Italian interpreting cutbacks: skimping or saving?

Is Italian-language interpreting on its way out? Looked like it for a while. We didn't think it was a good idea—and the Italian government agrees.

Cutbacks on Italian interpreting in the EU and the hosting of an English-only summer course by an Italian cultural institute for a largely Italian target audience led to heated exchanges last June and July. Italy, it seemed, could not afford Italian-language interpretation. Italy's government now realizes it can't afford to do without.

Choosing the meeting languages

As English comes to dominate the international scene, interpreting seems increasingly pointless to some decision makers, especially if their own English is good—or if they think it is. At a time of drastic budget cuts it looks like low-hanging fruit. After all, Lithuanians, Croatians, Greeks and Slovenians (and others) all dispense with their language altogether at many Commission meetings.

Italian delegates briefly risked a similar situation: they would've been able to speak Italian, but not hear it. Fortunately, the Italian government realized that this would be a big mistake and has made funding available for the same meetings that were covered before.

As described in La Stampa, meetings would have been served on a hierarchical basis: bigwigs would get interpreters, foot-soldiers mostly not. Language skills were not a consideration: never mind if they couldn't get what others were saying.

I wonder what the outcome of a large-scale exercise in English listening comprehension testing among public servants in EU countries might be. Beyond the popular Cambridge Proficiency qualification, relevant testing should also include actual presentations made by non-natives. It would be interesting to see results, not only by nationality but also in relation to self-assessed proficiency: delegates who refuse to wear headphones when interpreting is available often contribute needlessly to large-scale misunderstandings at international meetings.

In the case of Italy, the head of the Italian Institute of Culture in Brussels organized a summer course in English without interpretation and claimed that Italian officials' poor command of English was a good reason to do so. Hence, the Italian government's efforts to find funding make perfect sense. The question then arises: if the summer course content was worthwhile, did it make sense not to ensure that participants got the message in full?

Waste of experts

Full disclosure: I worked hard for a long time to add Italian to my language combination so I hope it stays around for a while (it barely contributes to my income stream, though). Still, I'm also a taxpayer and hate to see public funds wasted. The question really goes beyond Italian: can we and should we dispense with interpretation and just use “bad English, the universal language”?

Some national and international public servants are up to the task of communicating in English; many are not. The sink-or-swim approach sidelines valuable people with poor language skills. Can the EU afford to miss out on contributions from true experts just because they're not good linguists?

The world doesn't owe interpreters a living. Organizers are free to do without interpreting at any event, even if that creates the somewhat ludicrous situation of Italian politicians lecturing in English to largely Italian audiences under the aegis of an official Italian government institution.
But good simultaneous interpreting enhances both interaction and communication when participants' language skills are limited—as long as you have the right team, equipment, chairperson and organizer. If you don't believe that, you've probably never experienced really good interpreting. Pretending everyone knows English well enough when they don't is a massive waste of resources.

The backstory

Here are all your links to the full story—mostly in Italian.

Last June, the Italian government decided to limit interpretation into Italian at EU Council meetings to save costs: only meetings covered by the EU's own interpreting budget will keep an Italian booth. At lower-level meetings, Italian officials will mostly be able to speak their own language but will be forced to listen to another: probably English, possibly French, German or Spanish. This decision does not affect the European Parliament: MEPs must be allowed to use their national languages to protect the right of European citizens to elect whomever they choose to represent them, and the interpreting budget there is not “topped up” by national government contributions.

Hot on the tail of this news came the announcement that a summer course on Italy and the EU organized by the Italian Cultural Institute of Brussels would be held exclusively in English, though some of the main speakers and most of the expected participants were Italian. Most of the feedback on the La Stampa blog that delivered the news was negative, though it covered other issues besides language.

The course director, Ms Federiga Bindi, explained her decision in an open reply. Her parting shot was the claim that “simultaneous translation” is ineffectual at a highly interactive seminar and hence unjustified.

The EC's Director General for Interpretation retorted that multilingualism is an important part of EU policy and that interpreting is regularly used for international decision making.

Our President Linda Fitchett also replied in an open letter. Her main points: simultaneous interpreting is a regular feature of many high-level meetings and conferences, and interaction is actually far more lively if people can express themselves freely in their own language—after all, Ms Bindi herself had noted the poor foreign-language skills of Italy's public servants.

Going back to the EU, early in August I was very pleased to learn that Italy had found a way to pay for interpreting at the Council of Ministers. The news was delivered by the European Commission's Interpreting for Europe Facebook page on 7 August. (Unfortunately, Facebook does not allow for linking to a specific update).

Updated 29 August 2012 to correct a factual error regarding the Facebook source in the last paragraph (Interpreting for Europe, not Interpreting the World). Help in keeping track of Facebook sources will be appreciated.

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