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Conducting a Survey of the Opinions of Finnish Delegates in the EU: Using a Tool of Social Sciences

Abstract

The European Union's impact on the Finnish language has been a focus of national debate since Finland became a member in 1995. Despite this ongoing discussion, during the first years after Finland had joined the EU only a few were really familiar with texts produced by EU institutions. The group that could offer an informed opinion on the quality of EU texts was composed of Finnish officials negotiating for Finland in the working groups of the European Council or the European Commission. To find out what they thought, a questionnaire was sent to Finnish central government departments in late 1998. The survey was repeated in 2006–2007. This paper will not, however, present the results of these two surveys (for results see Piehl 2000, 2008, 2009) but concentrate on some of the problems that arose in making them.

1. The survey and translation studies

This survey has no direct relation to translation studies: it was not conducted to test a hypothesis or a theory but for purely practical purposes. It was done to gain information that would be of benefit when establishing an EU Finnish consultant/advisor post. This post was established in 1998 to offer advice on the usage of Finnish in EU-related matters, and I have held it since the beginning. Giving advice means mostly dealing with translated texts and assessing the acceptability of different alternatives available so as to achieve a functional Finnish text. The acceptability of the texts as translations does not come into it, but sometimes the difference between acceptability as a text and acceptability as a translation can be hard to discern. According to Toury (1995: 230), acceptability may be important for cultures where translations play a role in shaping the very centre of the system, as he suspects may be the case for Finnish culture. Based on my professional experience, this is probably true. Other Nordic EU member states, where translations likewise have been central to cultural development, have also had discussions on the acceptability of their language versions (see, e.g., Karker 1993 and Melander 2001). As background information for this post, this survey investigated acceptability from a reader's point of view.

Questionnaires have been used to research responses to translations before, but this research focused on the comparison of actual texts by selected test groups. It assessed, for example, how acceptable different translations of the same source texts were, and aimed to find out the grounds for the readers' decisions. (Toury 1995: 229–230.) Surveys like mine that deal with general opinions on translated texts produced by institutions are perhaps better compared with customer opinion surveys that seldom appear in academic contexts. The Finnish interpreters in the European Commission did two surveys similar to mine in 2005 and 2007 when they sent their clients a questionnaire on whether they used interpreting services and whether they were satisfied with the service provided. The results were published on the SCIC website.

2. How this survey was made

The main purpose of the first survey was to investigate what Finnish officials thought about the readability of the Finnish language versions. An additional purpose was to find out what was the

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status of the Finnish language in the multilingual legal drafting process of the EU. The first survey had 12 close-ended questions that the respondents could complement with their own comments. The questionnaire could be answered on paper or through email. The questions were based on discussions I had had with officials from the target group and translators, and I had road-tested the questions on a group of 25 officials from government departments and the Bank of Finland.

The results raised new questions: does the choice of working language have an effect on the officials' opinion on readability? What effect does the decision to use or not use interpretation have?

The second survey from 2006 and 2007 was conducted to find out if there had occurred any changes in opinion on readability or in the status of Finnish and to seek answers to questions that had arisen from the first survey. This time the survey was made using the Webropol program, and the questionnaire could only be filled in using a web form. To be able to compare the results the old questions were kept unchanged. Some new questions based on the answers from the first survey were added and EU translators suggested some additional questions as well. There were 24 questions altogether. Some of the added questions were on more practical matters, like, for example, whether the respondents felt they got the Finnish language versions when they needed them, or if they got interpretation in meetings as often as they would have liked. Other questions pertained more to the respondents' view on translation, like the amount of freedom that is permitted in the translation of EU documents and the satisfaction felt about the level of cooperation with translators.

The first survey in 1998 drew responses from 180 officials. There were somewhat fewer respondents in 2006–7, the total number being 165. Both target groups were selected by EU liaison officers in government departments. They sent the questionnaire to suitable officials and asked them to participate. No background information was asked in the first questionnaire, but in 2006–7 the respondents were asked to indicate their department, the number of years they had worked in EU-related tasks, the nature of those tasks and the groups they participate in in the EU. Most of the respondents told they participated as Finnish delegates in different working groups of the Council of the EU, and 60% of them had worked with the EU affairs for the past six years.

