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Evolving Role of Translation in the European Parliament

Abstract

The Directorate-General for Translation (DG TRAD) is a world-leading translation service that delivers documents in each official European Union language. Our mission is to enable the European Parliament to meet its commitment to the policy of multilingualism. We employ more than 850 language professionals directly involved in the translation of content. We mainly translate from and into the 24 official EU languages. In this article I will explain who we translate for, what we translate, and what products and services our directorate offers. I will explain the role of the concept of clear language in our work, present the structure of DG TRAD and will also describe a role of an intercultural and language professional in the European Parliament.

Keywords: translation, transcreation, multilingualism, European Parliament, languages, democracy, transparency

Presentation of the Directorate General for Translation

In the European Parliament, all official languages are equally important: parliamentary documents are published in all the official languages of the European Union and Members of the European Parliament have the right to speak and write in the official language of their choice. It also ensures every citizen is able to follow and access the Parliament's work.

The Directorate-General for Translation (DG TRAD, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/translation/en/translation-at-the-european-parliament/organisation [date of access: 17.06.2025]) in the European Parliament, as a world-leading translation service, plays a key role as it makes it possible for Parliament to meet its commitment to multilingualism by providing its documents in all official European Union languages. We are also mindful of the increasingly important role we play in communicating with EU citizens.

An important part of our mission is to enable the European Parliament to meet its commitment to the policy of multilingualism, designed to ensure the equal treatment of languages, which enables all citizens of the European Union to communicate with the institutions and access EU documents in their own language. The principle of multilingualism (see: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/multilingualism [date of access: 17.06.2025]) is very important here. Multilingualism facilitates democracy. It is rooted in the European treaties and is an important democracy tool: it makes the European institutions more accessible and transparent for all citizens of the Union, which is vital for functioning of the EU's democratic system.

The Directorate-General for Translation employs more than 1000 language professionals and supporting staff directly involved in the translation of content. Our linguistic staff can be broken down into the following profiles:

- translators
- intercultural and language professionals
- clear language professionals
- legal language professionals
- innovation language professionals
- quality coordinators
- translators-editors
- translation assistants
- proof-readers/language editors
- innovation language assistants.

Like the European Parliament, DG TRAD has three places of work: Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. However, most of our translation services are located in Luxembourg.

In 2023 we produced nearly 3 million pages (translated, revised and quality controlled; see: Annual Activity Report 2023. DG TRAD, European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/285562/9_TRAD%20-%20AAR%202023.pdf, page 4 [date of access: 17.06.2025]). 44% of those pages were outsourced and quality checked on delivery, and 80% of the documents translated related to the legislative procedure. Working with 24 official languages results in 552 language combinations. We use a relay language system to cope with this task. This means that documents are translated into English, French or German and then into the target language. After the creation of the Enlargement and non-EU languages Unit, DG TRAD also delivers some products in non-EU languages such as Ukrainian or Russian, the official languages of candidate countries and other official UN languages. So far, we translate and localise chosen texts, audios and videos into Ukrainian, and we translate some texts into Russian, but we also aim at translating into Arabic and Chinese in the future.

Serving through Translation

We translate for two kinds of recipients:

- members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who come from different countries, speak different languages and have the right to speak and write in their native language;

- the rest of the EU citizens.

Thanks to translation, any citizen can follow, in their native language, the different steps of law making, the activities of the institutions and communicate with EU institutions in their language. DG TRAD therefore plays a crucial role in bringing the EU closer to its citizens.

Delivering Translations, Products, and Services

Text, Audio and Video Translation Services

We mainly translate from and into the 24 official EU languages. Highly skilled language professionals translate:

- legislative texts
- administrative
- and legal texts and texts intended for a wider public.

Our specific translation fields include documents related to the legislative process, documents related to budgetary procedures, session documents, and documents intended for a wider public as part of Parliament's communications policy and administrative and legal texts.

