

“Mountain” in Four Languages

The LexALP project aims to foster international understanding by harmonising quadrilingual terminologies for Alpine affairs.



Four official languages – French, German, Italian and Slovenian – are spoken in the eight countries of the Alpine arc, and each state has its own legal system. Nonetheless, these neighbouring Alpine countries have strived to develop a network of international cooperation and drafted agreements such as the Alpine Convention, which deals in great depth with issues concerning the environment and spatial planning. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that, given these premises, the need for common and clear language use, particularly in the legal sphere, has often been voiced.

Together with numerous international partners, the EURAC's Institute for Specialised Communication and Multilingualism recently started a project directly addressing this need for analysis, comparison and harmonisation of the legal terminology used in France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy and Slovenia. The main aim of LexALP (*Legal Language Harmonisation System for Environment and Spatial Planning in the Multilingual Alps*) is to reach an agreement on which terms should be used at the international level, thus facilitating co-operation and information exchange between these nations and promoting their economic, social

and cultural development. The project is financed by the INTERREG IIIB Alpine Space programme (www.alpinespace.org) and will last from 2005 to 2007.

Until now, most similar projects have focused on only two languages at a time, making LexALP the first extensive project of its kind. The partnership includes both public and private universities (*Université J. Fourier Grenoble 1, Université Stendhal Grenoble 3, Sprachen & Dolmetscher Institut München*), a research institute (EURAC) and various regional and national public agencies (the Terminology Section of the Swiss Chancellery, the Italian Department of Regional Affairs, the Italian Ministry of Environment and the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region). LexALP will pool the broad experience and expertise of the various terminologists, legal experts and computational linguists, and exploit as much as possible the latest technological developments in the field.

In its first phase, a quadrilingual corpus of relevant texts will be collected and stored as an online information system, providing the basis for automatic extraction and analysis of vocabulary. The terms to be used in all four languages will then be developed, with constant support and

feedback from computer linguists and legal experts. In the second phase, a “harmonisation group” will discuss, select and confirm the developed lexicon, which will then be disseminated to all of the project participants, both through dedicated training courses and the online LexALP Information System. The partnership of important national and local public institutions will ensure broad dispersal and acceptance of the harmonised quadrilingual terminology.

We spoke with representatives of the prestigious institutions currently acting as LexALP observers, (the Alpine Convention, the *Délégation Générale de Langue Française e des Langues de France* of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, the Austrian *Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft, Umwelt und Wasserwirtschaft*, the Autonomous Region of Aosta Valley and the Office of Linguistic Issues of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano) about some of the issues related to the LexALP project. Here are their comments.

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Language Barriers in the Alps

Interview with Ruggero Schleicher-Tappeser, vice-general secretary of the Alpine Convention

The Alpine Convention has now existed for more than a decade. What are its aims, and how does it apply to the life of those living in the Alps?

Schleicher-Tappeser: The Alpine Convention is an international treaty for the sustainable development of the Alpine area. It was signed in 1992 by all the countries that have at least part of their territory in the Alps (Italy, Austria, France, Switzerland, Germany, Liechtenstein, Monaco), and also by the European Community (in a special capacity). It took many years to negotiate protocols on specific issues such as transport, spatial development, the protection of nature, mountain agriculture, tourism, et cetera. Now the implementation phase has begun: Nine protocols took effect in 2002, but they have not yet been enacted in every Alpine country. A permanent secretariat was finally established in 2003. Working in co-operation with specialised networks, the institutions of the Alpine Convention will now address a much larger audience.

The Alpine Convention includes the four major languages of the Alpine area, (French, German, Italian and Slovenian).

What does this multilingualism mean in terms of work and financial investment?

S.T.: Co-operation requires communication, and language barriers are an obstacle within the Alpine area. In order to address the largest possible audience, translation is necessary, but multilingualism should not mean that we have always to rely on translations: an understanding of several Alpine languages is important for everyone working in this field. Wider use of English remains controversial, though it is the only lingua franca in the region. For these reasons, improved efficiency and quality of translation and interpretation services is necessary.

Moreover, the topic of multilingualism is embedded in the larger issue of cross-cultural communication. The usual translation and interpretation services cannot take the place of mutual understanding. In my experience, confusion can only be avoided through detailed explanation by specialists familiar with both cultural perspectives, and also using simple tools, like comparison of key legal and administrative terms.

How will harmonisation of terminology improve communication within the Alpine Convention?

