

Putting the VIM into AVIMA

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BACKGROUND

A lot has been said at this conference about new developments which are going to make life easier for the translator. We are going to tell you about one which already does make life easier for the translator and which, into the bargain has saved the European VAT-payer the bagatelle of 57 million ECU or 40 million pounds, per year, in translation costs alone.

Back in the early 1970s, an official in the European Commission had a brilliant idea. The money spent by government and local government, he reasoned, was a motor of the economy, one of the biggest chunks of any country's GDP, and as a general rule it was spent well, but not necessarily wisely, almost entirely in the country in question. *Pas très communautaire, quoi*. It was rather difficult to imagine France giving a motorway contract to Wimpey's or Britain buying school exercise books from Italy, or Italy buying computers from Siemens. The Commission decided to open it up, and advertise the contracts Community-wide. Let the public at least see where the money was being spent, and that competition was real.

A new publication was born, the *Supplement to the Official Journal of the European Communities*. Its first issue was eight pages, four of which had had to be translated into each of five other languages – these were the days of the six-language Community.

By 1980 the number of these notices being translated each year had crept up to around 2,500. At two pages each, into five languages, this made 25,000 pages a year – and we had built up a considerable wealth of

expertise on French bridge-building methods, German post-office equipment, and Dutch flood-control techniques.

Then a sixth target language, and a seventh, and an eighth, plus adjustments to the rules, and the trickle gradually became a flood.

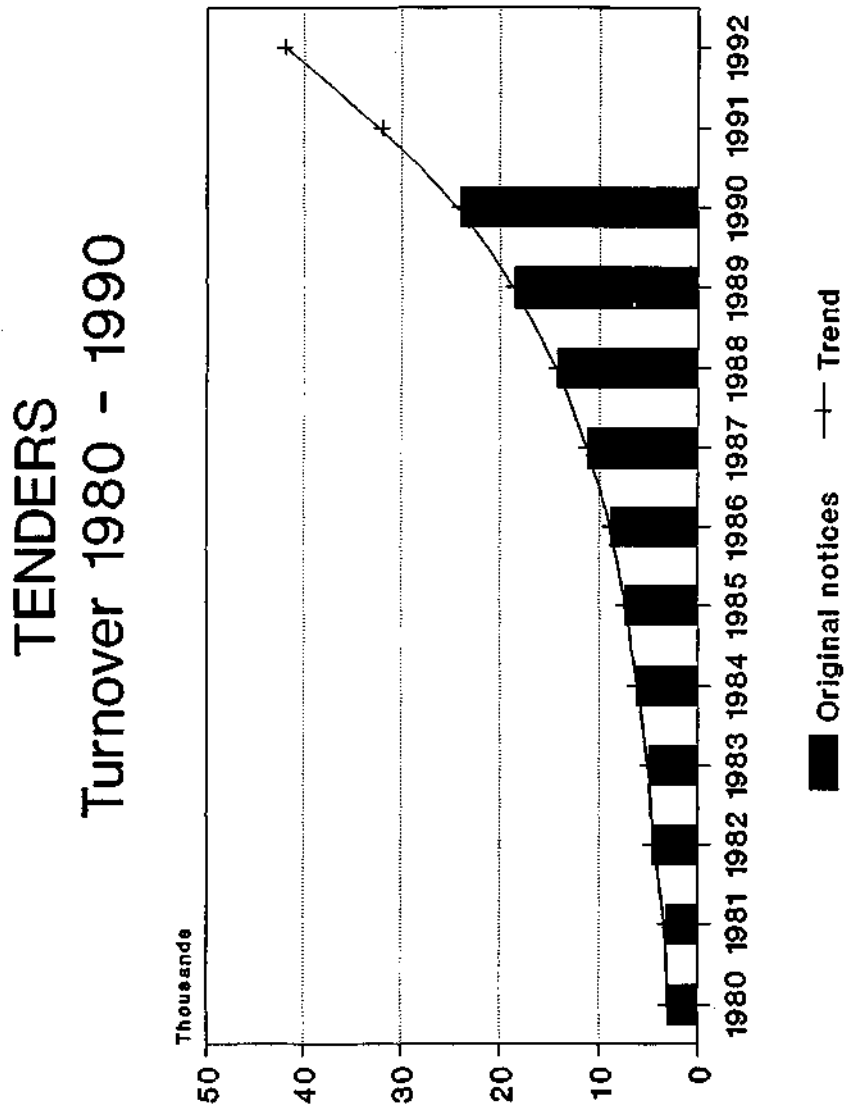


Table 1: Tenders turnover 1980 - 1992

These are the numbers of originals received each year – including our projections for 1991 and 1992. From 2,500 to 45,000 over 12 years is a big increase anyway, but what that means in pages of translation is this...

