

# The Importance of Language Services in International Relations

Presented in Canberra in November 1997 by His Excellency **Aneurin Hughes**,  
Head of the European Commission delegation in Australia.

It is a great honour to be asked to give the Jill Blewett Tenth Anniversary Lecture. I should say that unlike any previous speakers, who have given this lecture I did not know Jill Blewett. But, having read of her contribution and her views, it does seem to me that I share a great number of her pre-dispositions and her emphasis on the importance of multilingualism, of what it can mean to any society, and also the emphasis that she seemed always to put on communication rather than merely the mechanics of the *métier*. I also noticed that she was very interested in the theatre and this is *par excellence* the *métier* of communication. In thinking about this, it struck me that we Welsh have a long tradition of either ascending the steps of the pulpit or the steps of the stage. But perhaps our Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkinses are much more famous for their words than our great preachers, our great Christmas Evanses and our Huw Evanses. But communication, I think, is the essence of anyone like myself who was bilingual from the age of six. I learnt English only when I went to school. Before that I was entirely a monoglot: Welsh speaking.

One of the great authors, great in my book because he was one of the few who could make me laugh when I was alone in a room, is Leo Rosten. The favourite books of his for me were two about Hyman Kaplan. Hyman Kaplan was a larger than life character who came from an un-named middle European country and was the star pupil in a school in New York. The school was for teaching English to immigrants into America, sufficient English that they could pass the exam to become US citizens. There is a Mr. Parkhill, long-suffering teacher at this New York evening school. To give you a little vintage taste of Hyman Kaplan: he has always got his hand up for an answer to any question - he is always wrong. For example, when

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Since 1973 Mr Hughes has worked for the European Commission, variously as Head of Division for Internal Co-ordination in the Secretariat General, as Advisor to the Spokesman and Director-General for Information, as Chef de Cabinet of Lord Ivor Richard, Member of the Commission, and as Organiser of Conference on Culture, Economy and New Technologies in Florence. From 1987 to 1995 he was Head of Delegation in Oslo, Norway, and since 1995 he has been Head of Delegation in Canberra.

they are having a lesson on the declension of adjectives, Mr Parkhill teaches them painstakingly. "Now class," he says, "who can suggest to me the comparative and superlative forms for 'bad'?" Great muttering all around, scratching of heads, what could it possibly be? Hyman Kaplan with a grin from ear to ear has got his hand up. Parkhill evades his gaze for at least five minutes, searching for any other possible claimant to knowledge. Hyman Kaplan, without blinking, still looks at him and eventually Parkhill has to turn his gaze and says "Mr Kaplan?" "I have the answer! Bad...worse....dead!" So I do recommend to anyone who wants to learn about the trials and tribulations of teaching foreign languages and also to learn about communication, that they look at the books of Leo Rosten on Hyman Kaplan.

In the introduction to one of his books, he looks at what some people consider to be humour. Leo Rosten's definition of humour, which is one I've always liked, is that humour is the affectionate communication of insight. I thought that that would not be a bad description for the *métier* of interpreters and translators - it is the affectionate communication of insight which makes the wheels turn round.

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*Walk together, talk together,  
O peoples of the world, then and  
only then will you have peace.*

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Two years ago I was ambassador in Norway and had given a dinner party to raise money for the American Field Service, an exchange program for pre-university kids which sends them to live with families in other countries. I mention the AFS because (they organised) my year in America all those years ago, in Oregon, a marvellous place. There were two Indian tribes that I visited. One had what they regarded as the distinct honour of still not having signed a peace treaty with the United States Government. The second had this marvellous motto which became the AFS motto, and it was "*Walk together, talk together, O peoples of the world, then and only then will you have peace*". Think of that also in the context of your work as interpreters and as translators. It is part of that whole business of making people walk together and talk together. It is perhaps what Churchill once described as being "jaw, jaw, and not war, war".