We also translate from and into non-EU languages, when relevant to parliamentary work, particularly when it comes to external actions and external relations. Likewise, we offer localised translations for communications. Our communication texts are written in clear language and are tailored to the needs of the audience, local readership or culture. Here are some examples of texts that we localise: press releases, campaign material, newsletters, briefings and info sheets, letters to citizens, texts for exhibitions and visitors' programmes.

We also provide summaries and summary translations. Summaries can be useful when there is a need for a clear and concise overview of a longer document's content. Our language professionals provide summaries and summary translations in three different formats: written, oral (e.g. over the phone) and audio (in audio podcast form).

Another vast area is subtitling. We provide subtitling services in the 24 official EU languages. This service includes translating subtitles of the source language and specialised subtitles based on the specific needs of the deaf and hard of hearing. Some examples of videos we subtitle are: speeches by the President or MEPs, informational videos describing EU policies and research, interviews or testimonial videos for exhibitions, feature films nominated for the LUX Audience Awards (see: https://lux-award.europarl.europa.eu/en [date of access: 17.06.2025].

Editing and Drafting Support

DG TRAD is also committed to improving the quality of texts in all of the 24 official EU languages. Our native language professionals help with drafting non-legislative texts. Editing is an integral part of the translation process for part-session resolutions and amendments, own-initiative reports and written and oral questions. In addition, we edit compromise amendments (in English and French) and provide editing services on request for any non-legislative document. A focus of our work is clear language, and therefore we help edit texts bearing in mind the principles of clear writing. We work with our clients to

make sure the readers can easily find the information they need, understand this information and use it. Possible interventions by our clear language professionals include rephrasing, writing shorter sentences, improving the structure of the document, creating bulleted lists and deleting redundant information. They then submit all suggested changes to the authors for their approval. Most types of documents can be adapted to clear language in all 24 official EU languages. However, clear language editing lends itself best to communications intended for a wider audience. Also, we run the Multilingual Linguistic Helpline (see: Annual Activity Report 2023. DG TRAD, European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/285562/9_TRAD%20-%20AAR%202023.pdf, page 18 [date of access: 17.06.2025]). Anyone at the European Parliament can call it during working hours to seek help and advice on specific points relating to any of the 24 official languages. A language professional will be at the other end of the line ready to answer questions, give advice and make suggestions.

Other Technical and Linguistic Services

Our technical assistance service aims at helping authors to meet the technical prerequisites for documents and making it easier to reuse reference documents translated in the past. This service includes advising authors on the best technical and formatting solutions for drafting and presenting documents, as well as central post-alignments of documents for future reuse and referencing (searching for reference documents).

In order to support DG TRAD's mission, our Terminology Unit provides terminology packages on priority topics and terminology resources in all fields of EU legislation, coordinating at the same time Parliament's contribution to the Inter-Active Terminology for Europe (IATE, see: https://iate.europa.eu/ [date of access: 17.06.2025]) database, which contains terms in all EU languages, and running terminology projects in cooperation with universities. We also provide speech-to-text conversions, including transcriptions of parliamentary meetings. Our transliteration service provides the appropriate spelling of names in different alphabets (e.g. we rewrite Cyrillic words into Latin characters and vice versa). Also, our staff members are involved in various communication activities and support Parliament's communication campaigns and events. This support includes welcoming visitors and giving presentations on multilingualism to groups of visitors, cooperating with linguistic organisations and universities in the Member States and organising awareness-raising campaigns and events, such as Europe Day, Multilingualism Day, Clear Language Days and the European Youth Event among others.

Audio Podcasts and Webstream Radio

As the citizens' voice in the European Union, the European Parliament and its elected Members want to reach citizens throughout Europe and beyond. One way to do it is through audio: the European Parliament's web-based radio with different audio programmes and podcasts. We want to make the European Parliament accessible and easy to understand by a wide audience. The use of clear language is key to getting messages across.

