

Retour Interpreting

The Art of Interpreting into B

Edited by
Riccardo Moratto and Irene A. Zhang

First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-032-87121-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-87122-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-53100-5 (ebk)

Chapter 4

From Marginal to Mainstream

Retour Interpreting in the European Union

Pavol Šveda and Ivo Poláček

(CC BY-NC-ND) 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9781003531005-4

The Open Access version of this chapter was funded by Comenius
University Bratislava.

4 From Marginal to Mainstream

Retour Interpreting in the European Union

Pavol Šveda and Ivo Poláček

1 Introduction

Retour interpreting has long been a topic of debate within the field of conference interpreting. Historically, the dominant view, particularly within the Western school of interpreting, has favoured interpreting into the A language, prioritising native language production as a means of ensuring high-quality output. This perspective is deeply rooted in the belief that interpreters are most effective when they translate into their mother tongue, where they can fully exploit their linguistic proficiency and cultural nuance. As Seleskovitch (1978) argues, the superiority of the A¹ language over the B language in terms of clarity, idiomaticity, and overall quality is generally accepted within this tradition. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the belief has been prevalent both in AIIC and Western European countries, most of which were member states of the European Union (EU). Consequently, this perspective has also influenced the organisation of interpreting services in EU institutions (Čenková 2007).

However, the expansion of the EU in 2004, which brought in ten new member states from Central and Eastern Europe, introduced significant linguistic challenges that required a re-evaluation of this approach. The enlargement added nine languages to the EU's official roster, many of which were not widely spoken outside their countries of origin. As we will try to demonstrate, this shift created a practical necessity for retour interpreting, as it became increasingly difficult to find interpreters proficient enough in these newer, less commonly spoken languages as their B or C languages. This reliance on retour interpreting has not been a temporary solution but seems to be a lasting feature of the EU multilingual regime.

Several of the new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe have been historically influenced by the school of thought that originated from the Soviet bloc. This school of thought traditionally advocated for retour interpreting, which emphasises the importance of native comprehension of the source language. Theoreticians like Denissenko (1989) argued that understanding the source language, often one's A language, is paramount, especially under challenging conditions such as high speech rates or complex

accents. This school of thought believes that a less idiomatic or slightly accented target language output is preferable to an interpretation that is linguistically flawless but fails to convey the full meaning of the source text.

The EU's multilingual policy, which strives to respect and represent the linguistic diversity of its member states, has further complicated the debate. The EU institutions, particularly the Directorate-General for Interpretation (DG SCIC) and the Directorate-General for Logistics and Interpretation for Conferences (DG LINC), have had to adapt to a multilingual environment where retour interpreting has become more common and traditionally preferred. The inclusion of languages such as Slovak, Latvian, and Maltese, which have relatively few proficient speakers among interpreters in other language booths, has made retour interpreting a practical necessity rather than a theoretical preference.

In this linguistic landscape, retour interpreting has moved from being a marginal, for some, perhaps even controversial practice to a necessity which underpins the current model of multilingual language policy in conference interpreting. However, despite its prevalence, retour interpreting is often still perceived as a “necessary evil” or a temporary measure (see Čenková 2007). The dominant preference within EU institutions remains for interpreting into the A language, which is seen as the gold standard for ensuring linguistic accuracy, fluency, and cultural appropriateness (Bartłomiejczyk 2004). This prioritisation reflects a lingering scepticism about the quality of retour interpreting, with many viewing it as a compromise rather than an ideal solution, particularly when compared with the presumed superior output of A-language interpreting (cf. Graves, Pascual Olaguíbel and Pearson 2021).

Given these ongoing perceptions, this chapter aims to explore the current state of retour interpreting within the EU institutions, focusing specifically on its use 20 years after the significant enlargement of 2004. The objectives of this chapter are not to trace the evolution of retour interpreting over the past two decades but to verify, in a limited and focused manner, the frequency of retour use in contemporary EU settings. The chapter will analyse a small sample of meetings held at the Council of the European Union and of plenary meetings of the European Parliament to identify in which languages retour is predominantly used and how frequently it is employed. Through this focused inquiry, the chapter seeks to shed light on the continued relevance and challenges of retour interpreting in one of the world's most complex multilingual environments.

