowden of the UK Association of Translation Companies. The EUATC, which is only open to national associations, not individual companies, now has member associations from UK, France, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Finland, Netherlands and Belgium.

At one time, as a result of the earlier meetings in this project, the larger translation companies of Europe, those whose turnover is into the millions of pounds sterling, were considering setting up their own association. This was provisionally called the European Association of Translation Companies. However, to the best of my knowledge, this association has not yet got off the ground. This is one of those politically delicate areas, and I will try to choose my words carefully. There is a feeling in some quarters that the EUATC is not sufficiently representative, particularly of the big companies. As a compromise the EUATC was asked to consider having a special section for larger companies, but after a lot of discussion at its meetings took the view that such companies should be members of their national associations. In some cases this is in fact true. Another major problem is the lack of representation of translation companies in Germany. The German translation companies organisation, the *Verein Übersetzungsbüros* (VU), does not seem to be active at present.

Another important strand in the translation industry is the training infrastructure. Here there is a long-established organisation, the *Conférence Internationale des Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes*, CIUTI, which is usually represented at Platform meetings by Professor Truffaut of Geneva University's School of Translating and Interpreting, and by Professor Huber of the University of Mainz at Gernersheim. CIUTI tends to represent the older-established courses, and many of the newer courses are not members, or perhaps I should state not yet members. But CIUTI representatives have made a positive contribution to Platform discussions, and are cooperating in POSI, the important initiative which I shall describe below.

In addition to the training of translators and interpreters, many universities in Europe have people working in the comparatively new discipline of translation studies: here again there is an association, the European Society for Translation Studies, which is usually represented at Platform meetings by Professor José Lambert, of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium).

I have mentioned all these organisations in some detail as they do illustrate the various activities of the translation industry.

Two areas of activity which do not have organisations to represent them are staff translators/interpreters in big companies, and staff translators/interpreters in international organisations. So we have co-opted on to the Platform John Graham, head of language services at the German industrial company Mannesmann Demag, and Mme Marie-Jeanne de Saint-Robert, who heads the terminology and technical documentation section at the United Nations Organisation in Geneva.

There is one pan-European organisation which is not yet represented, and that is the European Association for Machine Translation, which, I notice, is a co-sponsor of this Translating and the Computer conference. I hope this can be remedied, but here again there are delicate political questions of demarcation. It was thought important that the Platform initiative should not be seen as technologically-oriented, since language technology is covered by the European Commission's telematics programme. But the incorporation of the EAMT is certainly not ruled out for the future.

So far the activities of the European Translation Platform are governed by a 'Mandate' which was written out in 1995 by Mr Jan Roukens, of DG XIII, who was the prime mover in the European Commission in getting it set up. This mandate will take the Platform up to the end of 1996, when its future will have to be decided. Until then DG XIII will call the meetings, and a Commission representative always acts as chairman. The secretary of the Platform is appointed by the Commission, and the current appointee is the author of this paper. Meetings take place on Commission premises. The Platform is not a legal body; it is defined as a forum for the stimulation of mutual consultation and information, the building of a consensus, and the issuing of recommendations.

To what extent has the European Translation Platform achieved these objectives?

Consultation and consensus has gone so far that no fewer than eight position papers have been issued, covering eight fields of considerable importance to translators and interpreters. These are Quality assurance and accreditation, Customer education, Raising the profile of the profession, Education and training, Promotion of multilingualism in Europe, Impact of new technologies, Statistical information, and Copyright. Copies of these papers can be obtained by written request to myself; a limited number of them can be found at the Praetorius stand in the exhibition at this conference. Some of these subjects, of course, overlap, and there have been a number of developments since the papers were agreed.

It was never the intention of the European Commission to 'control' in any way the translation industry in Europe; their initiative was intended as a catalyst, to get the industry to create its own coherent structures, that would enable it to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The same objective was behind the European Commission proposal, the *Multilingual Information Society* (MLIS). At the time of preparing this paper the proposal had not yet been approved by the European Council of Ministers, but more information may be available by the time of the conference. The objective of MLIS was not to finance large-scale research and development projects (already covered by Telematics and Esprit programmes), but to act as a catalyst - that word again - especially in prompting organisations to work together.

Naturally, the European Translation Platform, which was an existing exemplar of this working together, the sort of thing MLIS was designed to promote, became an early and enthusiastic supporter of the MLIS project, which we studied when it was still in draft form. As its position paper on the subject shows, the Platform believes that multilingualism is crucial to Europe's future. To quote the French writer Claude Hagège: *L'Europe sera multilingue, ou il ne sera pas.*

The need for more definite statistical information has been a subject of discussion since the very first meeting in 1994. Many figures have been bandied about concerning the number of professional translators in Europe, or the amount of translation business which is done, and whether the figures are increasing or decreasing, and by how much. None of these figures, however, seem to be based on empirical data. The Platform has been considering ways in which data may be collected, and has put its view firmly to the Commission that the collection of such data, perhaps through some official project, would be a worthwhile initiative.

There has been considerable discussion on the overlapping areas of quality assurance, accreditation, education and training. One result is that the promoters of separate initiatives on quality assurance in Germany (draft standard DIN 02345), Austria (proposals for the individual certification of translators and interpreters) and Italy (a draft standard, known as Uniter, for translators and translation companies) have all been put in contact with one another. It is generally agreed that the international quality assurance standard, ISO 9000, is inadequate and in some respects inappropriate for translating and interpreting services. Work is therefore going on on quality assurance norms for translation companies on the one hand, and individual translators on the other.

Quality assurance standards are obviously associated with accreditation, which in turn is associated with the training infrastructure.

A major project is now taking shape for the coordination of translation training and qualifications in Europe, combined with an attempt to bring the training of translation and interpreters more in line with changing requirements. It would be presumptuous to claim that this is exclusively a European Translation Platform project, since a great deal of work has been done by the German translators association (*Bund Dolmetscher und Übersetzer* - BDÜ), by the FIT Regional Centre for Europe, and by individuals such as John Graham. But the Platform certainly coordinated the activities, gave the whole initiative a significant push forward, and made sure it was developed on a European scale.

The project is known as POSI, an acronym based on the original proposal which was written in German, *PraxisOrientierte StudienInhalte für die Ausbildung von Übersetzern und Dolmetschern* (practice-oriented course content for the training of translators and interpreters). A detailed description of POSI can be found on pages 7-9 of the journal *Language International* 8.4.

The next crucial stage in the development of POSI will be a seminar to be held at the University of the Saarland, Saarbrücken November 29-30. Participation at this seminar will be by invitation only, but there will be representatives from translators' and interpreters' associations, industry, university training courses, and the European Commission. The discussions will be deliberately structured in order to lead to meaningful actions.

The old days of enmity between translators and translation companies, of universities developing courses without taking account of the requirements of the market place, of everyone doing their own little thing, have I hope gone for ever. Translation is now, economically and culturally, such an important activity yet still faces immense customer ignorance, that we must all work together to try to get it right. The European Translation Platform is an example of how the whole of the translation industry - for we are now an industry - can cooperate in the best interests of all of us.