S.T.: Co-operation requires a common perspective of a situation, of the problems to be solved and what should be done. Building such a common perspective and developing a shared vision for the future necessitates a kind of common "language". Even if the partners need interpretation to speak to each other, agreement on common terms with specific meanings and consistent usage is a prerequisite for reliable understanding. It is equally important to be aware of which terms should be avoided, because these can cause just as much confusion. The Alpine Convention has already developed its own terminology, which is not always coherent or complete, and this could benefit from harmonisation: it would be very useful to provide short explanations in all four languages (five, including English) and to develop simple tools for facilitating access to the common terminology. This harmonised terminology should certainly make it easier to draft understandable, translatable texts in the context of the Alpine Convention. Therefore we have strongly supported the LexALP project.

Finding a Terminology that Suits Everyone

Mr. Galle, you follow the activities of the Alpine Convention since its early beginnings in 1989. Could you give us a general overview of the relationship between the Alpine Convention and its member countries? How do they implement the common goals of the Alpine Convention within their own territories, through their different legal systems?

I am not familiar with the individual Alpine Convention member countries' various methods of implementation, but one common feature of the procedures is that their Parliaments are all actively engaged in the legal



Ewald Galle,
Head of the Austrian
National Committee of
the Alpine Convention

process. The overall bond is International Environmental Law, which provides a basis and guidelines, but not more.

How has so far the Alpine Convention dealt with the various differences between its member countries?

The Alpine Convention has faced cultural, linguistic and legal differences between its member countries from the very beginning. For example, three different words for "environmental impact assessment" have been used in various Italian versions of protocols, and this sort of thing can cause unnecessary confusion. Nonetheless, we should

recognize that the Alpine Convention has taken steps to deal with these issues.

What is the challenge in the harmonisation of the quadrilingual terminologies used by the Alpine Convention?

The major challenge is to find a terminology that suits all four languages, without leaving too much room for interpretation. Occasionally, we tried to use English as a fifth, common language, based on the idea that we would all share the same mutual disadvantage. But language is closely related to personal and national identity, so we have to take this issue seriously. Finally, I would hope that some of the results of the LexALP project will help us, even indirectly, in the negotiations for a declaration in the field of "Population and Culture".

Language Harmonisation in South Tyrol

Current issues in harmonising bilingual legal terminology according to Annette Lenz, Director of the Province Office for Language Issues

What are the tasks of the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano-South Tyrol's Office for Language Issues?

Lenz: Our office, with a staff of 12 translators and a secretary, is assigned with translating and revising provincial laws and regulations from a linguistic point of view. On request, we translate national laws into German and revise various texts produced by the Province administration, such as forms, books and brochures. We translate mainly from and into German, Italian and Ladin, and sometimes from English and French.

We support the Province Terminology Commission for legal and administrative terminology in South Tyrol. In addition, we offer linguistic advice and consulting services to Province offices as well as the public.

The German terminology for the Italian legal system still lacks coherence, completeness and consistency of usage. How does this affect your daily translation work?

Lenz: In legal as well as administrative texts, we often find as many as three different terms for the same concept. Many writers of such texts are simply not aware of the importance of consistency, especially in legal texts, which should be as clear and precise as possible. In South Tyrol, new terms (such as job or study titles) are often created independently by various institutions without any sort of agreement with others who will have to use the term. Legal terms used in Austria or Germany are applied to concepts in Italian law, even though their meanings are not equivalent. German terms or neologisms often result from hurried, superficial translations, or terms are translated in a specific context without taking their general meaning into consideration. Once questionable terms have been introduced, they spread very quickly, especially with today's media,

and it is extremely difficult to replace them with proper terminology. We deal with the resulting chaos in our daily work.

Harmonising terminology between languages requires a detailed scientific comparison of the linguistic and legal features of the different systems, but the human factor also plays a very important role. How can acceptance and diffusion of new terminology be promoted?

Lenz: A great deal of useful work has been done in the last few years to create a South Tyrolean legal terminology. The BISTRO online database, which is accessible to the general public, is an important first step. The biggest problem is that if you have used a certain term or expression for a long time,

and you are used to getting your ideas across, it is difficult to adopt an unfamiliar new term even if it is more correct.