We produce a wide range of audio podcasts based on existing content from various Parliament services. There is the Parliament's 24-hour online web radio (see: https://en.audio.europarl.europa.eu/main/pub/home [date of access: 17.06.2025] in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish

and Slovenian, and many audio products are available in more languages. Our ongoing podcast series are as follows:

- *News in brief* – a daily update from the European Parliament available in all 24 official EU languages.
- *Weekly review* – highlights of the week at the European Parliament, structured around a lead topic. It is an audio magazine and uses previously broadcast audio podcasts with introductions by an anchor-person.
- *Plenary round-up* – an overview of the European Parliament's agenda with the most important information from each plenary session.
- *Raising the game: better legislation* – new initiatives for a better European Union. This podcast series presents information on different initiatives intended to address citizens' expectations for better EU legislation. It is based on research by the European Parliamentary Research Service and discusses topics at the forefront of European current affairs: social policies, climate change, new technologies, consumers' rights, international relations and the economy, among others.
- *What Europe does for me* – the many ways the European Union is changing our lives. As European citizens, no matter where we live, how we make our living or how we spend our time, the EU has an impact on our daily lives. This podcast comprises a series of short episodes exploring what the EU does from the individual's point of view. There is a special dedicated website (see: https://what-europe-does-for-me.eu/ [date of access: 17.06.2025]).
- *My history* – personal stories from all over Europe. With hundreds of stories, documents, photos and videos published by people from all over Europe and beyond, My House of European History (see: https://my-european-history.ep.eu/myhouse/homepage [date of access: 17.06.2025]) is a unique collaborative project where history and the lives of European citizens come together. My History podcasts, originally published on the platform, create a virtual library of testimonies from people across Europe and the world.
- *Jargon jungle* (see: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/podcast/jargon-jungle_EPJJ_PODCAST [date of access: 17.06.2025]) – the European Parliament explained in clear language.
- *History and facts* – for special events, anniversaries or celebrations.

DG TRAD's area of competence is vast and challenging. Our mission (that is, ensuring that the European Parliament's documents are available in all 24 official languages of the EU, thus enabling the Parliament to meet its commitment to multilingualism) is possible thanks to:

- our team of highly skilled language professionals (who always translate into their mother tongue and have a solid knowledge of at least 2 other EU languages);
- our translation memories, that allow us to re-use sentences that have already been translated (avoid double work);
- our computer-assisted translation tools (CAT tools), some of them tailor-made for DG TRAD and some others specifically adapted to our environment and needs; they allow for up to 40% re-use rates;

- our machine translation service (eTranslation), provided by the European Commission, which is a very useful tool that saves us time and efforts but needs to be used with special caution, as the results are not always accurate and can even lead to important misunderstandings.

All these resources allow us to strike a balance between time constraints, costs and quality assurance.

Work organisation is essential for the smooth running of the workflow. We have highly qualified language professionals, helped by terminologists in language units and thematic groups. We also cooperate with other institutions during our work to ensure a coherent translation. This is of paramount importance for legislative documents that are proceeded in several institutions. To better translate specialised texts, we have also created thematic groups in each language unit, which help us specialise in concrete areas in order to use the appropriate terminology.

Clear Language in the European Parliament

Origin

The origins of the "Citizens' Language project" (see: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/142/language-policy [date of access: 17.06.2025]) date back several years. It has always been DG TRAD's aim to develop its linguistic expertise and tailored services to the various in-house clients, and ultimately to European citizens. Therefore, DG TRAD has gradually expanded its range of new language services for communication purposes to meet the clients' needs. Examples include subtitling, text adaptations and summaries, clear language services and audio adaptations.

Institutional Development

In February 2020, these new services were gathered in one new Directorate for Citizens' Language. Since then, DG TRAD has been consolidating it skills in clear language. In 2020, the Bureau of the European Parliament adopted a note on citizens' language. Following this direction, Parliament's responsible services aim at promoting the use of clear and plain language in order to make Parliament's texts and communication more accessible and understandable.

