

A 40-years Journey Hand in Hand with the EU-Terminology

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Abstract

A description of the way terminology has been managed in the European and the European Institution from the early eighties when I joined the EP as translator until now with all the experience of creating and heading the Terminology Coordination Unit. From the perspective of the EP, a description of the evolution of the interinstitutional work and cooperation in terminology around the EU-Database IATE and its evolution.

Keywords

Terminology, IATE, TermCoord

1. From Words to Data

Terminology has been the leading keyword throughout my 42-year career in the Directorate General for Translation of the European Parliament.

Indeed, when I joined the Institution in 1981, together with the first translators from my country, Greece, joining the EU in that year, I had a solid background in the languages I knew, but minimal experience in translation that I had acquired as freelance translator during my studies. This was the case for most of the 30 colleagues with whom we made the first Greek Translation Unit in the European Parliament. Therefore, our only possibility to ensure a quality level for our first translations of texts of the thence European Community into Greek was to use already existing terminology in the languages we knew and to transpose it into Greek, creating the very first Greek glossaries in different fields this way.

The way we approached Terminology work at that time is a very interesting story for today's generation of language professionals. Since Terminology is an inherent part of the translation process, the way we had collected and stored it was closely related to the way we were producing our translations. At that time, the texts we had to translate in the European Parliament, contrary to the European Commission, did not make part of the legislative process, but were more political statements by the Members of the European Parliament, who were in their big majority inspired politicians, supporters of the European idea, having left the active political life of their countries. Therefore, we had the possibility to transcreate the originals in beautiful texts in our language, adapting them to the respective political style. This is why the majority of us used the so-called dictaphone; it was a recording machine with mini-cassettes with which we recorded our translation while reading the original, working as a kind of consecutive interpreters.

These recordings were then sent to a pool of typists who returned them to us a few days later typed on paper. On these typed documents, we made our corrections by hand and sent them back for final typing on the already existing electric typewriters. What most of us did with Terminology was to underline on the original while translating the terms that we would like to check, we made our research while we were waiting for the typed translation, wrote the correct terms on the original and then accordingly corrected the phrases on the typed translated text when we received it. Therefore, the first step of the revision was to ensure the equivalency to the meaning of the original. The next step of this procedure that we would call post-editing today, was to leave the original aside and to rephrase the translation in order to create a "new original" in the target language. Of course, every time we found or

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decided on the new term in Greek, we wrote it down on a card together with the correspondent term in the source language (or also in other languages in which we encountered it during our research) and we placed this card in alphabetical order in the plastic boxes that we had such as the ones used in libraries before the digitalisation of the data. Based on this material collected in the boxes of all translators of all languages and in all EC institutions, printed glossaries were created, typed also on electric typing machines, with the list of terms in alphabetical order and with an index at the end, in a different colour for every language, where you could find the term in your language in the corresponding alphabetical order. The Greek indexes had a light blue colour, for German we had yellow, for English purple etc. These glossaries were provided by the different Institutions and were separated by domain. This way you had glossaries on customs policy, fisheries and agriculture, financial policy and so on. All the glossaries were of a grey colour and had the title on the cover page in all the languages they contained. The only important power of the Parliament at that time was to approve the EC budget and therefore we had large specific glossaries on the budgetary terminology containing the denomination in all languages of the hundreds of posts of the common budget.

How was the terminology work of all translators coordinated at the time?

In the European Parliament, each translation unit had one or two translators who this responsibility was assigned to. They had to collect photocopies of all the cards and send them to the Publication Office that was in charge of compiling and printing the glossaries. These colleagues were also in charge of guiding all translators on the sources to use for the terminology research, which were mainly specialised dictionaries in the respective language. You could also consult them during revision if you had any doubts about specific terms.

One important practice that helped us greatly during these first years of our career as translators in the EU institutions were the so-called *collationnements*.

These were meetings conveyed by the drafters of the texts sent to translation, where they explained to the translators of all languages who were attributed the specific text, the exact meaning of specific terms but also, very importantly, the overall context and the political objective of each report.

