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THE IMPACT OF ENLARGEMENT ON TRANSLATION IN SWEDEN: ASSESSMENT
AND GUESSWORK

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In political terms, the facts of enlargement are very similar in the 3 potential new member countries of the EU (European Union) in the North of Europe - Finland, Norway and Sweden.

All three countries are currently participating in the European Economic Area agreement which entered into force in January of this year. But the EEA is only a halfway house, however, a temporary arrangement, and so all 3 countries took the precaution of applying for full membership of the EU some 2.5 years before the EEA deal became effective.

In 1993-94 Finland, Norway and Sweden have been involved in protracted negotiations for full membership and the process has now reached the referendum stage in which the peoples of the 3 countries concerned are voting for or against EU membership. The Finnish people have already given the EU their blessing. Sweden is due to go to the polls on this issue in 3 days' time, but the results are far from clear. It's a real cliffhanger. The results of the Norwegian referendum are even more doubtful, unless the Norwegians get cold feet when they see that everyone else is joining the EU. The reasons for the differences in public attitudes towards membership of the EU in the 3 Nordic referendum countries are very interesting - at a psychological level. Unfortunately they lie outside the scope of our meeting today.

In the language sphere, which is what we should be talking about today, there are also strong, formal similarities between Finland, Norway and Sweden as regards the impact of the EU, but there are also underlying psychological differences which have practical effects.

So far, the impact of the EEA and potential EU membership on Sweden has been the need to translate 40000 pages of EC legislation into Swedish, and a mere 2000 or so pages to be translated from Swedish into several foreign languages, mainly English.

In the case of the 40000 pages, two solutions have been tried. The first involved an attempt at coordinating the work of some 35 professional freelance translators. This failed, partly because freelance translators are prima donnas who don't like having their output criticized and coordinated by a committee, and partly because there was no common terminology on which coordination could be based. The second solution which has been tried might be called the "Norwegian method", involving the recruitment of some 50 relatively young, inexperienced translators who work together under central direction and scrutiny. This method has proved to be easier to administer, but also very expensive, since "green" translators seem to have much lower productivity than old hands, even if low rates of pay for young translators are taken into account.

In practice the freelance method and the Norwegian method have been combined with 4 experienced professionals responsible for 25% of the output and 50 "green" translators taking care of the remaining 75%.

The remaining texts which have been translated into English and the other foreign languages have been dealt with on an "overtime" basis by overloading the existing official translation service. Translation into foreign languages has mainly been called for in order to present the Swedish point of view on such crucial matters as alcohol policy or the principles of access to official documents in the negotiations with the EU. Presumably the impact of enlargement on the demand for translation services has been quite similar in Finland and Norway.

The difference lies in access to resources and awareness of the language impact of enlargement.

Finland, with its 2 official national languages - Swedish and Finnish - has always been aware of the linguistic aspects of international politics and has built up a medium-sized official translation service, based in particular on the Prime Minister's office. There are also well-established facilities for training translators and terminologists, and priority is given to taking up questions at the highest level.

Norway also seems to be rather well equipped to deal with the language aspects of enlargement and the additional resources required seem to be available - for example, at the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, which also provides language services for other ministries in Oslo.

In Sweden, on the other hand, it is generally assumed that language problems solve themselves. Although enlargement implies the internationalization of the entire public sector in Sweden, little thought has been given to how this is to be achieved in language terms. The traditional dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy is disappearing, but no one in official circles wants to think about how to cope with this new situation until after the referendum.

Three years ago, it could be noted that Sweden only had one tenth of the number of professional public translators possessed by Denmark- which only has half the population of Sweden. There was only a nominal training programme at university level for translators and terminologists. The public translation service (based in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) was one of the smallest in Europe, smaller than the British Ministry of Agriculture translation unit, in fact. The situation has scarcely changed today, although there are signs that there may be a change in attitude once it is clear what language impact membership (or non-membership) of the EU will have.

By then, it will probably be too late. Good translators do not grow on trees. It takes years to train them and many of the best translators with the right language combinations are already moving down to Brussels and Luxembourg to work for three times the salary that they can currently expect in Sweden!

For the last few years, Sweden has in fact been hoping that, as a member of the EU, the Union will take care of all its translation problems- and foot the bill too!

Although this may well apply to official Community and Union legislation and directives which need to be translated for formal reasons, there is some doubt that the Swedish translation facilities now being built up in Brussels and Luxembourg will cope with all the problems.

The Danish experience is that EC/EU documents translated into Danish arrive weeks after meetings which are to discuss them have already taken place. Similarly, it hardly seems feasible to get Brussels to translate Swedish standpoints which are to be presented in negotiations in a day or two's time- let alone the bulky backup material which will need to be scrutinized in Brussels after the meeting. In other words, EU membership is almost certain to mean greater language competence in Sweden- the only question is how much greater, and how can it be handled?

One answer is for Swedish bureaucrats to work directly in English. This has already been happening very markedly over the last 3-4 years, but this is unlikely to solve the problem:-

- (1) because the command of English by government officials is not really sufficient to deal with difficult situations. Many of them will be second class EU citizens when working in English.
- (2) because the primary language of the EU at the moment is French, not English. In French they'll be really lost. Two week courses are not enough.

Another possibility which possibly lies close to the hearts of some members of this audience is machine translation. Machine translation may be viable in certain specialized applications, especially with a pre-edited source text, but to rely on it for instant translation of complex and varied political texts would appear to be premature.

Much more promising medium term technical options would appear to be machine-aided facilities. We looked at IBM's TranslationManager system at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs a couple of years ago. It looked promising, but was not sufficiently compatible with our requirements. We will be testing the Siemens-Nixdorf Eurolang system when a Swedish English version comes on the market in a few months time.

Another time saving idea is voice-text transfer system which could greatly improve the efficiency of the dictation process.

More immediately, we will be relying on a mixture of conventional solutions.

- (1) A rapid introduction of a terminology database- based on the translator's needs, not terminologists'- which can be distributed throughout the Swedish Civil Service. This should give a 10-20% improvement in productivity, even if it is unlikely to have the same effect on output achieved by wordprocessors over the past few years. This terminology can also be fed into a machine-aided system such as Eurolang.
- (2) Another really old-fashioned solution is to recruit more translators! We have already been forced to do this in translating from Swedish to English, but due to the shortage of real professionals in Sweden, we will be concentrating on building up a mixed team of experienced/ less experienced translators- a sort of on-the-job training programme.

- (3) A third possibility which has been discussed is a fully integrated Swedish government translation service, with a proportion of the financial resources coming from the Ministries which need its services. This would mean a smoother workload, greater efficiency and probably higher quality.

So far, the main option which has been considered is Swedish membership of the EU. In others words a YES vote in the referendum on Sunday.

But a Yes vote is by no means certain. What would it mean if Sweden stayed outside the European Union? In language terms, it might well mean a real boom. Relations with the EU would continue, one way or another and there would probably be a great variety of temporary ad-hoc arrangements. In other words a great need for translation and other language services. At the same time, Brussels and Luxembourg would be dismantling their Swedish translation service. So everything would have to be handled in Sweden! But nobody has given that option much thought so far! We'll see!