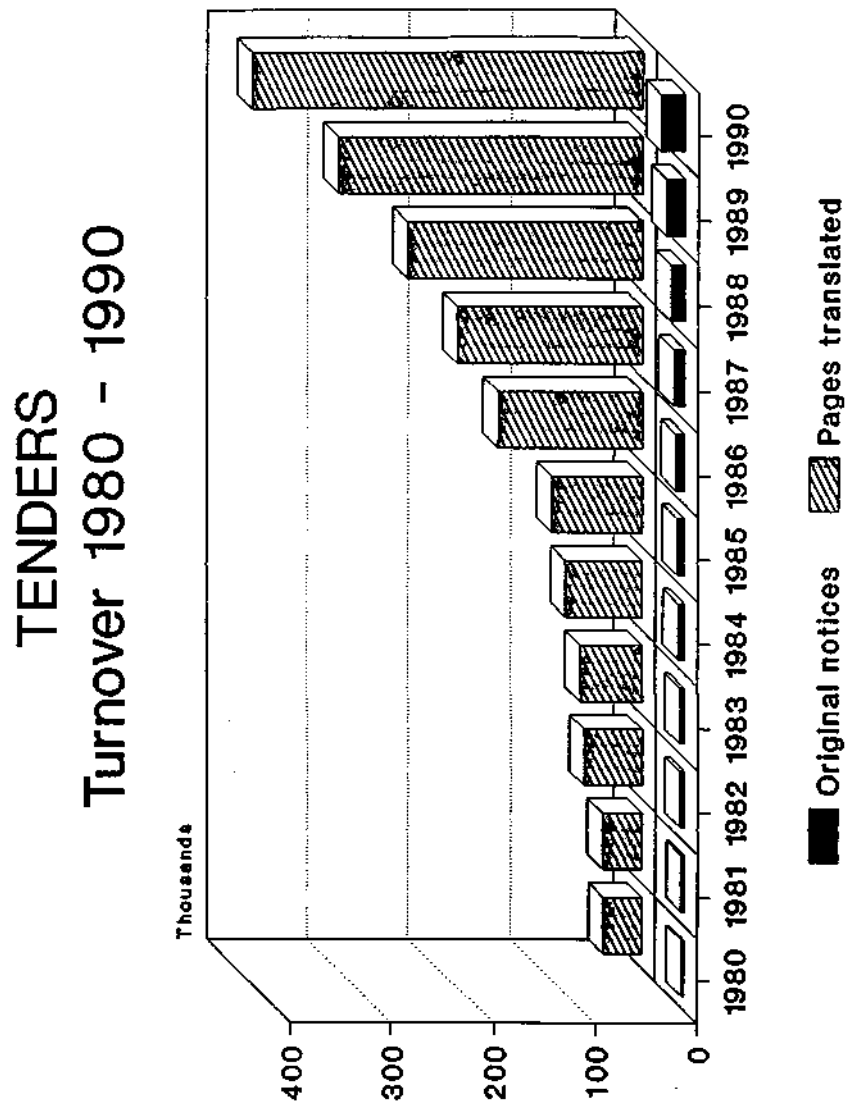


Table 2: Turnover pages 1980 - 1990

THE PROBLEM

By 1987 things were becoming quite busy, but that was not the problem. We could have handled 200,000 pages a year, but we also had other requesters relying on our services. By 1987 these notices were absorbing 70% of the capacity of the entire Luxembourg service, and 85% of the smaller language divisions such as Danish and Portuguese.

It was ripe for rationalisation. We had occasionally suggested this rather diffidently to the other parties involved in the project, and been told that our job was to produce translations, not ideas. But this time the circumstances were different: we had had a fire, had been out of action for weeks rather than days, and nobody had complained. It began to dawn on people that we were perhaps doing a little more than was strictly necessary. Precisely our own point of view, in fact. All of a sudden, it became a good idea to try to prune the task. This was the official start of project AVIMA, the name being an acronym from the French for notice of invitation to tender, AVIS DE MARCHÉ.

The fight wasn't over, since any large bureaucratic organisation will always say 'no, it can't be done' unless there are irresistible reasons to the contrary, but the principle had at least been accepted. We could rationalise.

