

It is about time for a comprehensive terminology policy and implementation in Europe

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After reflection, it's time for action
(common wisdom)

ABSTRACT

In the mid-nineties the author, then in the European Commission, set out to develop a comprehensive approach to the development of terminology in Europe, including the formulation of a number of infrastructural measures to provide a firm basis and cohesion for the terminology research, development and applications.

Admittedly, much has happened since then, due to the many individuals taking initiatives and responsibility. But the system approach to research, development and application (R&D&A) which was in the minds of the experts and administrators at the time, cannot be observed. Even less if the geographical parameter, Europe, is taken into account.

The author claims that it is now time to assess where we are with respect to terminology R&D&A in Europe. To identify what needs to be done and the bottlenecks that delay efforts to make substantial progress towards what needs to be achieved. He will list major elements of a comprehensive terminology policy, including goals and the cohesion networks.

He will stress the need for initiative on the level of the Member States of the EU, but he is also convinced that without the coordinating role of the European Commission the whole system will not be established and will obviously not work. But he is also convinced that if there is no complementary approach challenging the communities-of-experts, the initiative will collapse as well.

The summer of 1994

On 24-25 June of 1994 the European Council¹ met on the Greek island of Corfu for an important meeting. Looking back, the positive spirit of that meeting is heartening. The air and the colours of Corfu may have been instrumental. But not to forget: Eastern Europe had opened its gates only a few years earlier, the European Union was in full expansion, technological and economical opportunities seemed abundant. The prospects were so bright that the massacre in Rwanda seemed an *'accident de parcours'*.

Europe lost control over its' future in the early years of the second millennium. The global environment appeared increasingly hostile and an essentially non-European ideology crossed aiming at the reduction of the public and the social sectors crossed the Atlantic and settled in certain minds. Eventually, Europe was drawn into destructive wars in its vicinity that caused great public and political distress. But reading the conclusions of the Council of 1994¹, there wasn't even a foreshadow of this in Corfu.

The main issue on the agenda was the signature of the Treaty of Accession of four new EU member states: Austria, Sweden, Finland and Norway. Eventually, the people of Norway decided not to join for cultural and economic reasons. But that is another story.

Among the other major and forward-looking decisions taken by the Heads of State, was the decision to fully endorse the proposals of the European Commission to: *'Fully exploit the possibilities and opportunities offered by the information society'*. An important consideration was added, embedded in a small sentence easily overlooked: *'Also the importance of linguistic and cultural aspects of the information society was stressed by the European Council.'*

The European Commission interpreted this sentence as an invitation to elaborate proposals for an information society with a 'human' face, in concert with the diversity of European cultures and languages. The first meetings to identify the options for a strategy in this area took place in September 1994 on another Greek island, Thira (Santorini), where wise people joined the Commission in an effort to respond to the invitation of the Council in a way as concrete as possible.

The result of this and subsequent meetings was a strategy to maintain the linguistic and

¹ Meeting of the Heads of Government of the EU Member States

cultural patterns in Europe. Those patterns should not change even if the system for handling information were to evolve rapidly and profoundly. Or: we should not need to alter our languages or the basic characteristics of their use because of the advancing information society.

It was felt that there was absolutely no reason to abandon our languages because of the advances of certain information technologies, or even to replace them in certain situations and domains. To the contrary: the information society was to provide us with facilities that would make it much easier to deal with linguistic and non-linguistic information, and the I.S. would even be called upon to enhance the quality of such information. The society resulting from the efforts to realise these goals was called the *multilingual information society*ⁱⁱ.

Sustaining the multilingual society

Underlying these optimistic perspectives were serious general concerns about the pressures on many languages and language communities as a consequence of a process now called *globalisation*. At the time, even some French authorities exclaimed that French was to become a minority language in the global context. Differing language communities come in closer contact, as a consequence in particular of the expansion of the internet and the rapidly increasing exploitation of that technology. Definitely, some such culture communities are more powerful than other such communities because they are larger or they are more powerful economically.