3. A method to be used just by anyone?

To find out what a certain larger group thinks, the survey is an obvious method to choose. Researchers have borrowed the methods of other scientific disciplines for a long time, and so have linguists, too, for natural reasons. For example, those who want to research the history of linguistics probably are and always will be linguists. The same applies to those who want to investigate the linguistic behaviour of certain groups. The survey is an increasingly popular method used by text linguists and conversation analysts, to name a few (see, e.g. Gunnarsson 2005, Koskinen 2008 and Tiililä 2007). It is often used as one of several methods in a research project so as to shed light on the problem from different angles. The problem may lie in that linguists are seldom trained to use surveys. The necessary information can of course be acquired, but I at least have to admit that I am not as knowledgeable as I could or should be.

One likely reason for the popularity of the survey is that it is relatively easy to do these days. You can use computer programs to construct the questionnaires, to administer the responses and to make reports. Target groups can be reached via email. You do need training, though, in selecting a representative sample and in designing a questionnaire that will give you results that are valid for the research problem at hand. A limited knowledge of statistics may also prove to be a weak point. These points at least proved problematic when making this survey.

3.1. Response rate and reliability

The problem I am going to discuss in detail here is the response rate and its effect on the reliability of the results. My first problem is that I do not know the exact response rate for either of the surve-

ys, as I do not know how many officials got the questionnaire. My target population was government department officials whose tasks include participating in EU working groups and committees. My plan was not to select a sample of them but to target them all. This was done by asking EU liaison officials in government departments to send the questionnaire to all suitable officials. I chose this approach because I thought I would get a better response rate if the possible respondents would receive a message from one of their own colleagues (or a superior), for e.g. the liaison officer, and if that person (rather than me) asked them to answer the questionnaire. I could not ask for a list of recipients, because they had been promised anonymity. What I should have done is ask the liaison officer for the number of officials the questionnaire was sent to. However, even just arranging the survey took many calls to each liaison officer, first to ask for help and then to ask them to remind people of the survey. I shied from asking the busy officials to do more.

Besides, I was not interested in the response rate for each department separately. I also thought I could get a good estimate of the response rate from the Prime Minister's Office – the government department that coordinates other departments in EU matters – since I assumed they would have exact information on how many officials work with EU tasks in government departments. It turned out, however, that no such information existed. A subsequent educated guess by several experts in the Prime Minister's Office set the total figure of possible respondents at approximately 300. If this is correct it would make the response rate about 50%. Anu Sajavaara had a very similar target group when she surveyed the opinions of Finnish officials on language training in government departments before Finland's first EU presidency in 1999 (2000: 29) and her response rate was close to mine. Getting a response from half the target group is nowadays considered a normal rate (Babbie 2007: 262, Trost 2007: 137), and adequate for analysis and reporting.

If I do not consider other possible factors, like the design of the questions, can I now rely on my results on, for example, the readability of Finnish language versions? Both in the first and in the second survey over 80% of the respondents said that they thought the Finnish language versions were harder to understand than original Finnish texts of the same genre¹.

With a response rate of 50% the results could still be significantly biased because, say, only the discontented half of the target group answered the questionnaire. Those who have a complaint tend to be more eager to answer than those who are satisfied. In earlier times a response rate of 70% was required for reliable results, but apparently such a rate is rarely achieved now. How should I evaluate this result? The percentage of those who responded that the Finnish language versions were more obscure than texts originally written in Finnish has not changed for nearly ten years. Does this have any bearing on the question?

Similar answers from different subgroups are thought to support the conclusion that the opinion expressed is a general phenomenon (Babbie 2007: 47). Be as it may, in this case, the subgroups are not very different from each other. Those who have worked in EU tasks over a year chose the same alternative, as did those who are involved in drafting Finnish legislation. Only those who have had tasks like these for less than a year differ from the main group: barely 60% of them find the Finnish language versions more difficult than Finnish legislation. What does this tell us? That they have not realized the difficulties yet? That there is a new generation with different opinions on the way? Or that this is just a random result, since it is the opinion of only eight respondents?

It would be helpful to be able to compare these results with information from other sources. Answers to some of my other survey questions can be corroborated by information from elsewhere. For example, the fact that nearly 100% of respondents told they choose/prefer/use English as their working language both in the office and at EU meetings match the results of other surveys and statistics available (e.g. Sajavaara 2000: 114). There are also statistics on how much interpretation the Finnish officials have ordered/requested.

¹ It should be noted, that the purpose of this survey was not to investigate the readability of EU legislation as such but to find out, what this important addressee group's opinion of readability is. What each of the respondents understands by readability is left aside. Nor does this survey investigate underlying attitudes, though the answers may reflect them. If this had been the purpose, the questions would have been formulated otherwise.