Implementation

A streamlined Citizens' Language Policy in Parliament should aim at:
- closing the perceived gap between citizens and the institution;
- creating a clear language mind-set and framework for all writers;
- enhancing clarity for readers, listeners and viewers and increase accessibility to Parliament content;
- linking all stakeholders involved at institutional and international level.

Example of clear language intervention on a text:

Figure 1. Clear language – making Parliament more accessible

ISO Standard

20 June 2023 will go into history as an important date for clear language: it marks the publication of the first international standard on clear language (*cf*. ISO 24495-1:2023). This standard, which applies to all 24 official EU languages, breaks down what plain or clear language is. It defines how to create documents that are clear and understandable. It makes sure that readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find and then use that information.

DG TRAD was closely involved in its development in the ISO Technical Committee 37 Language and terminology. The standard is a tool that helps us achieve our Citizens' Language policy aims. The standard will help develop a clear language mindset. A mindset is a belief that orients the way we handle situations. We can consider a clear language mindset as an intentional approach to communicate in a way that prioritises clarity and effectiveness in expressing ideas, thoughts, and information. The mindset needs to be created and then developed.

Clear Language in Practice

Briefly, plain language ensures that readers, listeners and viewers can easily find what they need and can understand and use that information. However, creating a clear language mindset requires a whole

framework that covers a set of clear language principles, guidelines, and best practices. The standard sets the foundation for this framework by outlining the four governing principles. The principles relate to four interconnected aspects of clear language:

- Considering the needs and characteristics of the audience (the audience comes first).
- A clear and well thought-out structure and design that make it easy to find and understand information.
- Not oversimplifying, but using the right words.
- Evaluating and reviewing the content to ensure that the audience can use the information.

These principles are the basis for developing a clear language framework for all writers in Parliament. DG TRAD is currently working on further guidance on how to apply clear language principles in our EP content in 24 languages.

The mere existence of the principles and guidelines will not create a clear language mindset though. It is the people who apply the principles daily in their communication who can make a difference. Plain language is applied across three formats: text, audio and video. It has therefore become a rule in the creation of a variety of products. DG TRAD needs to lead by example to raise interest among other writers to adopt a clear language mindset.

What is then a definition of the plain/clear/citizens' language? According to the International Plain Language Federation (see: https://www.iplfederation.org/plain-language [date of access: 17.06.2025]), a communication is in plain language if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.
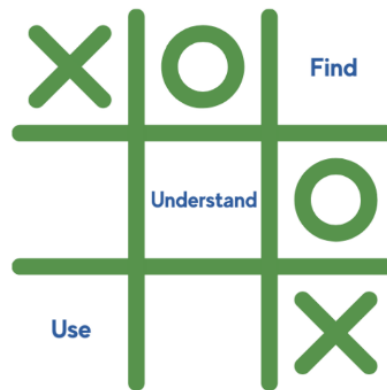

Figure 2. Illustration of clear language principles

The first principle is the reader's needs – we must identify the readers, their purpose, the context in which readers will use the document, and then select the communication channel and content that meet these needs. The second principle is the structure and design so that readers find what they need. To do this, we use information design techniques. Third comes the language. Here are some rules concerning the language:

- choose clear, familiar concrete and precise words;
- use specialised terms if necessary and explain them;
- use abbreviations only if appropriate and use the same words for the same meaning;
- write understandable sentences – structure them clearly, address readers directly, put one idea in one sentence, avoid unnecessary words and keep the sentences short;
- paragraphs must be concise too and keep the rule of one topic-one paragraph; and
- use respectful, inclusive and non-discriminatory language.

Structure of DG TRAD

DG TRAD is evolving to keep up in a world of globalised, multilingual communication. One of the most important ways we can do this is by making the effort to communicate with EU citizens in clear, understandable language: in other words, citizens' language. As language professionals, we need to support the European Parliament administration and its Members in their multilingual communication with citizens, ensuring that content is clear, high quality, relevant, available in a variety of formats and media, and in all EU official languages.