1.1 Conceptual Development of Retour Interpreting

The development of retour interpreting as both a concept and practice has been marked by a gradual divergence between theory and practice, especially within the context of European institutions. This divide is rooted in the long-standing debate over directionality in interpreting, particularly the relative merits of interpreting into one's native language (A language)

versus interpreting into a second language (B language) (see Bartłomiejczyk 2004; Kalina 2005; Bartłomiejczyk 2015; Bartłomiejczyk and Stachowiak-Szymczak 2021).

As mentioned previously, the theoretical landscape of conference interpreting in Western Europe has been heavily influenced by the views of the Paris School, particularly as articulated by Seleskovitch (1978) who strongly advocated for interpreting into the A language, arguing that the quality of interpretation is inherently superior when the interpreter is working in their native tongue. She contended that interpreting into the B language is fraught with challenges, such as severe source language interference and a higher cognitive load, which detract from the overall quality of the interpretation. According to Seleskovitch, interpreting into B should be avoided, particularly in simultaneous interpreting, except in cases involving highly technical material that can be translated more literally (1978).

Gile (2005) shared similar reservations about retour interpreting. While Gile acknowledged the practical necessity of retour interpreting in some contexts, his work largely echoed the belief that interpreting into A is preferable and likely to yield higher quality outcomes. This view, rooted in a blend of personal experience, ideology, and tradition, became the dominant perspective within European institutions, as evidenced by the stance of EU interpretation services. Representatives of these services, such as Alison Graves, Marina Pascual Olaguíbel, and Cathy Pearson, have stated that “though the institutions work predominantly with interpreters working from a range of passive languages into their A language, for some languages and in certain situations, retour interpreting is required” (Graves, Pascual Olaguíbel and Pearson 2022, 106), reflecting a continued adherence to this traditional view.

Despite the dominance of the Paris School’s perspective, the practice of retour interpreting has persisted and even expanded within the EU, driven largely by practical considerations. Čenková (2007) notes that after the EU’s 2004 expansion, the asymmetry in retour use became more pronounced, with the newer member states’ languages being underrepresented in interpreter language combinations. This situation made retour interpreting unavoidable, as there were often insufficient interpreters with these languages as their B or C languages. Consequently, native speakers of these less common languages had to interpret into more widely spoken languages, typically as their B languages.

Research by Gorton (2012) supports this practical necessity, indicating that despite the less favoured status of retour interpreting, its use has become widespread across all languages. Gorton’s survey of AIIC members revealed that a significant number of interpreters work regularly into their B languages, and many respondents acknowledged feeling pressure to develop a B language to enhance their market value. This reflects a market reality where retour interpreting is often indispensable in all languages, even if it is not the preferred mode of operation.

Donovan, as cited in Gorton (2012), highlights the cognitive dynamics at play in retour interpreting. Donovan suggests that while interpreting into a B language may involve an “expression deficit” compared with interpreting into an A language, it also benefits from a “comprehension bonus,” particularly in complex or high-pressure situations. This trade-off complicates the traditional preference for A-language interpreting, suggesting that retour interpreting, despite its challenges, can offer unique advantages depending on the context and languages involved.

Opdenhoff’s (2011) research further explores these cognitive and practical aspects, providing empirical evidence that challenges the traditional biases against retour. Opdenhoff’s findings indicate that while interpreters often perceive retour as more cognitively demanding, the actual quality of interpretation does not significantly differ from A-language interpretation when adequate preparation and experience are accounted for. This supports the growing recognition that retour interpreting has proven to be a viable and sometimes necessary practice within the EU’s complex multilingual framework.

Bartłomiejczyk’s analysis (2015) further highlights the growing divide between theory and practice. Bartłomiejczyk notes that while the theoretical debate on directionality has often emphasised the superiority of interpreting into A, the realities of the interpreting market, especially within the EU, have led to an increasing reliance on retour interpreting. This reliance is particularly evident in the context of less common languages, where the availability of interpreters is limited. Kalina suggests that the significance of directionality may be overstated when not considered alongside other factors such as the specific languages involved, the context of the conference, and the needs of the participants (2015).