If balances are delicate, environmental changes may easily and dramatically distort such balances. The development of an information society was considered a potentially distorting factor. The action programme to pursue the goal to maintain and enhance multilingualism in society overall, including those domains that seemed particularly vulnerable for the impact of the information society, focussed on the strengthening of the languages per se and the promotion of their use in all ways of life. Materially, the development of tools and services supporting all European languages and the bridges between them were promoted. Examples are the support for a standard as *Unicode*, the development of user working environments adapted to all languages such as provided by *Windows*, *Mac* and other manufacturers. Also: the development of multilingual websites, the promotion of publishing in the various languages, the promotion of the translation sector and the development of tools to facilitate and accelerate the translation process.

Language Infrastructures

In order to be useful, languages must be equipped with all the elements that make them

usable in all domains and circumstances where they are purposefully used in society. The internet and the web are ideal instruments to store language elements in a systematic manner, and to deliver selections to users immediately and in any place of the globe. The major challenges in such situations are of a linguistic and cognitive nature, not the technical.

In most countries in Europe the construction and maintenance of dictionaries and grammars is a well-established discipline and there would be no reason for the EC to get involved, except in cross-language issues. By the way, many of the 6000 or so languages still in use in the world lack this documentation; many of those languages cannot even be written yet, which make them extremely vulnerable. The languages that are in a much better position because they are used in economically prosperous regions such as Europe are nonetheless not completely safe. They are vulnerable in those domains that are extremely dynamic because of their internal dynamics and consequent rapid linguistic changes. This may result in domain loss, as the phenomenon is called.

This is the case in particular for many scientific and technical domains, where new concepts emerge every day. New concepts must have names and they must be contextualised and documented. The concept-presentation couple together with the accompanying documentation is called a term. The terminology field is indeed very dynamic: managing and maintaining the swarms of terms is an incredible challenge. Moreover, new terms emerge and all terms are used every day in all places of the world in adapted forms! Responding adequately and properly to this challenge is a first order societal requirement: scientific progress depends on the ability to attach labels to new knowledge and to make old and new knowledge readily accessible for users. The MLIS² management therefore decided that terminology was a logical focus for European action. The availability of terms on the web as well as their mutual connections, together with the possibility to access these data from a myriad of locations was called the terminology infrastructure.

Transnational terminology

There were more considerations supporting the decision for a European effort in the terminology field. A concept which is at the root of a term is, normally, not confined to a particular territory or society of people. Many concepts are of global significance and this justifies an international or at least European approach to the management of terms. The presentation may in many cases be language-bound; in such cases the term is of concern to an international authority and to national and local authorities.

² Multilingual Information Society programme, managed by the European Commission (1996-1999)

Nobody has a full oversight of the structure and size of the terminology field. There is a consensus that it is huge in domain covered and in numbers of terms, but no quantification is reported in the literature. Estimating the efforts required to manage term collections, however, requires at least some quantification albeit rough. The effort to define structure and to measure size should be undertaken by an organisation at the supranational level.

Monitor and coordinating the actions undertaken at the local or national levels might also be tasks for an international organisation. The complexity and size of the terminology field justify a disciplined approach to its management anyhow.

A European agency to deal with transnational terminology issues has been discussed in the mid 1990s, but never materialised. Financial resources were not abundantly available, and the need to establish such an institution was not considered a priority at any level. But the main problem is still persisting today: in the great majority of the EU member states, organisations taking care systematically of terminology beyond the boundaries of the 'own' discipline or profession or even the own company, are non-existing. For the functioning of an international terminology agency a 'bottom-up' network of local & national organisations is a *conditio sine qua non*, however.

European, national & regional terminology service centres

This lack of organisational infrastructure was the reason for the failure of a major infrastructural terminology project launched in 1997. The purpose of the project was to investigate the efforts underway in the EU member states to develop, collect and disseminate terminology. The TDC³ project could not get to grips with the situation 'on the ground'; mainly because there was no oversight of what was happening nationally, the networks to collect the information did not exist. Nobody in the field knew what other people were doing even within the same nation. In parallel with the TDC project, national terminology associations were established or revitalised in many countries. As well as a European terminology association linking many national associations. These associations are instrumental for the development of the terminology discipline and for promoting the organisational structures required.