Sometimes the introduction of new terms requires promotion in the media. People who are involved in drafting legal documents, or writing in general, should be aware of the importance of correct and consistent terminology, and also know whom to contact when new terminology needs clarification. It's obviously

very difficult to impose language on a population, but if people understand why a certain decision has been made, they are usually more willing to accept it.



Annette Lenz

Bilingualism in Valle d'Aosta

What is the language situation in the Valle d'Aosta? How many languages are currently spoken there, and what is their official status?

Muti: The Autonomous Region of the Valle d'Aosta is officially bilingual: both French and Italian are currently spoken. While the 1948 Autonomy Statute grants equal recognition to French and Italian, Franco-provençal and Germanophone dialects do not enjoy the same official status, though they are also widely used. There have been public initiatives to protect and, eventually, to expand their use.

What legal strategies for safeguarding language diversity and promoting multilingualism have been officially enacted?

Muti: In the field of education, from

nursery school through secondary school, the same number of hours is spent teaching both languages.

Prospective employees at regional administrative offices must first pass a bilingualism proficiency exam. In the legal field, official documents can be drafted in either Italian or French upon request (though the judicial documents must be written in Italian).

Is any specific public office responsible for multilingual terminological activity in the legal and administrative fields?

Muti: The Regional Council established the "Service de promotion de la langue française", a public office charged with both promoting the French language and handling administrative or legal translations.



Stefania Muti, co-ordinator, Espace Mont-Blanc, Regional official of the Autonomous Region of the Valle d'Aosta Direction Environment

Resisting Global Monolingualism

Bénédicte Madinier, head of development projects for the General Delegation for the French Language, makes a case for the importance of linguistic heterogeneity

The world is going global. But to outsiders, France appears to maintain a stubbornly monolingual stance, to the point of overprotection of the French language, of its *pureté*. Is this a misconception?

Madinier: This is certainly a misconception. On the contrary, monolingualism is precisely what we are trying to avoid. Cultural and linguistic diversity are at stake – every language is unique, and conveys a way of thinking, a culture. Becoming more global should not mean that we have to replace all existing languages with a single, common one. Of course a lingua franca is necessary in certain circumstances, but the current internationalisation of language runs the risk of excessive uniformity and a doctrinaire approach. Our view is that promotion of the French language helps give a chance to languages in general. I do not consider this overprotective.

We live in a multicultural and multilingual world, and we insist that multilingualism should be promoted and access to languages be extended to as many people as possible. Specifically, we favour early language education: at least two languages should be taught in primary schools. But language is rarely subject to legal regulation in France. The only aspect governed by the law is access to information: all French citizens have the right to be informed in their own language on civil matters.

Still, the *pureté de la langue* remains a topic of endless discussion for us. Language matters in France, and it can be thought of as a living organism: it evolves spontaneously, along with civilisation. Keeping our language alive and maintaining its quality and richness is first and foremost a question of personal awareness and commitment with the support of the authorities, as we consider it the fundamental element of

our cultural heritage and of our identity. We certainly don't want the people to be told how they should express themselves, but a good command of language is very important: more than purity, the important thing is precise and effective communication.

What are the main objectives and activities of the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France*?

Madinier: The *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* is in charge of implementing and co-ordinating language policy in France. Its main objectives are to promote language awareness, to use French as a means of better integration (particularly for immigrants and victims of social exclusion), to strengthen the links based on language between French-speaking and other European countries, and to contribute to the enrichment of our language. The French language needs to be adapted to the constant, increasingly rapid changes in society through modernisation of language, and by providing French words to express the contemporary scientific and technical realities. The office for the enrichment of the French language was established in order to develop, publish and officially endorse new terms and definitions, thus enabling our language to have a real future.

What can be done to safeguard the national language and to promote intercultural dialogue at the same time?

Madinier: I wish I knew the answer! It should be possible to find some solutions, such as developing translation through all possible media and technology. Original media in one's own language is crucial, be it books, theatre, films or songs: all means



Bénédicte Madinier

of linguistic expression and creativity should be encouraged and supported. This is an important way of stressing the importance of language in our culture. But we cannot ignore the considerable cost of such programmes, particularly in the EU, which has 25 countries.

We have just initiated a project at the European level, the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL). This project reflects a shared concern about the future of our languages in Europe, providing a forum for discussing the status of language in our countries: What is language policy? What sort of actions should be taken, and to what extent should the state be involved in these matters? We hope that some useful ideas and projects come out of this "think tank" to help us to make the right choices for the future.

Interviews by Elena Chiochetti
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