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**EMCI Anniversary Note  
by Patrick TWIDLE**

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**A short history of how the EMCI came into being – from the European pilot project to the Agreement to formally establish the EMCI Consortium signed on 30 May 2001.**

**The signing of the Agreement constituting the EMCI Consortium in 2001**, during the European Year of Languages, marked a significant milestone in my career at the European Parliament.

Enlargement - that is to say the progressive expansion of the European Communities from the **6** original Member States of the Common Market to the **28** Member States of the European Union (until Brexit, at least) - was the driving force behind the conception of the European Masters in Conference Interpreting.

I started working in Strasbourg in January **1973**, when my country joined the European Communities, together with Ireland and Denmark, in the very first enlargement process. Twenty years later - given that I had studied Swedish for my first degree at university - I was put in charge of the training and recruitment of Finnish and Swedish (and Norwegian) interpreters for the European Parliament, setting up a crash internship - with assistance from the Universities of Westminster (**CIT**) and Paris (**ESIT**) - just two months before Finland and Sweden joined in **1995**, after holding a last-minute referendum (whilst Norway voted No).

Following the fall of the Berlin wall, preparations began in the 1990s for the **fifth** enlargement of the European Communities to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (already foreseen by Robert Schuman in **1956**<sup>1</sup>).

The role of the **TAIEX** (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) programme managed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement Negotiations was essential. In **1997**, for instance, it sponsored the University of Geneva (**ETI**) to run a training of trainers course for applicant countries in Prague, at Charles University (**ÚTRL**), on research applied to the teaching of interpretation. **AIIC** (International Association of Conference Interpreters) was also a key player through **CECO**, its Committee for Relations with Central and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> 1956 - in a lecture given in Paris, then in Luxembourg, and finally in Copenhagen at the *Alliance Française*: "*L'intégration européenne est-elle un objectif valable et d'actualité*" (historical archives of the European Union, CEAB 2 n° 1644)

*« Nous devons faire l'Europe non seulement dans l'intérêt des pays libres, mais aussi pour pouvoir y accueillir les peuples de l'Est qui, délivrés des [sujétions] qu'ils ont subies jusqu'à présent, nous demanderont leur adhésion et notre appui moral. Depuis de longues années, nous avons douloureusement ressenti la ligne de démarcation idéologique qui coupe l'Europe en deux. Elle a été imposée par la violence, maintenue par la force [...]. Puisse-t-elle s'effacer dans la liberté. »* (Stenographer's record of the oral delivery).

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, as late as **2001**, it was generally assumed that there would be several separate waves of accession, and no political decision had yet been taken as to the specific date for any of the applicant countries to join. The interpreting and translation services were therefore obliged to prepare to add a further **12** languages in parallel.

The European Institutions have always been major recruiters of skilled conference interpreters. However, whilst the Parliament depended mainly on interpreting schools, in particular those belonging to **CIUTI** (*Conférence internationale permanente d'instituts universitaires de traducteurs et interprètes*) to train new staff and freelancers, the Commission relied on its own internal training programme, the so-called '**stage**' set up by the Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (**SCIC**) in **1964**.

Because of the sheer numbers involved in the run up to the '*Big Bang*' enlargement, which would more than double the number of official languages, the **SCIC stage** six-month in-house training model was no longer deemed viable, so in **1997** the Commission took a political decision to outsource interpreter training to national educational systems.

In order to meet sharply increasing demand for qualified recruits, a pilot project was launched by the Commission under the auspices of the **SOCRATES/ERASMUS** programme and the **European Language Council** (thematic network project in the area of languages) to develop a core curriculum for a university course at advanced level in conference interpreting. The initial project group involved members from **8** universities, and I was asked to participate as the representative of the **EP Directorate for Interpretation**. It was this project that gave birth to what was going to become the **EMCI Consortium**.

One of the objectives of the project was to seek to adapt *sui generis* interpreter-training courses to the **Bologna Process** in European higher education (3-year cycle + 2-year courses leading to a Master's degree), another was to increase the diversity of languages offered. At the same time, it aimed to ensure that quality standards were maintained, while training conference interpreters in considerably greater numbers.

A brief explanation of the EU language regime may be useful at this point, bearing in mind that systems vary between the Council, the Commission, the Parliament and the Court of Justice. Nevertheless, in Europe what unites us is always more important than what divides us, and the EMCI was to become a prime example of inter-institutional cooperation. The common assessment criteria developed by the Consortium provided the basis for the joint accreditation tests of the EU interpreting services.

It is important to remember that the interpreting services of the European institutions are obliged to function with all necessary languages - a formidable task, especially when one considers the fact that very few of these are international conference languages, some having only recently acquired the status of national official language, and many have small native speaker populations.

Although it was feasible for the Commission to reduce its own language regime and introduce an asymmetrical system, the European Parliament faced a particular challenge, since the right of elected members to speak, read and write in their preferred official language lies at the heart of Parliament's democratic legitimacy. European parliamentarians are directly elected by the citizens of their own country, who choose them for their politics, regardless of their knowledge of foreign languages.