In these meetings, we had the opportunity to meet the colleagues translators of other language dealing with the same text and could afterwards come in contact with them to discuss any problems we could encounter and to get advice from the solution given in another language that we knew. The most devoted among us also took note on our corresponding cards of the terms found in other languages we knew, creating what we would describe today a “multilingual entry”, of course handwritten on paper. The separation of the translators in units according to their language (and nationality) made us feel as working in a national service. This is still a disadvantage of the Translation Directorates; while you work in a huge International Organisation with so many other nationalities, you are finally limited to a national and monolingual environment. The need of communication for terminology to ensure the quality of our translations was the only professional bridge between translators in the some 10 languages of the time.

In the mid-80s, the European Parliament started to be purchase the first Informatics hardware and software. Some of those enormous computers with a very heavy screen and with a big case behind them were installed in common spaces and access was granted to those having some idea in manipulating them or use them for training purposes. Although I do not have any technical talent, being by nature a curious person for innovation, I started playing with a programme of that time that was very simple in its use and made for amateur users, called *dBase*. I created a frame and started typing my terminology findings from the cards, so that they were accessible on screen and searchable by term. This material was saved on a so-called “floppy disk” and could be shared and accessed by another user on another computer. This gave the possibility to let translators from other language units add their terms into the same frame and so we had the first digital multilingual entries. Unfortunately, there is no trace of this first interactive terminology work, because there is no computer anymore on which you can insert and play the floppy disks. Technology evolved fast and real informaticians created multilingual databases in the EU institutions compiling the terminology of the printed glossaries. Therefore, for many years the Commission worked using *Eurodicautom*, the council its own database called *TIS*, the Translation Centre serving the specialised agencies *Euroterms* and the Court of Auditors another one called *CDCTERM*. The terminology database of the European Parliament was called *EUTERPE*, standing for “European Terminology Parlement europeen” a mix of two languages to be able to give it a name from

the Greek mythology; a very common practice in the European Community in that times, you remember perhaps the programme *Eureka*, the prize for the best literary translation *Aristeion* and many more.

The digitalisation of the terminology collections in the different EU Institutions was a revolution for those times. In 1999, a Greek company was hired by the Commission to merge them all into one database for the whole EU legislation terminology and so IATE, standing for InterActive Terminology for Europe, was born in 2002. Its approach was to provide one entry for each concept (conceptual database) and to cover all official languages. It was conceived as an internal interactive tool with an account created for all translators of all Institutions having the role of “terminologists” giving editing rights (advanced users) and with read access to all the others. This read access was also given to users outside the EU Institutions to a separate version, called public IATE in 2007.

As it is the case for the linguistic practice of the European Union, every time a new country joins, its language is added to the official languages listed in the very first regulation of the EC (number 1, 1958), also the structure of the IATE entries is adapted to host the terms in the new languages. Before the entry of each country in the European Union, there is a huge effort to translate the existing European legislation into their language, the so-called *Acquis communautaire*, which makes the corpus from where the first terminology is extracted to be added to IATE in the respective language. We will speak about the gradual evolution of IATE to become the very advanced and open terminology platform that we have today, but most important to mention here is that IATE became the central tool around which all the interinstitutional cooperation on terminology management was built since then. The college of Director-Generals for Translation of all of the EU-Institutions meeting regularly to draw a common policy in this field, created a working group to submit proposals about terminology, called the “IATE Management Group”.

This Group became the central governing body for every decision related to terminology over time, in addition to the discussion of the technical aspects and needs that are communicated to the developers’ team. This developer team works in the translation centre based in Luxembourg, (one of the more than 60 EU-specialised agencies) and given the role of the “tool manager”. In the beginning, the IATE Management Group consisted of the heads of the terminology coordination units of each Institution. Gradually we involved colleagues having the day-by-day experience in using the database and at a much later stage, we got the direct contact to the developers who report directly to the group in its meetings and participate with us in a task force dealing with the technical aspects. Nowadays everybody is convinced that for the development of any linguistic tool the direct contact between linguists and developers is necessary to communicate the needs and discuss the feasibility and the way to cover them on a technical level. Nevertheless, 10 years ago, we had many difficulties to overcome some hierarchical practices and mentalities in order to develop the central governing body of the EU-terminology into an efficient cooperative working group.