So we did. Our first step was to set down a shopping list of suggestions about how such and such an objective could be achieved. Most of these were initially vetoed by one or other of the other departments involved – DG III (Internal Market) the coordinator of the whole business, the Secretariat-General, who are paymasters to the *Official Journal*, the Publications Office who are our editors-in-chief, or our own masters in Brussels. Most of these suggestions were ultimately accepted as the only rational and realistic way of doing things. Most of them, after all, had been matured over years.

THE DOCUMENT

So what does a tender notice actually look like, you will be wondering. This is what they used to look like.

UK-Lewes: vehicles and plant

(90/S 109-16207/EN)
Awarding authority: East Sussex County Council, Highways and Transportation Department, Transport Group, The Broyle, Kingmer, UK-Lewes BN8 5NP, East Sussex. Tel. (0273) 81 40 21. Facsimile (0273) 81 33 77.

2. (a) **Contract type:** Non-recurrent within the period specified.
3. (a) **Delivery to:** As in 1.
- (b) **Goods:** Purchase of vehicles and plant as follows:
 - 1 Ford Cargo 1013 box van with 1-ton hydraulic tail-lift or equivalent;
 - 1 Ford Cargo 1213 mobile library body or equivalent;
 - 1 Volvo FL614 tractor unit or equivalent;
 - 1 Bedford Astramax 560L CDV or equivalent;
 - 1 Ford Transit 17-seat crewbus or equivalent;
 - 1 Ford Transit Luton with 1-ton hydraulic tail-lift or equivalent;
 - 1 Landrover 110 LWB hardtop or equivalent;
 - 1 Case International 485 agricultural tractor or equivalent;
 - 3 Ford Transit 15-seat minibuses or equivalent;
 - 4 Bedford Brava 4 x 4 1-ton pick-up trucks or equivalent;
 - 5 Vauxhall Nova 1.2-litre hatchbacks or equivalent;
 - 5 Ford Transit 17-seat welfare coaches or equivalent;
 - 4 Ford Transit 120 standard panel vans or equivalent;
 - 2 Ford Transit 120 extra-high-top panel vans or equivalent;
 - 8 Bedford Astra 1.4-litre car-derived vans or equivalent;
 - 5 ERF ES6 tipper chassis with hoeklift equipment for gully emptier and 6 m³ gritter demountable bodies or equivalent;
 - 2 Vauxhall Astra disabled conversion for wheelchair patients with lowering vehicle suspension system or equivalent;

Illustration 1

- 2 Ford Escort 1.4-litre estate cars or equivalent;
- 1 Ford Sierra 1.6LX estate car or equivalent;
- 10 Rover Metro 1.1-litre cars or equivalent.
- (c) **Division into lots:** Tenderers may quote for all or part of the requirement.
- (d)
4. **Delivery deadline:** Before 8. 2. 1991.
5. (a) **Documents from:** As in 1, The County Transport Manager.
- (b) **Requests not later than:** 25. 6. 1990.
- (c)
6. (a) **Deadline for receipt of tenders:** 23. 7. 1990 (12.00).
- (b) **Address:** The County Secretary, East Sussex County Council, Pelham House, St Andrew's Lane, UK-Lewes BN7 1UN, East Sussex.
- (c) **Language(s):** English.
7. (a) **Opening of tenders (persons admitted):** Authorised officers of 6 (b).
- (b) **Date, time and place:** 23. 7. 1990. As in 6 (b), at a time to be arranged.
- 8., 9.
10. **Legal form in case of group bidders:** In the event of a group of suppliers winning a portion or all of the contract the council will require each supplier in the group to become jointly or severally responsible before acceptance.
11. **Qualifications:** Unless having previously supplied vehicles and/or plant, tenderers must forward evidence as specified in Articles 22 (1) (a) and 23 (1) (a) of the Draft Composite of Directive 88/295/EEC.
12. **Tenders may lapse after:** 90 days from the date of tender.
13. **Award criteria (other than price):** Price, delivery date, after-sales service, quality, running costs and standardization of fleet. These criteria are not necessarily in order of importance.
14. **Other information:** Tenderers must be priced in sterling and all payments will be made in sterling.
15. **Notice postmarked:** 30. 5. 1990.
16. **Notice received on:** 30. 5. 1990.

It can contain anything from seven to 18 points, depending on the Directive under which it falls. There are 12 different types of tender notices, according to content (public works or supplies) and the tendering procedure.

