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Merit-Ene Ilja

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Estonian Legal Language Centre: Legal Translation and Terminology Work

MERIT-ENE ILJA *

The Estonian Legal Language Centre, initially known as the Estonian Legislative Support Centre and later on as the Estonian Legal Translation Centre, started operation in 1995 as a state agency under the governance of the Estonian State Chancellery. It was funded from the state budget.

During the EU pre-accession period, from 1995 to May 1, 2004, the Centre's mandate was to translate Estonian legislation into English and the European Union legislation, the *acquis communautaire*, into Estonian. In addition, the objective was to set up and manage a full-text database of translations and a terminology database. The Centre catered exclusively to the translation needs of the Estonian ministries who, on the one hand, required English translations of Estonian legislation to show to the European Commission its compliance with the EU law and, on the other, Estonian translations of EU Directives and Regulations in order to draft Estonian legislation in accordance with the EU law.

Starting in 2003, the Centre has worked according to the list of the *acquis communautaire* provided by the European Commission and the Council of the European Union with a view to the publication of the Estonian language version in the Official Journal of the European Union. The translations and terminology produced by the Centre are freely available on its web site and the statistics show that, apart from the Estonian ministries,

* Ms. Ilja is the director of the Estonian Legal Language Centre. Together with her colleagues, she assisted in the establishment of the Centre in 1995. Being engaged at different levels of responsibility at the Centre – first as the Head of the English Translation Unit, then as the head of the whole Translation Department, and finally as the Director of the Centre – she has contributed to its development into a center of excellence and expertise in the field of legal translation and terminology in Estonia. During the period of Estonia's preparations for its accession to the European Union, Merit-Ene Ilja was directly responsible for organising the translation of the *acquis communautaire* into Estonian. The quality-oriented workflow model set up by the Centre for the translation of the European Union legislation was followed by several other candidate countries.

diverse groups of the public, including researchers, translators, law offices, etc. are its frequent users.¹

From the outset, the Centre's aim has been to produce high-quality translations of legislation. Therefore, a quality oriented translation process relying solely on in-house translators and revisers was devised. Drawing on the legal translation experience of other countries, notably Canada and its bilingual province of Ontario, along with Finland and Sweden as the most recent accessions to the EU, we set up a work process consisting of the following steps:

- terminology work,
- translation,
- legal revision,
- linguistic revision, and
- consultations with and feedback from the client.

Teamwork is instrumental in the work process. A quality translation is produced only if every link in the chain does its work properly and meets a deadline. However, the involvement of legal experts is essential in the translation of legislation. Also, it is most important to consult subject area specialists with state-of-the-art information technology tools, namely translation memories. Thus, from scratch we have gradually built up the Centre's legal translation expertise by training and motivating the translation and terminology staff, adjusting the workflow according to the increase of experience and by taking advantage of IT tools available for making technical translation more effective. Training has been crucial in this process, as at the beginning most of our staff were linguists with good knowledge of foreign languages but lacking formal translation qualifications and translation experience. When the Centre started its activities, no university in Estonia awarded a degree in translation. It was not until 2002 that the University of Tartu set up a one-year Master's degree course in translation. Tallinn Pedagogical University followed suit in 2003.

It should be pointed out that, in addition to the state budget, the Centre has received significant external funding for training, management support, equipment and software. The primary partners in setting up the Centre were the Canadian International Development Agency and the Government of Ontario, Canada. During 1995-1999 the Centre received valuable know-how in translation and terminology work as well as management from the Office of Legislative Counsel and the Government Translation Service of the Government of Ontario, Canada. For the

¹ The homepage of the Estonian Legal Language Centre is <http://www.legaltext.ee>.

development of translation activities related to the process of European integration, the Centre has received much support in equipment and training from the European Union PHARE programme and TAIEX, DG Enlargement, European Commission, and from the British Embassy and British Council in Tallinn.

To date, the pre-accession translation and terminology work has resulted in the production of 92,000 pages of *acquis communautaire* in Estonian and about 50,000 terms in the Centre's terminology database.² However, the translation into Estonian of the EU legislation adopted before 1 May 2004, the EU accession date, still continues with the help of PHARE funding.

As of May 1, 2004, the Centre's mandate is the development and protection of the Estonian legal language, the systematisation of legal terminology, the linguistic revision of draft Estonian legislation and the translation of legislation with a view to contributing to ensuring the linguistic quality of Estonian legislation. Although the Centre continues to translate Estonian legislation into English and international conventions and agreements to which Estonia is party into Estonian, the main focus has shifted from translation to terminology work and to the provision of linguistic support to legislative drafting. The Centre has an ambitious plan to create a concept-based legal terminology database serving as a tool for draftsmen, translators and the general public. The aim of the terminology database is to record legal terms used in the Estonian legislation providing their definitions and other relevant data.

During the nine years of its operation, the Estonian Legal Language Centre has developed into a centre of expertise in legal translation and terminology work in Estonia. At present, the main challenge is to continue using its expertise for the good of the Estonian government and the public as well as to support Estonian translators working for the EU institutions.

² The legal terminology database, ESTERM, is at <http://www.legaltext.ee/en/andmebaas/ava.asp?m=032>