

A Translator Writes

'Whereas, since the European Community is a constitutional community, its legislation must result from a transparent decision-making process, characterized by texts of an intrinsic quality that will ensure they are read with ease by those to whom they are addressed,'
— from Parliament's comments on the Commission's Twelfth Annual Report on Community law.

Someone once called the parliamentary process 'idleness without leisure, and labour without industry'. The speaker was referring to Westminster in the nineteenth century, but his main point remains true of all parliaments everywhere, and it is this: that the business of political representation is unpredictable - at times unreasonably frenetic, and quite often dull.



The precarious fortune of politicians teaches them to thrive on a sense of urgency. They like to respond at the last possible minute to current events — to draft, re-draft and amend in the quest for consensus, while linguists wait at their desks. The form of words that emerges, sometimes late at night, from this refining process may be hard even for its author to understand; but an accurate rendering in the other official languages must be produced and printed before the committee's next meeting, at nine in the morning.

Parliament's translators learn to live in this unpromising climate. For all its limitations we do our best to make readable sense of our raw material, whether it is a motion calling for emergency aid in the aftermath of an earthquake, or a highly technical amendment to a regulation on pesticides.

A job like this seldom appeals to literary purists or academic linguists, because sooner or later the frustrations of the sordid real world get them down. Most of us still find it hard to accept the fact that our own translation will often appear alongside 'English' written in a hurry by a non-native speaker, and amended by another, because political expediency insists that it must be so. We also resent having our limpid prose tampered with by experts in Euro-speak, anxious to create a uniform house style.

At the same time, a high degree of

fluency in written English, and a consuming interest in communicating ideas clearly, matter more than fluency in other languages — though you are obviously more marketable if you have an intimate knowledge of, say, Greek and Finnish as well as French or German. All our work involves translation into English; we may have occasion to speak other languages in our contacts at work and outside.

These days the computer has arrived with a vengeance. Every translator now has a PC to work on, with a range of glossaries and legal databases to draw on at the touch of a button. It helps to have a good typing speed, and to be familiar with the splendours and miseries of word processing.

The advent of electronics means that everything has speeded up. The minutes of a committee meeting can

be typed in Brussels, translated in Luxembourg and printed in Strasbourg in the space of a single morning. Sooner or later it will be possible to transfer the text of a law drafted by the Commission, amended by Parliament, re-amended by the Council and reconciled by the lawyer-linguists of all three, to the national parliaments' libraries without having to re-type it at each stage of the process. It also means that a smaller number of people can do more work, and need less contact with other human beings — perhaps, eventually, working from home. It suits the monastically inclined better than the naturally gregarious; but — in spite of rumoured attempts to undermine the international civil service, and the occasional strains of an unpredictable workload — most of us find it a reasonably agreeable way of earning a living.

Edward Seymour