**W**hen I came back after my year in Oregon, I returned to Swansea Grammar School, a very famous school founded by the Bishop of Waterford-Lismore some 400 years ago, but more famous perhaps because Dylan Thomas had gone there and had been the editor of the school magazine. That year there was a remarkable innovation, there was a girl there! It had been a boys' school since time immemorial. Her name was Gina Williams, and Gina couldn't speak English. She had come to

the Swansea Grammar School to learn English, because she had come from Patagonia and she had been brought up bilingually in Welsh and in Spanish. Gina was quite a remarkable lady. Some years after that, I was visiting Australia and New Zealand for the first time, in 1964. We went to a student conference in Christchurch, New Zealand, held in a horticultural hall which no longer exists. I was representing the National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In front of my desk was a sign, "England". At some point, I needed to speak, and waved my placard. The chairman, I think he was a Paraguayan, said "Inglaterra - England". Over the *écouteurs* came the word "Wales"! Everyone was wondering what was going on. It was Gina Williams! She had come as the head of a group of interpreters from Geneva, and had remembered me.

Several years later, I had just arrived in Brussels when the U.K. joined (the European Economic Community) in 1973. I had gone from the Foreign Office in Rome to Brussels, switching allegiances. I was at a meeting concerned with European schools. Wherever there are institutions of the European Community, we have a European school open to all kinds of people who work in the institutions. And, of course, it is multilingual because they have to be taught in all the official languages of the Community. That is quite a headache if you think of providing teaching in say, 11 official languages which we've got at the present time. This was a meeting of school parents and, of course, there was interpretation. I had *écouteurs* on - my French wasn't brilliant in those days. I was listening away, and there was some chap who was Italian who was intervening in the debate and speaking French, but atrociously. I could not follow him at all. Everyone was scratching their heads. He went on and on and on. Then, coming over was the interpretation in English. "I um...er...mmmm...ah...ah...", and then at one point, "I'm sorry, I don't know what the hell this man is saying!...I don't think he does either!!".

So you will gather from all this that even if I am not one of you, I have been subjected to you over many years indeed!

I would now like to suggest a few points where we have a lot in common, to give you some information as to where we are in the European institutions and finally, perhaps, suggest that there is one overriding issue that we all face in the future. First, of course, you have to look at the political developments taking place, because you cannot look at interpretation and translation in a vacuum. And I would like to spend a few moments suggesting that the political developments in Europe as a whole now, not just those of the institutions of the Community, are extremely fascinating and have parallels with what is happening in Australia. I have to confess an ignorance: when I came to Australia first, I had no idea of how federal a system you had, or of the tensions between the States and the Federal Government. I really didn't have any idea of the degree of devolved power that the premiers and governments of the different States had. So it was quite a surprise to learn that the Australian system was very similar to the German system, with its weak central government in Bonn and very strong federal governments in the different *Länder*.

In Europe as a whole, the kind of new paradigm of government that is developing sees two forces at work. One force concentrates certain decisions at an international, multinational level; the other force transfers power away from the centre to the periphery of a locality, of a commune, a region, a shire, a county or whatever you want to call it. This is fascinating, for it is this tension, if you like, which is going to be politically debated in Europe, I would say for the next 15 or 20 years. Now you might say, "Oh, he is only celebrating the success of the Welsh assembly vote in the referendum two weeks ago." We only squeezed through by 0.7 of one percent. However, it was 4 to 1 against in 1979. But it is much more than that. It is happening, but much later, in the United Kingdom. There has been an old joke for years about the "occasionally United Kingdom".

The moves within Europe towards this federated system are quite significant. The German system, interestingly enough, was set up by the British in the immediate post-war years. Also, they have a

very forward system of trade union legislation and relationship between trade unions and federal government based on a blueprint by Vic Feather, ex secretary general of the T.U.C. in the U.K.. Why the U.K. didn't impose it on themselves is another question. But even France, now that most centralist of states, remembers De Gaulle saying, "*Après Paris, qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*", "What is there after Paris?"