Some of it is addresses and dates, information that can, thankfully, simply be taken over into any language without any treatment whatsoever. Though we had to fight even to have dates expressed in numbers – 9. 11. 1990, rather than language – 9 November 1990.

Another chunk is administrative information. Guarantees, methods of payment, minimum qualifications, that sort of thing.

And finally the actual subject of the notice. Just a small paragraph, point 3b. And it can be anything from gooseberry jam for the Luxembourg army officers' mess to the Channel Tunnel.

THE STANDARD FORMULAE

The administrative part. Well, no matter how one looks at it, there *is* a limit to human imagination. There can be many variations on the minimum qualifications theme, but their number is bound to be finite. From about 20 formulations about the annual turnover over the last five years, what we distilled in the end was:

The following information may be requested to facilitate the assessment of a firm's financial constructional and managerial capacity:

A statement of the firm's total turnover and its turnover in construction work over the three previous financial years.

Sounds elementary – and it certainly is. But try paraphrasing an awarding authority and you immediately have the problem ‘That’s not *our* text! We didn’t say “*may* be requested”, we only said “*could, under certain circumstances, be requested*”. Our legal department spent three years arguing this point out and decided that...’

Seriously, this could not go on. Enter the legislator, DG III in this case, with one very *significant* phrase:

A summary of the important elements of each notice shall be published in the other official languages of the Community, the original text alone being authentic.

Council Directive 88/295/EEC, Coordination of procedures on the award of public supply contracts, Article 9, Para. 6

This was published in 1988 and it paved the way for a long string of developments. To cut a long story short: the compilers – that is the people who preprocess the tenders – can use a textual database with all the standard clauses. According to the essence – not always the wording – of

the paragraph, they enter a code in a skeleton document. This is then processed, the corresponding text parts are automatically inserted in all other language versions except the original (which is published in full text) and the rest, which by this time is only point 3b – the description of the contract – is sent to the translation service.

You can imagine the amount of work this has saved everybody involved – translators, typists, typesetters, proof-readers, up to those who sign the bills (fewer zeros to fill in). So while the tide was still with us, could we not apply the same principle for the description of the contract?

NOMENCLATURES

The administrative part was the easy seven-eighths. As we were saying, the flights of administrative fancy may be pretty wild, but they *are* finite. But Man's wants, particularly corporate man's, are pretty nearly infinite. We had to try to codify it all. We came to the conclusion that the best tactic was to divide human wants into sections, and then treat each fairly exhaustively.

We started with construction work. This accounted for 45 per cent of all our throughput, and it was the area in which we had the longest experience. Our first efforts produced a neatly-organised nomenclature built around a three-digit classification. We had the world of building and civil engineering divided into ten coherent sections; each of these ten sections was broken down into ten subsections, and each of them into ten headings.

The only way we could test this nomenclature was against previous text. We found that it scored on average something between 85 and 90 per cent of direct hits, and that all but a handful of the remainder could be fudged. We did better than fudge them.

Nomenclatures work very well in a disciplined environment such as statistics, but that is the last thing one would call either public spending or the construction industry. We enriched the nomenclature with a set of 'wild cards' – jokers, if you like – which could be used *ad lib* to qualify the headings. A highway, for example, maybe constructed, repaired, improved, widened, lengthened, reconstructed and even demolished. So can almost anything else. With a pack of 200 jokers, the nomenclature could be halved in size, and it became a weapon of prodigious power.

This made much of our three-digit amateur nomenclature unnecessary, and we turned it inside out and grafted it to the Central Product Classification, the CPC, which is a United Nations classification recognised throughout the commercial world. In this form the nomenclature was submitted to the Advisory Committee for Public Procurement – the representatives of the 12 Member States – who approved it. The Publications Office, meanwhile, had been doing their programming, and the

'Administrative formulae' algorithms were adapted to handle the technical stuff.

We had already discussed amongst ourselves and with the trade what it was exactly that a potential contractor needed to know about the job. Surprisingly little, we concluded. You all remember Lemuel Putt, the Specialist, who could build '...a house, barn, church or chicken coop', although he specialised in privies. Civil engineers are much the same. To a civil engineer it doesn't really matter whether your motorway bridge is going to be built with a slab deck or a beam deck, out of steel or concrete. Most of our colleagues wouldn't recognise a slab-deck bridge if it fell on them, but they had been translating the differences assiduously for years. Nobody was bothered about the difference, least of all the builder. He's interested in just three factors: how big a job is, how long he has to do it, and how much it's worth. Particularly the last.