We have four directorates within the Directorate General:

- Directorate A – Support and Technological Services for Translation, provides various services to assist those involved in the translation of Parliament documents (including the development of in-house applications, pre-translation services, terminology support and Business Analysis) and additional translation capacity through external contractor;
- Directorate B – Translation, encompasses language units where intercultural and language professionals translate legislative documents into the given language, and some direct support services (e.g. the Planning service responsible for the smooth workflow of tasks);
- Directorate C – Resources, provides resources in four areas: people, training, finance, information technology;
- Directorate D – Citizens' Language.

Directorate D emerged in 2020 as a consequence of the ever growing demand for non-legislative translation and the DG TRAD's objective to respond to this demand. The new directorate hosts these new services. Its five units carry out tasks that reflect this need to bring the European Parliament closer to the citizens:

1. The Clear Language and Editing Unit provides assistance in writing texts. Authors of non-legislative texts in English or in French working anywhere in Parliament can submit their texts to the Unit for linguistic editing. It also offers other services directly to Members, such as drafting support in all languages or the editing helpline.

2. The Audio and Podcast Unit develops audio products in all EU languages to support the European Parliament's activities. It makes ready-to-broadcast content for distribution in house (on platforms such as the website Europarl Audio (see: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/audio [date of access: 17.06.2025]) and the Citizens' App, see: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/stay-informed/citizens-app [date of access: 17.06.2025]), as well as by radio stations throughout Europe. It records and produces podcasts based on the Parliament's content in all languages.

3. The Subtitling and Voice-over Unit is responsible for subtitling products (speeches, EPRS' videos, My House of European History's materials and films for the European Audience Film Awards) for all Parliament services and developing voice-over services. Staff in this unit are also responsible for tasks such as organising training, coordinating subtitling and voice-over projects, and developing and managing the software programmes in cooperation with the designer.

4. The My House of European History Unit is responsible for the management of the My House of European History project, which gathers personal stories related to European History told by people from all over our continent. The unit's core team consists of webmasters and web designers, producers to coordinate the moderation of input from citizens, organisers of conferences and other events and activities, staff responsible for (social) media outreach, project managers and assistant-producers.

5. The Speech-to-text Unit is responsible for the integration of speech-to-text technology in the Parliament. It works primarily on the provision of real-time captioning and translation of Parliamentary debates in all official languages. Its objective is ambitious: developing ready-to-use speech-to-text applications in 24 languages inside the most multilingual Parliament in the world.

These five units constitute a cross-unit pool of intercultural language professionals and proof-readers that cover the 24 official EU languages and core teams dealing with the daily functioning of each unit, creating content and providing support.

A Coordination Service has been created to oversee and plan all the work.