Even after France has now moved towards a greater degree of devolution to the provinces. I think in the future you will find that there will be a move towards some kind of regional assemblies, whether in Brittany or Languedoc or other parts. They have ordinary devolved powers to most states in Italy, but in 1971 they passed a bill setting up five *superregioni*. Alto Adige for example, has its own tax raising powers. Now, of course, we have this rather silly debate as to whether there should be the creation of Padania in Northern Italy, and Mr. Bossi and his Northern League. I think this is more gimmicky than real. I do not see that kind of development but I do see an increase in the devolution of power away from Rome. Belgium now operates almost entirely as a three member

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state, with Brussels, the Walloons speakers and the Dutch speakers, (remember, you mustn't say Flemish any longer) having their own legislatures. The German minority also has its own legislative representation outside of the country. The second chamber of the German parliament, the Council, has direct representation of all German delegations in every sphere of the Community's institutional decision-making process when matters affecting any *Land* are discussed. And in Spain, the coalition at the moment depends on an agreement between the right-of-centre party in Spain and Mr. Pujol's Catalonian party. Without Mr. Pujol, that coalition would break up. The question is whether with 8 million Catalan speakers in Catalonia it will

be possible to retain a central state in Spain or whether there will be much more delegation of powers down to individual departments grouped within a federal system.

If you then look at ex-Yugoslavia, I have a theory that, if we'd had a devolved system in what was always an artificial federal state under Tito, where each of the nationalities could have exercised their right to language and culture, and if we had had that within the context of a European Common Foreign and Security Policy 10 or 12 years ago, we could have avoided the horrors of Bosnia. This issue of language and culture also has to be seen within those political developments taking place. I see the future of ex-Yugoslavia and even some of the CIS states within the context of an enlarged European Community.

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After discussing the devolved scene, power moving from the centre, we come to the question of what is being concentrated at the centre. This, of course, has its own problems. Nation-states are crying out for the protection of the virtue and integrity of the nation-state. But you have to ask, "what does it mean?" It may have been fine when the Treaty of Westphalia was signed, but what was the nation-state all about? It was about power. Nowadays, what does sovereignty mean, when by tapping on your computer you can transfer money from any bit of the world to any other bit of the world within 30 seconds? There are important questions to ask about the reality of the nation-state as a concept and whether it has outlived its usefulness, whether it is slowly shrinking away. At the moment it is clinging to the powers that it has got. Nevertheless, I believe that the movement to concentrate the powers where it is necessary to concentrate them is unstoppable in the medium term.

To illustrate my meaning, I will tell you how in Europe one looks at ordinary issues of the

environment, and give you one example of why it is essential that we look at it globally as a community rather than just leave it to national governments: "you ought to clean up the Rhine." Great! But what is the point of having stringent measures about what you can chuck into the Rhine in France if it is different in Germany? What is the point in having severe measures in one country to control acid rain when the winds that carry acid rain are no respecter of boundary or frontier?

Meanwhile, we are moving towards a single currency which will come about on the first of January 1999 not because somebody scratched their head and said, "Oh, that's a good idea", but rather because, if we have a single market for the movement of goods and services and people and capital, it is a nonsense that you should operate with a different currency in Perth, so to speak, to the one that is in Canberra. But because we are thinking in mind-sets which are an eighteenth and even seventeenth century creation, why should we think that operating the same currency in Bonn and London is so different from using one currency in San Francisco and New York or in Perth and Canberra? You have to do a little bit of sideways thinking occasionally to appreciate it. We're doing it because it makes sense, because it stops people from making huge amounts of money by playing with exchange rates, and to stop the huge costs of transactions across the borders simply because you are moving them from one country to another. We are moving to a situation where it makes sense for these decisions to be taken at the centre.

