

## **Report from the Translating Europe workshop on the *Eurolect Observatory* project**

On 9 and 10 June, DGT organised a Translating Europe workshop dedicated to the *Eurolect Observatory* research project.

### **The project**

The *Eurolect Observatory* project was launched in 2014 by the Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma (UNINT University) in Rome. At present, it involves 24 scholars from 13 universities across 9 EU countries, analysing 11 official languages: Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Latvian, Maltese, Polish and Spanish.

The project aims at analysing whether evidence can be gathered to confirm the existence of a macro-variety of legal drafting — eurolect — generated by the legislative drafting that takes place in the EU. The research hypothesis is that language contact through translation has led to the creation and dissemination of standardised lexical variants, structural features and text patterns. Or, to put it in plain language, the research question is ‘Does eurolect exist?’

To explore this, the project uses corpora and a common research template comparing one corpus of 660 EU directives (adopted between 1999 and 2008) with corpora containing national implementation measures, in 11 case studies. For some languages, corpora of national law have also been included. The research combines quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The common research template used for linguistic description and intra-linguistic comparison is structured around three main (interrelated) axes:

- 1) EU-induced features;
- 2) contact-induced features; and
- 3) intra-linguistic variability.

Occurrences in each of these axes are expected to be found at various linguistic levels: lexical, morphological, syntactical, and textual.

For further information, check the project’s [web page](#).

### **The workshop**

The workshop took place over two half-day sessions. On the first day, researchers presented the project and preliminary findings for the 11 languages concerned. The audience consisted of translators, lawyer-linguists, legal revisers and researchers. The event was public and web-streamed.

On day two, the researchers met with representatives of their respective languages for more in-depth discussion of the preliminary findings and to explore relevance and pitfalls. Each language was represented by 7-10 people. For most languages, every institution involved in the legislative process was represented. The attendance exceeded all expectations, in particular as regards the other institutions and the legal services (legal revisers and lawyer-linguists). Some 100 people were present on day one and 70 on day two. So much was the interest triggered by day one that more than 25

people joined day two without prior registration! The lively group discussions were fed into a wrap-up plenary session.

### **What's in it for us?**

The project is potentially of great interest. It might even end up being operationally useful for everyone involved in the drafting (or transposition) of EU law. How?

- It is likely to come up with evidence confirming what we already know intuitively. This will enable us to relate to facts, and not just perceptions. This includes the fact that languages are different, behave differently and might need to be treated differently to produce the intended meanings.
- It might show that some of our perceptions are false. For instance, there is a perception in Dutch that EU law has very long sentences, whereas the preliminary findings seem to show that sentence length is the same as for national law.
- The findings might unveil features we were unaware of. For instance, the use of adverbs ending in *-ment* in French is almost exclusively used in French language versions of EU law but hardly at all in French national law. Or syntactical patterns: EU texts in Spanish, French and Italian seem to be drafted with plainer (i.e. more readable) sentence structures than comparable texts at national level, with considerably fewer subordinate clauses at the beginning of a sentence.
- Other findings concern interesting differences in the use of connectors, cohesion markers, pronouns, etc.

Moreover, the findings are likely to show patterns of contact-induced issues originating in the English version that affect all languages. At the same time, there may be patterns of contact-induced issues originating in English versions that affect only specific language families, for instance Romance languages, whether in similar or — even more interesting — different ways. For instance, copying the use of normative present as in French, while this might or might not be the way obligations are expressed in national law. This is likely to help avoiding unnecessary interference from English. Yet another potential benefit is to unveil patterns for languages that are official in several Member States (DE, EL, EN, FR, NL), for which the balancing act becomes even trickier. In other words, intra-linguistic variation not only between EU and national legal drafting but also between different national legal drafting traditions even though they use the same language.

The discussions showed that there is a great interest amongst practitioners in this type of research. At the same time, there is some concern that researchers might miss the point if they do not entirely grasp the complexity of the text production environment. In this respect, a number of possible pitfalls surfaced in the discussions, including:

- the switch from French to English in original language versions that has gradually taken place during the reference period;
- the importance of understanding the specificities of EU legal terminology and formal drafting instructions; and

- workflow, time pressure, non-native drafters.

The frank discussions also showed that there is a fear amongst practitioners of being exposed to (unjustified) criticism. In this respect, the discussions enabled the researchers to clarify that theirs is descriptive research. It is not about value statements or prescription. Once objective evidence is available, we will all be able to draw conclusions on whether the findings show good or bad things and whether they should lead to changes in the way we work. We are not there yet, but the preliminary findings clearly triggered an interest among our staff.

Last but not least, the workshop provided the translators, legal revisers and lawyer-linguists from the Commission, Parliament and Council with a much-appreciated opportunity to meet and have meaningful exchanges around relevant quality-related issues. The workshop resulted in a lot of useful networking, which contributes to strengthening the interinstitutional links, and to awareness of the fact that we are all in this together and that there is room for improving the way we cooperate with each other.

Ingemar Strandvik  
Quality Manager, DGT