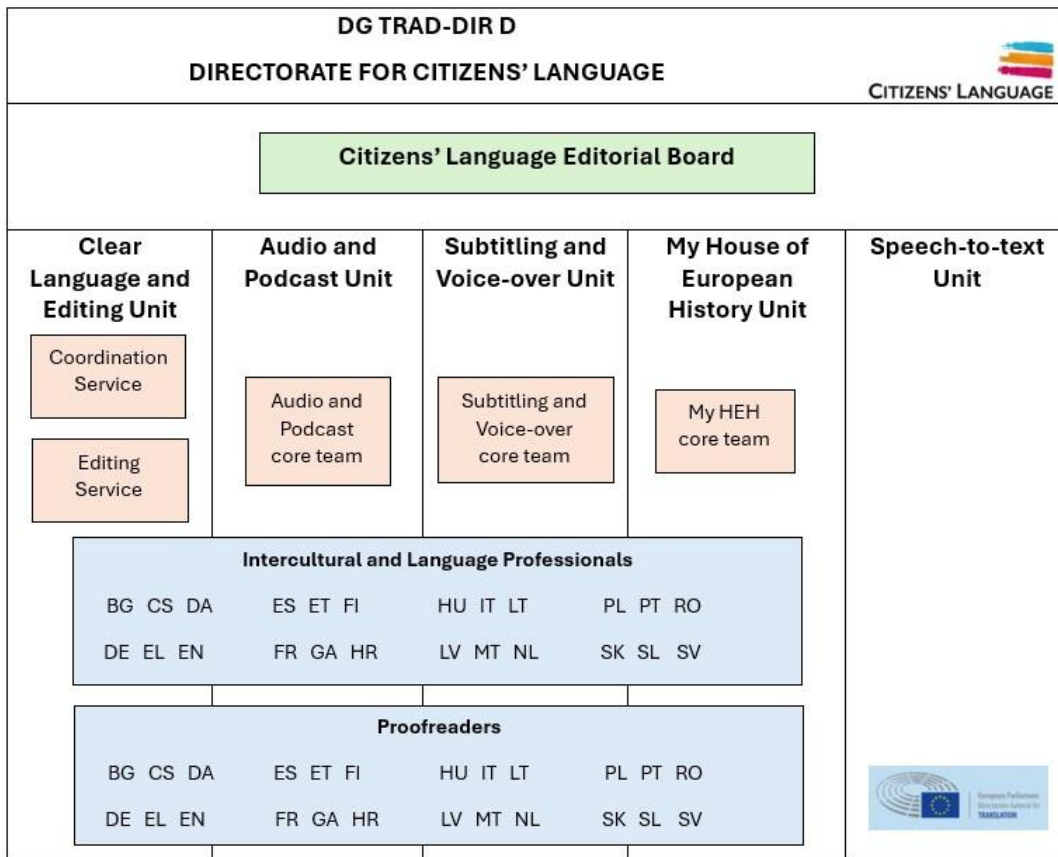Below is the organisation chart of the Citizens' Language Directorate:

Figure 3. Structure of the Directorate for Citizens' Language

Role of an Intercultural and Language Professional in the European Parliament

When I started to work as a translator in the Directorate General for Translation in the European Parliament in 2005, I translated mainly legislative texts, and the scope of tools used was very limited. However, the profile of a translator in DG TRAD has been evolving, with the addition of new needs and tools. The job profile has evolved and is now called an "intercultural and language professional". Now the main tasks of an intercultural and language professional are the following:

- facilitate communication with citizens in plain language, in their native language;
- translate, adapt, transcreate and revise all types of content in the official's mother tongue;

- enable communication in the official's mother tongue, working from at least two other official EU languages, by means of intercultural and linguistic mediation (e.g. audiovisual content, subtitling, adapting);
- provide drafting assistance in non-legislative matters;
- help with training measures, the terminology work carried out by all units and the development of communication and IT tools;
- maintain regular contact with other requesting departments; and
- contribute to the quality assurance and control processes and ensuring that best practice is followed so as to optimise the quality of content delivered by the unit.

The work of the intercultural and language professional in the Parliament is even more fascinating. The wide variety of content and formats involved in translation (or transcreation) means that there are constant challenges and changes. We feel that we keep up with changes in our profession and even set directions and trends, as exemplified by the plain language strategy.

Conclusion

The role of translators in the European Parliament keeps pace with the changes in society and in the industry: technology, language, social interactions and expectations of citizens. The evolution of the role is reflected in the new – and much more appropriate – denomination of the position: intercultural and language professional. Looking ahead, the role of language professionals will become even more dynamic, requiring constant adaptation to technological and societal changes. DG TRAD is well-positioned to lead this evolution, ensuring that communication within the EU remains inclusive, transparent and citizen-focused.

Not only the job title of language professionals in the European Parliament has changed, but also their competences and skills. Along with these changes, the awareness of the importance of multilingualism among language professionals, clients and stakeholders has also increased. Simultaneously, our language professionals participate in intensive trainings and exchanges with the external world, particularly academia. They continue to improve their knowledge of linguistic and cultural specificities in intercultural interaction. DG TRAD's language professionals facilitate communication in clear language between the European Parliament and citizens in more than one language through translation, adaptation and transcreation of content in text, audio and video formats, helped by advanced language technologies.

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