Come now more closely to your interests and the questions of language. I was in court in Caernarvon, North Wales, eighteen months ago. I was giving a speech to the Gwynedd County Council, and my speech was in Welsh. And, of course, there was interpretation, as normal, because maybe four or five of the fifty or so who were gathered there did not speak Welsh. I have to tell you that would have been unthinkable even 30 years ago. When I was in school and going to Swansea Grammar School, everything was in

English. There were no schools where I could be taught through the medium of Welsh. Five years later, after the Education Act of 1944, my sister did all of her primary schooling in Welsh. Nowadays in Wales, your parents can choose whether to send you to a Welsh-medium instruction stream or an English instruction stream. Interestingly enough, whereas the total population who speak Welsh is something like 20% according to the last census, between the ages of 15 and 16 it is creeping up to 25%. This is becoming the norm, and you have the strange phenomenon now of English parents coming down to Cardiff to work in British Airways, a huge establishment there, and opting to send their kids to the Welsh language system. So I would say that we are moving much more, at least, into a climate where the advantages and virtues of bilingualism and multiculturalism are recognised.

**B**ut it is not just from my experience in Wales. At the present time in the metropolitan area of London, there are in the order of 140 different languages used in teaching. A lot of those languages, of course, are related to the ex-colonial empire of the United Kingdom, so a lot of Urdu and Hindi is taught, or classes conducted in those languages. I think that there is a lot one can learn from how mistakes have been made in the past, and also the successes.

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We have a situation where we have new languages being brought into everyday experience and, at the same time, because of this devolution development throughout Europe, some of the lesser-used languages of Europe are poking their heads above the parapet because they are not subject to centralised authority which dictated that

only one metropolitan language could be used. I think it is wonderful. It reasserts, in a way, the technical mosaic of Europe, rather than the attempts of totalitarian regimes, whether in Spain or Greece, or the Soviet Union, to force the generic one-sided view of the world. I think that as a result of this, there will be an outpouring of cultural manifestations and vitality in the future, more than we've had for a very, very long time.

Within the institutions of the European Community, we now have probably the largest single translation/interpretation force in the world. There are about 3,000 people involved. Altogether they represent about one third of our total staff who have a university degree.

Eleven official languages, with a possible further eleven languages to become official with the enlargement of the Community - that creates a few problems. The immediate challenge is that the first regulation ever passed by the Council of Ministers of the European institutions says that all official languages shall be equal. That means that anybody who writes to us from any member state of the Community has to be answered in his own language, that all translations of official texts, every piece of legal text has to be produced in the eleven languages of the European Community. That can mean, even with the rich language of English, that it has to produce new words, new expressions to cater for some of the legal requirements involved in the U.K. being part of the European Community. The head of our office gave a speech in Helsinki in 1996 in which he said that we had to employ one hundred Finnish translators within a short period of time. That was quite difficult. There are not many Finnish-Greek speakers around. We had to find something of the order of 450 new expressions into Finnish because of their membership of the European Community. We now translate over one million pages per annum. We accelerate that by ten percent for every new language that comes in. On the translating side alone, we have about 1,300 full-time employees, and even then we have to go outside for 20% of our material to be translated. And of

course, this is not only in the official languages. In Wales we have a little bulletin that comes out in Welsh. When I was in Norway, I had to produce two news magazines, one in ordinary Norwegian, Riksmål, and the other one in Nynorsk. It was a legal requirement of the Norwegian Government that 25% of all official texts had to be in Nynorsk. While not a linguist in your sense, one of my special subjects was semantics and I did a degree in philosophy. I have to tell you there wasn't much difference, it seemed to me, between Nynorsk and Riksmål - I'm sure there's somebody in the audience who could correct me.

We produce texts regularly in Arabic, in Chinese, in Japanese and in Slovenian as well as a huge number of other languages. You will perhaps have heard of our automatic translation system, which is called Systran. We remember the old stories when the CIA had some marvellous machine and was able to produce Pravda immediately in language that was recognisably English even if you couldn't understand a word; now Systran is used increasingly for first texts. It is never good enough for the text to be deemed the official text in a given language, but increasingly, when it is a matter of urgency, it is used to give people an ephemeral translation. I have seen it used and I think it is quite remarkable. You have immediately got the drift and the main arguments of any text, and, of course, they throw it away when the proper translator gets at it.