The European Parliament decided to create a central coordination service for terminology only in 2008, also with the objective to be duly represented in the IATE Management Group as an Institution paying a big part of the budget for the functioning and maintenance of the database. The Directorate responsible for translation in the European Parliament was called as from its creation “Directorate for Translation and Terminology”. Nevertheless, it was the only Institution that had included the management of terminology in its Technical Service and did not have a proper unit at that time. The Director of this Directorate was charged by the Director-General for Translation (the biggest DG of the European Parliament counting 1300 staff members) to suggest somebody among the translators with an administrative experience to create a central coordination from scratch. Having already been working for 27 years in the Greek Translation Unit, when I was proposed the job, I asked for a reflexion time to decide if I wanted to make this choice in my career at the European Parliament. I was therefore sent on mission to the Terminology Summer School organised by *TermNet* and the University of Vienna. In that week, in the summer of 2008, I could meet the most important professors teaching terminology in their universities. I was impressed to see that terminology was becoming a separate science connected to communication and computational linguistics. I found this very challenging and started to think how we could create a dynamic unit in the European Parliament with a different approach, including communication, international networking and a permanent contact to the quick evolution of the research and technical means to constantly adapt the EU terminology practice to new trends.

The Director-General, a visionary woman, open-minded and much attached to communication, immediately accepted my proposal and so TermCoord was created in October 2008. We could have had a very small team of four officials at the beginning, but we were given the possibility to hire an unlimited number of trainees in order to work with young researchers and professionals in the field of terminology coming directly from the universities, where they learned and practised the new methods and tools. The biggest asset of the Terminology Coordination of the European Parliament has been our efficient work with the trainees. We had an average of five to six trainees, in one term we even reached a group of 11 highly skilled young professionals devoted to terminology. Twice a year we could select among 60 to 100 applications for a paid traineeship in terminology in the European Parliament. The secret was to trust them, to encourage their creativity and to involve them in the core business of the Unit that was of course to coordinate the terminology work of the 24 translation units to feed and use IATE. The largest majority of the projects of TermCoord have been suggested and realised by the trainees in very close cooperation with our permanent staff. First, the website <https://termcoord.eu> that started as an official blog in 2011 (created on a free template by a trainee who was running a personal terminology blog as a hobby) has been the main communication and networking tool for many years with a very high average of visitors' rates. The record of visits in one month was 78,000 visitors. It became an official website of the European Parliament only two years ago, formally administrated by its Technical Service. It has always been fed and managed by the trainees and is now considered one of the most rich and important public terminology websites. Most of the projects it contains, as for instance the collection of interviews with prominent linguists and terminologists done by all the trainees, the weekly IATE and food terminology term, the quarterly newsletter, all of these projects have been ideas of the 200 trainees who worked in TermCoord in these 15 years.

The content of the EU database IATE that nowadays, after the release of the new version in 2018, all external users can access and download, is the result of an impressive work done by all central coordinations of the European Institutions and by all 5,000 translators working in the 10 involved Institutions. The 8,5 million terms have been inserted by the translators in carefully prepared and constantly updated entries after validation by the terminologists in all 24 languages. Except of the technical work, this requires constant communication and training. It also needs a permanent contact to national experts and bodies in order to collect the terminology they are creating in their languages when transposing the European directives and regulations in national laws. Especially in the recent years, many Institutions have adopted a descriptive terminology practice consisting in importing in IATE terminology of e.g. the national central banks in the financial sector or the national courts in the sector of justice. Speaking about Justice, one of the most important enrichments of IATE has been the import of all the terminology of the EU case law kept by the European Court of Justice in its specific database, *Curiaterm*. This required the adaptation of the structure of the entries in the domain of legal terminology before we could import the very reliable data from *Curiaterm*.

One of the biggest contributions of our Terminology Coordination to the interinstitutional cooperation was the conception and creation of an internal terminology portal, *EurTerm*, an interactive communication platform open to all EU-officials. We already felt in 2011 that this was a necessary tool to enable communication and collaboration between mainly translators but also drafters in terminology in the different languages in order to discuss terminology issues on language independent level but also in each of the 24 EU-languages. Therefore, we also created a wiki within this portal for each language that is structured according to the needs of each language community; some of them utilise it as a forum for discussion with national experts, others use it as a general platform for the discussion of any issue related to translation. This obviously brilliant idea has been very difficult to realise. In the European institutions, as probably in any big organisation, the path to make a reality of any dream is longwinded and difficult. You need to convince several stakeholders about the usefulness of a project and oftentimes many of the stakeholders are not specialised in the field. Therefore, instead of submitting a series of long reports explaining the needs of our proposal, we worked on a draft mock-up that I could show live to the senior hierarchy of the interinstitutional translation. We could finalise and manage it from our Unit in the European Parliament until, with some additional provisional human resources, it became a sub-project of IATE that it is now directly accessible from the database by all internal EU users.