Professional associations are a necessary condition for success, but they are not a sufficient condition. Also required are national and/or sub-national institutions or centres, available for advice, for projects to develop terminology together with clients, training, facilitating the

³ Terminology Documentation Centres, a network of actual and virtual centres in the member states

dissemination, advising about regulations having an impact on terminology, and to connect with institutions and projects in other places. At least two prototypical organisations exist since some time: TermCat in Barcelona and TNC in Stockholm (in 2011 TNC celebrated its 75th birthday!). Several other centres are growing up, often painfully. Probably the latest in the line is the Steunpunt Terminologie covering the Netherlands and Flanders, as a cooperation of a university department and a language company, financed by the Dutch Language Union.

Such service- and user oriented Terminology Service Centres⁴ should spread over Europe and establish a durable cooperation. Probably the main challenge for these centres is to liaise with the beneficiaries of terminology services, assessing their needs and jointly defining solutions for their problems. Beneficiaries are to be found in many areas, such as:

- Government departments and agencies
- Industry and business
- Education and research
- Health and care
- Media
- International organisations
- And all other beneficiaries

Once a good number of such centres become operational, it is possible to re-launch projects such as the TDC and to get to grips with the state-of-affairs in terminology in Europe. And to create a serious fact basis for national/regional and European terminology policies, in compliance with the main goal of terminology: extending our ability to function in a sophisticated manner in the many specialised domains that characterise our ever more complex societies.

Epilogue: Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism

This paragraph is meant as an epilogue. The European Commission has set up 'civil society platforms' in various domains, meant to collect ideas and opinions of the 'professionals' active in those domains. About what should or need not be done by national and European authorities to cope with deficiencies or challenges for the future. The exercise might be considered a way to (re)establish communication between the European authorities and the intermediate layer of 'bottom up' organisations that float the large grey zone between the

⁴ TSC(?)

citizens and the politicians and administrations who govern them. In some way this fits the democracy nature of our societies, even though the information flow is one-way only: the civil society speaks out, the government listens and will eventually decide.

It makes sense to keep this background in mind when reading the final report of the platform on multilingualismⁱⁱⁱ. The main chapters of the report concern:

- Language Policy and Planning
- Linguistic Diversity and Social Inclusion
- Language Education
- Translation and terminology

Although terminology is prominently placed among the areas identified, it seems that the first chapter is the most interesting from the policy point of view. That chapter also refers to terminology in the wider context of language planning. Some relevant quotations from the Recommendations (page 8) in the Executive Summary:

“(Policy should...) Cover all areas of language planning, i.e.

- (a) status (rules and regulations),
- (b) corpus (creation of descriptive data, corpuses, tools such as dictionaries, terminology etc.,
- (c) acquisition (learning of languages, including L1, L2 and LF⁵), and use (planning opportunities to use each language).”

“Corpus-planning activities should aim at the creation and completion of a fully fledged multilingual language infrastructure. This aim goes beyond the responsibility of individual language communities and countries and therefore needs a European approach.”

“Such a language plan should be designed to protect and promote all European languages.”

Even though some aspects of this report might be criticised, such as:

- strong bias towards personal language learning as the means for mutual comprehension in the multilingual society;
- under-emphasis of the provision of multilingual services, such as truly multilingual websites;
- irrespective of policy claims that all languages are equal, some languages turn out

⁵ L1, L2, LF refer to first, second and further languages a person is able to speak

to be more equal than other languages and therefore some counter-balancing is required,

Many recommendations and background texts are worthwhile. The Language Planning chapter in particular is valuable.

It is not clear how the European Commission will use the results of the Platform to have an impact on its own policy papers and programmes.

- i European Council at Corfu, Presidency Conclusions; 24-25 June 1994;
www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00150.EN4.htm
- ii Council Decision concerning the Multilingual Information Society programme (96/644/EC, 4 November 1996)
- iii Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism; Policy Recommendations for the Promotion of Multilingualism in the European Union; Brussels, 9 June 2011
http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/doc5080_en.pdf

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