Our aim was to reduce the presentation of the technical description to something standard, and that trio looked a promising start. We had a nomenclature for the nature of the works, and we now knew what else the contractor wanted to know. How big became some expression in SI units – cubic metres of earthworks, tonnes of reinforcing steel, square metres of council offices. How long was the date for completion, which had already been dealt with in the administrative specs. And last, but far from least, how much. Not every council or department quotes a figure, and some are not much better than guesswork anyway, and may not be a particularly accurate reflection of the true value of a contract. But any figure gives the contractor something to go on. His question is not really as crude as 'how much?' Put into elegant terms, it is 'are the size of this job and the size of my business suited one to another?' If they are, and the dates are right, he can apply without fearing either the perils of taking on something which leaves him totally out of his depth, or the embarrassment of taking on something which is too trivial to be worth his while.

So there we were: three bits of data, which with the reference made four for publication.

Description of the contract (point 3b)

<i>Essential information</i>	<i>Example</i>
— Awarding authority's reference	Project no. SR2345/90
— Description	Secondary road. Extension.
Nomenclature heading(s)	
+ joker(s)	
— Quantity	Length: 3 km
— Value	DM 7 500 000

Illustration 2

But we haven't finished yet. Construction, as we were saying, accounts for only 45 per cent of production. And with so many million pounds in the till, the firm can afford to let us spend a little more time on this job. Next candidate is public supplies, and I have to say that no matter how fantastic your imagination, you could not out-fantasise some of the jobs we have had. Quite apart from the condoms for the French army and the coffins for Palermo City council, the coals for Newcastle and the buns for Bath.

There are several new nomenclatures on the stocks at the moment, corresponding to the main chapters of the CPC. Since, unlike works, most supplies are recurrent, we are seeking our inspiration from a full year's worth of notices, rather than trying to re-invent the wheel. When we've finished we are expecting to be able to cover at least 85 per cent of supplies notices.

And to complete the automation, we have succeeded in producing a full set of multiple-choice forms, one for each type of contract in each Member State, and in each language. Local idiosyncracies are catered for – but only legal ones. When these forms are in general use, the need to choose between the various possible administrative clauses will have been returned to the awarding authorities, and input of the nine language versions will be done – quite literally – by numbers.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

On the practical side, instead of 300 translators working almost full time, we have one for each of nine languages, plus a tenth to coordinate and push for further progress. We are beginning to regain the confidence of our other requesting departments such as the Statistical Office of the European Communities, the Social Affairs directorate, and all the others who had been neglected whilst the *Avis de Marché* consumed 70 per cent of our time and efforts.

We were surprised ourselves that fairly modest computer resources can yield such disproportionately big dividends. This is not linguistic computing, it is simply an administrative routine running in nine languages. We are currently working on putting some intelligence into these routines – how, for example, to make adjectival jokers agree in gender, number and case with the nomenclature headings they qualify: not all languages have been blessed with the *artlessness* of English. We are looking for such routines in all languages – please send your offers to the Translation Service, European Commission, Luxembourg.

We have learned lessons that can now be put into practice with other types of document. That is one of the jobs for the future: to apply our experience in the hope of cutting costs elsewhere – though whether we shall ever be able to cut them on the regal scale of AVIMA remains to be seen.

The AVIMA project goes beyond the world of the translators, isolated in their private tower of Babel. Here the translation service took its rightful place in the chain of production, stretching from the legislator to the author, the publisher, the translator and the printer. None of this might have happened had the reader's need for crisp, structured information not been recognised at all stages of this production chain. And in that respect, it is significant that the entire project was led by a Task Force composed of all Community departments involved – including, for once, the Translation Service.

POST-SCRIPT

Further progress has been made since this paper was presented in London.

AVIMA is becoming a Commission Recommendation, the first ever legislative move to standardise document production, and should, by the time this paper reaches the press, have received the Commission's blessing.

An elaborate set of multiple-choice forms and a revised and expanded version of the public works nomenclature will be brought into optional use for a period of six months. If the experiment is judged a success their use will become compulsory.

Drafting of nomenclatures will have been taken over by Directorate-General Internal Market, where it rightfully belongs. New nomenclatures will cater for the new directives on water, energy and transport, and services.

The whole project is now serving as a basis for an extended public procurement information system, whose strength will lie in its equivalence across the nine languages of the Community.

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