**I**n relation to interpretation, there are now some 500 official interpreters. A number come in from outside. In 1995, we interpreted at nearly 11,000 different meetings which, translated roughly, means 120,000 interpreter-days. On average, we were interpreting from 17 languages into 11, and I don't think there was a single direct case of Finnish into Greek or vice versa.

The question of training is absolutely essential as far as our interpretation and translation service is concerned. You must get it right one hundred percent of the time for the purposes of the law. If you get it wrong you can be taken to court and it can cost you a lot of money. If, for example, it is

something to do with the Common Agricultural Policy, the Greek farmer needs to know exactly what the requirement is. He may receive up to 5,000 different pieces of legislation a year and he'll want to be able to read them all; but that is roughly the number we produce, because we manage the whole of Agriculture for the whole of the Community. He has to know the changes in farm-gate prices on a daily basis and he has to have that in Greek because he does not read any other language. And it is the same for everybody else around the community, so it is absolutely essential that the quality of the translation is a hundred percent. We spend an inordinate amount of time training our interpreters and translators, not just in the formal business of language and vocabulary, but also that they will become experts in the particular field with which they deal. Some of you will also know of our huge new glossary of terms and terminological phrases in a system called *Eurodicautom*, and that is being extended, of course, on a daily basis. There is also intense training in new technologies. I think over 95% of all our translating and interpreting staff are more than computer literate, so that almost 100% is done via visual screen.

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**I**now come to what I suggest is an issue which we all have to face in the future, and it is an important one. It is almost a banality to say that we are living in a glass walled planet. The information society is now global, whether we are thinking of text or sound or image. You just have to turn on your Galaxy television to recognise that. The question is to what extent this is a menace to multilingualism or to what extent it creates a new dimension for multilingualism. Again there is a political connotation to that question: if you are living in a closed society, they will always go for the notion that multilingualism is dangerous. They

will always feel that control is better exercised through a kind of black and white approach to things. If you have multiplicity, if you have multilingualism, it is always more difficult to deal with and it is always more complicated to control. For us, I come back to that first rule ever passed by the ministers that multilingualism is not just good in itself, it is a fundamental democratic principle. For the enlargement of the European Union to include the countries from east and central Europe, the first five proposed were Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Estonia and the Czech Republic. It is hoped that the Council of Ministers will accept the recommendation in December this year, then negotiations can begin in January of next. But even when we take all those languages and the other ones that could come after - Romania, Bulgaria, and the other two Baltic states (and what will happen with the emerging states of the old Yugoslavia?) - they will also be subject to that democratic principle that all countries will have to be given equal standing as far as their language is concerned with the older languages of the European Community. The farmer in Greece or Ireland needs exactitude to conduct his business. Think of the viability of contracts in a situation where there are no longer any barriers to the movement of goods and services. Think of the issues to do with parliament, or representatives of countries having meetings. You cannot expect everybody to speak four or five languages. So, if you take it all into account, I would say that we are on a clear pathway of developing multilingualism, not only in Europe, but worldwide.

**F**inally, I will mention some of the problems. **Cost:** Again, if you take the black and white approach, people say, “The cost is so high; we have one third of the total staff dealing with translation and interpretation, it’s ridiculous! We should be spending more money on research, education, unemployment”.

There will always be that view. It is terribly important to say, “No, this is a fundamental requirement”. Whether on the small scale of the ACT law courts, or on the huge scale of running the European Union, you must have equality under the law for each language deemed official in that domain.

**Market forces:** Economic rationalism - we have heard it all in different sectors. Whether it is in education or language or whatever, we should be very wary, in my view, of economic rationalism. There are too many economic gurus around. I am reminded of a definition of economists which was once told to me: (economists are) the people who can give you an approximation of your telephone number when you’ve lost it. So beware of the people with smart solutions - there aren’t any smart solutions. We were happy, and I think, privileged, to be involved in this whole area of multiculturalism. We must make sure that we put our heads above the parapets whenever that fundamental democratic necessity is under threat.

One thing that we have learnt in the European Union, I’m sure you all know, is that we must develop the capacity to see every problem as a solution in disguise.