

What ails euro English?

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V. R. Narayanaswami



The European Union has 23 official working languages. It is a mammoth task to provide translations in all these languages. Photo: AFP

In a modern democracy, one of the rights that people assert is the right to use and promote their mother tongue. Language defines identity and can arouse strong emotions.

On Indian paper currency, the denomination is given in 15 regional languages, apart from English and Hindi recognized as official languages at the national level. The Constitution of India envisaged the emergence of Hindi as the sole official language of the country; English was to renounce its official status in 1965. But when that change was attempted, there was protest from non-Hindi speaking states. The anti-Hindi agitation led to violence, destruction of property, strikes, fasting and suicide by self immolation. Lal Bahadur Shastri assured the people that English would continue indefinitely, a decision we are now thankful for.

Moving westwards, we come to another region where language issues are prominent. But the problem here is less political than academic. The European Union (EU) has 23 official working languages. It is a mammoth task to provide translations in all these languages. The difficulties were felt as early as 1995: EU then

launched a programme called Fight the Fog.

Although German, French and English are the most important of the EU languages, the problems arise mainly in the English versions. With the admission of new members the lead that English has over German and French has increased. Some translators complain that bad English has now become the official language of EU.

Drafts are prepared by editors and translators who do not speak English as a mother tongue. They create their own neologisms out of nowhere. Planification is used in place of planning, and comitology means committee procedure. You are not likely to find these words outside the EU context.

In the last two years, there has been a continuing debate on these problems. Jeremy Garden, a senior translator with the European Court of Auditors, collected examples of bad English produced by drafters. He listed 89 words and phrases that are misused.

Here are some examples of misused English words. The first set you can think of may be false friends. "Assister" in French means to be present, as in "three directors assisted at the meeting": this means they attended it, not that they helped. The French word for news is "actualites"; this has led to the use of "actually" in the sense of currently.

Sometimes the English word is correct but the use is incorrect or awkward. The word "agent" in EU English stands for anyone employed by EU in any capacity. This is misleading because in normal use agent has a restricted meaning, as in "a secret agent" or "a travel agent". Employee itself would be a better choice.

"Third country" can have a literal meaning when the reference is to three named countries. But EU uses it in the wrong context when the word refers to countries outside EU, or to what we now know as third-world countries.

In EU usage, opportunity does not refer to a favourable circumstance that knocks but once; a sentence like "they discussed the opportunity of sending troops now" can be revised by substituting advisability for opportunity.

The verb control can be very tricky. It is often misused as a substitute for check or verify. When EU controls some procedure, it makes sure that it is audited, and there are safeguards. It is not a question of exercising power over the procedure.

The commission is considering several measures to remedy the situation. Among the suggestions made are prescribing a limit to the length of the document, recruiting staff who have drafting experience, training the authors and translators, mandatory editing of documents, and encouraging clear writing by offering rewards.

V. R. Narayanaswami is a former professor of English, and has written several books and articles on the usage of the language. He looks at

the peculiarities of business and popular English usage in his fortnightly column.