In the first years, we underestimated the importance that our day- by- day terminology work could and would have for translators and interpreters worldwide. This awareness started to grow with the contacts from the external world, with our terminology projects with universities and the participation

and promotion of our work in all conferences related to translation, interpreting and multilingualism. All of them gradually reserved specific sessions and workshops to terminology; nowadays there is no conference where the importance of terminology is not repeatedly stressed for the quality of translation and of the programmes and tools in the process of automation. Since the creation of TermCoord we participated at least once in every recurrent conference organised by the different terminology and translation associations and bodies. We have been always present in the European Association's for Terminology (EAFT) European Terminology Summit organised every two years and we even once hosted it in the premises of the European Parliament. The way terminology is managed and coordinated in the European Parliament also always makes part of the Terminology Summer School that provides a certification on terminology management too. We managed to have a specific budget for our colleagues terminologists from the translation units to participate in this exam and to receive this advanced certification.

There were many regular conferences focused on terminology that always gather specialists from academia, industry and international organisations, such as the *TKE conference* (Terminology and Knowledge Engineering), *TIA* (Terminology and Artificial Intelligence), the annual conferences and workshops of *ToTH* dealing mostly with ontologies and ISO standards. Nevertheless, we also presented our work in more general conferences on translation like the ones of the *International Federation of Translation* (in Brisbane, Australia in 2017) or the big *Polyglots Conference* and the *BP Conferences* for freelance translators. In the last years, TermCoord was invited to all these recurrent conferences and we used the new possibilities of remote or hybrid participation that became a common practice after the pandemic. A very important and rewarding activity of our team have been the terminology projects with universities that started quite immediately after the creation of TermCoord. In the last years it was developed into a very wide network and collaborative platform called *Terminology without Borders* with a separate official EP website (<https://yourterm.eu>) where the results of projects done by professors and their students in the EU official languages but also covering a lot of other languages are made public.

This collaboration is presented in courses all over the world and gives the opportunity to professors and students to collaborate with a European institution in terminology. In the meantime, there are more than hundred chairs of postgraduate terminology, but also professors of translation departments who are very interested in running a terminology project with their students. This particular skill is an asset for them in any linguistic job they will get, where they will be necessarily asked to ensure the linguistics quality and consistence off any international activity and cooperation. Our activity with university courses started in 2013 with the University of Luxembourg, when we included a 40-hours course on terminology in two semesters in its Communication Master. This curriculum has been enriched in the meantime with courses by colleagues of DGTRAD, related to specific uses of terminology as for instance in interpreting, subtitling, clear language, machine translation etc. Over time, I was invited to give courses on EU-terminology in many universities in English or in the languages that I could cover and these courses were gradually inserted in their annual programmes or practice. The most complete of them is the 17-hours terminology course in the *Diplome universitaire* on terminology of the University Savoie Mont-blanc in France. In the framework of this academic activity, we have had many Master theses dedicated to the work of TermCoord in various universities. In these cases, we act as curators, participate in the defence and proudly publish the theses on termcoord.eu.

I consider myself very lucky having experienced the vertiginous evolution of terminology since the start of my full-time occupation with it 15 years ago. Also very lucky to have experienced a very different way of researching and recording it 40 years ago. It is fascinating to look back in the 80's with our hand-written terminology cards and to try to think how we would react if somebody came to tell us that 40 years later, there would be digital database to which you can send your text to translate and instantly get a list of terms in your language that you can import directly into your translation that is partly already finished because you can retrieve it from translation memory... How would we react if, during a night-permanence on mission in Strasbourg, translating the recorded extended minutes of the Assemblies of the European languages in the 552 official language combinations some crazy guy came to tell us that after 40 years we would upload this recording in a software called *speech-to-text* and we would get it translated in our language with the correct terminology because it would be connected to the database containing all the EU legislation terminology via something called *API* that can connect any database with any software.

History never ends! We always experience a very short period of it and we never know what the future will bring. Nevertheless, this piece of history that I lived and described contained a revolution: Terminology became a science. It is now the most important tool to ensure the quality of translation in any automation process. A special skill opens many opportunities to young professionals in the world labour market.