So, in the plenary sessions of Parliament, every official language has to be covered, even if there is some flexibility for smaller meetings. The number of booths required has gone from just **4** in the mid-twentieth century (with **12** possible language combinations) to **24** in the twenty-first, including Czech,

Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovene (2004), Bulgarian, Irish, Romanian (2007), Croatian (2013) - and occasionally other languages too, such as Arabic or Russian, according to specific needs (adding up to **600** or more language combinations in the case of future accessions).

Nevertheless, although the number of linguistic permutations to be covered has increased exponentially, the number of interpreters in each booth has remained relatively stable over the years, thanks to a paradigm shift in European conference interpreting, leading to greater reliance on relay and '*retour*' interpreting.

Until **1995**, it is fair to say that the *lingua franca* of the European Institutions was French, and interpreters were generally required to work in the booth from a number of passive (**C**) languages into their principal, mother-tongue equivalent language (**A**), often taking relay from *pivots* in other booths for some of the existing **9** official languages not covered directly in 1994.

Following the arrival of the Austrians, Finns and Swedes, there was a shift towards the wider use of English and - above all - the regular use of Finnish interpreters working with *retour* into their second active (**B**) language as *pivots* for relay into other languages. In the past, when this was also the case after Greece (1981) and Portugal (1986) joined, it had nevertheless been possible to assimilate the new languages into the existing system over time. After **May 2004**, the number of official languages doubled, and the critical mass was too great to absorb without a radical change in working methods, in order to allow multilingual meetings to survive the encroachment of badly spoken English.

Previously in Western Europe, AIIIC interpreters were not encouraged to work into a second language unless they were truly bilingual (**AA**), and AIIIC teams always sought to avoid relay interpreting, although this was already indispensable in the EU services once Danish became an official language in **1973**. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the situation was different, and for large conferences the use of a so-called 'pilot' language (or virtual booth) was the rule. The **EMCI** served as a catalyst for the new paradigm, and AIIIC trainers in the Consortium were instrumental in defining innovative criteria for teaching simultaneous into a second (**B**) language.

Once the common core curriculum had been developed, the **Senior Representatives of the Universities** taking part in the project for a European Masters in Conference Interpreting were invited to come to the European Parliament in Brussels to sign the **Consortium Agreement** with a view to future cooperation.

So, in **2004**, with the help of the **EMCI Consortium**, the institutions were able to function effectively following the historic enlargement of the European Union with the accession of **10** new Member States and the '*Big Bang*' addition of **9** new official languages at the same time.

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**The signing ceremony took place in the EP at 12 noon on Wednesday 30 May 2001.**

The project was jointly sponsored by both the European Commission and the European Parliament, and on that day the heads of all three EU interpreting services, including that of the Court of Justice, were in attendance at the meeting in Brussels with the universities (including new members and observers).

The formal ceremony was followed by an official luncheon hosted by **Giuseppe GARGANI, MEP, Chairman of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport.**

Afterwards, participants attended the opening of the **Plenary Sitting** of the European Parliament in the official gallery and then, together with MEPs, journalists, students, and pupils of the European Schools, they joined a round table discussion to mark the **European Year of Languages** opened by **Nicole Fontaine, President of the European Parliament**.

Here is the line-up of speakers at the EYL Round Table on 30 May 2001:

*'The Power of Babel ... L'Amour de Babel' - Multilingualism and the European Parliament*

**Chair : Vasco GRAÇA MOURA, EP rapporteur for the European Year of Languages**

**Special Guest : Sir Peter USTINOV, actor, writer, UNICEF Ambassador, and polyglot**

**Panel including : Viviane REDING, EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth, Media and Sport, Senator Jacques LEGENDRE, rapporteur on linguistic diversity of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Lajos PARTI NAGY, Hungarian author**

One final anecdote to close this chapter – as organizer of that event at the European Parliament (*'The Power of Babel - L'Amour de Babel'*) for the European Year of Languages, which coincided with the signature of the Agreement to set up a Consortium for the European Master's in Conference Interpreting, I managed to persuade the famous actor, [Sir Peter Ustinov](#), to join the panel in Brussels.

At the last minute, however, Peter Ustinov's Agent announced that the star could not take part in person, because he was going off to Canada to make a film. At the time I was away on mission in Graz, but luckily my ticket allowed for an emergency stopover at Frankfurt airport, and so together with a freelance cameraman we managed to film him (in his socks) at his hotel - 15 minutes speaking *ad lib* to camera with no retakes – making wise and witty observations about language in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Hungarian - and mock Finnish and Turkish!

When Professor Ivana Čeňková wrote from Prague and asked me to help with the 20th anniversary of the EMCI (a year late because of Covid-19), we agreed that it would be a good idea to include the Ustinov video - with English subtitles - so if you'd like to watch the clip (© EP2001) you are most welcome.

Patrick TWIDLE