It is easier to find support for questions that are on verifiable facts, but I am not aware of any other research on how readable Finnish language versions are thought/perceived to be. The recent Better Regulation Programme (2006: 140) from 2006 mentions that Finnish law drafters think the EU has had a deteriorating effect on the quality of national legislation but unfortunately there is no reference to an actual source. More importantly, does this support my results? These respondents may not have thought about readability but rather about other features of legislation, like, for example, the increased amount of regulation, or the more detailed nature of EU legislation.

Perhaps I will just have to make do with the knowledge that the opinion of the majority of respondents is shared by approximately 45% of the whole target group (if the estimate of the whole population is correct). Although technically this represents a minority opinion (of the whole population), there are still quite a few who find the texts hard to read.

What, then, of the other results, where the answers are not so overwhelmingly concentrated in one alternative? I find it best to be careful and not generalize from my results. It is more accurate to present the results as the expressed opinions of those who answered the questionnaire.

4. Counting the benefits

If the results cannot be said to represent reliably the whole target group's opinion, how useful is this survey and how can the results be used? Despite my doubts, I have found the survey very useful. The opinions themselves are of interest, even if they are not representative of the whole population. In addition to this, a survey often gives not only quantitative material, but an abundance of qualitative material as well, and my respondents wanted to write many comments and answers to open questions. These comments helped to interpret the quantitative answers because they showed how the respondents had understood the questions. The officials gave many examples of their practices in the office, in meetings and in their contacts with interpreters, translators and legal linguists.

They also gave information that I had not thought to ask. For example, there were many similar comments in the survey from 1998 that indicated that the officials chose to read the texts in English in the office because they had to use it when they spoke in the meetings later. This led me to look more closely at how using or not using interpretation might influence perceptions on the quality of texts. It also made me wonder what consequences this might have if officials rarely use the Finnish language version while negotiating about the legislation and, in the worst cases, only read the text in the final stages of the formulating process, often in a great hurry. This was also something officials commented on in their responses when they wanted say something in addition to choosing an alternative in the questionnaire.

The second survey also yielded results that point to the need for further investigation. One of the new questions in this survey was whether the respondents thought cooperation with the translators was sufficient. Half of the respondents said that they were not able to state an opinion. They were, however, quite ready to offer an opinion on whether translators could use more freedom in their work. Only a fourth felt that they could not answer this question, though to my mind it should have been at least as difficult to answer. It would be interesting to find out why it was so difficult to evaluate the need for cooperation. It reminds me of Kaisa Koskinen's findings on the invisibility of translators in the EU (e.g. 2008: 80). It also raises question about how officials see their own role in the process. Some respondents told they were very satisfied with the quality of the cooperation, but there were also some respondents who stated that they had no experience of cooperation at all. Some expressed frustration over situations where their suggestions to revise the text had been rejected without further discussion or contact.

Another interesting topic of research would be the officials' perception of what translation is. The most recent survey's open-ended questions already offer a wealth of information, but a new project (specifically) designed to investigate what officials mean by a good translation is needed. My material suggests there are two tendencies: some value a text that closely resembles the En-

glish text they had agreed on during the negotiations, while others prefer a text that is more similar to Finnish legislation and easier to adapt to the Finnish context.

5. Whereto next?

These results have something to give to both translation and EU studies. Translation studies would surely benefit from more research on how the actual readers assess the acceptability of translation and which factors affect their opinions. In EU studies the acceptability of texts can be seen as part of the union's general legitimacy. The EU has made a big effort in recent years to gain better legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Special teams have, for example, been assembled in EU representations in member states to produce localized information about the union (see Action plan to improve communicating Europe 2005) so as to make it more acceptable.

In EU legislation, however, formal equivalence is rather strictly required. Ensuring acceptability from the point of view of every official language is not seen as a way of gaining legitimacy. Up until some five years ago the same kind of formal equivalence was required of information meant for the press or citizens, and no need for localization was recognized. Can legal texts be granted a greater degree of freedom some day? Or does acceptability in legal texts consist of factors of another kind entirely than those that concern informative texts? Does formal equivalence further or hinder acceptability? Are the requirements that worked well for six or twelve languages still the best way of ensuring the equivalence of legislation in 27 languages? It would be important that these questions be answered.

An English summary of results of the survey and my conclusions are available on the website of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland at this address: <http://www.kotus.fi/index.phtml?l=en&s=3079>.

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