Thus, while retour interpreting continues to be viewed by some as a “necessary evil,” its practical importance has grown, reflecting the complex linguistic demands of the modern EU. This ongoing tension between theory and practice illustrates the need for a more nuanced understanding of retour interpreting, which acknowledges its challenges while recognising its indispensability in many multilingual contexts.

1.2 Multilingualism in the EU

The EU has long been committed to multilingualism, a principle enshrined in its very first regulation, Council Regulation No 1/1958, which established the official and working languages of the European Economic Community (EEC). Initially, the EEC had four official languages: French, German, Italian, and Dutch, reflecting the languages of its six founding member states (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands). Over time, with each enlargement of the EU, the number of official languages expanded to reflect the linguistic diversity of new member states. By 2013, after Croatia’s accession, the EU had 24 official languages, covering 552 language

combinations (Bartłomiejczyk 2016). This expansion in language diversity posed challenges for communication within the institutions, and tested the EU's commitment to "unity in diversity."

The 2004 enlargement, often referred to as the "big bang enlargement," was a significant moment in the development of EU multilingualism. Ten new member states joined, and nine new languages were added to the EU's official roster. This major expansion led to a dramatic increase in the number of languages and language combinations – from 11 languages and 110 language combinations in 2003 to 20 languages and 380 combinations in 2004, and eventually to 24 languages and 552 combinations in 2013 (Bartłomiejczyk 2016). This chapter will primarily focus on the post-2004 period, examining how multilingualism, particularly the use of retour, has been managed and adapted within EU institutions.

The demand for interpretation services has increased in parallel with the expansion of languages in the EU. Bartłomiejczyk (2016) notes that the European Parliament required approximately 100,000 interpreter days annually in 2012 to cover its meetings and plenary sessions. According to its 2023 Annual Activity Report, the European Parliament provided interpreting services at 5,534 meetings, delivering a total of 10,083 hours of interpretation (European Parliament 2023). The Directorate-General for Interpretation (DG SCIC), which serves the European Commission and provides interpreting services for the Council of the European Union, managed over 179,000 interpretation slots in 2023, each representing roughly half a day of interpreting, and accounted for 54,160 contract days for freelance interpreters (European Commission 2024a). The scale and complexity of these services, along with the parallel system of translation services, make the management of EU multilingualism a costly and logistically challenging endeavour. This chapter does not focus on the financial, logistical, or political aspects of multilingualism, which are thoroughly discussed elsewhere (see Bartłomiejczyk 2016; Ammon 2006; Gazzola 2006). What is crucial, however, is that at the time of writing, multilingualism in its full form – enabling every participant to use one of the 24 official languages and be understood in all others – creates an optimal context for the use of retour. As will be argued, retour is an indispensable and irreplaceable element of this language regime.

In this chapter, we focus on how the two largest interpreting services in the EU, DG SCIC and DG LINC, managed the significant expansion of official languages and the resulting implications for the necessity of retour interpreting. The third important user of interpreting services – The European Court of Justice – is not covered within our research due to its specific position and lower volume of required interpretation services. As we will argue, retour interpreting has become a critical component of the EU's interpreting regime. Although it may not have been anticipated in earlier stages, it has proven indispensable in ensuring coverage across all 24 official languages.

Looking briefly into the history, DG SCIC's February 2007 memo, *Interpretation: Where Do We Stand After Completion of the Fifth Enlargement?*

(European Commission 2024b), highlights the institution's response to the 2004 enlargement, which added nine new languages, followed by three additional languages in 2007. The memo acknowledges that DG SCIC is making "a long-term investment in training, the results of which will come on-stream only gradually." The primary goal of this training initiative was to expand passive language coverage of the 'new' languages among interpreters with established 'old' A languages. At the time, 61 interpreters from EU-15 member states (40 staff and 21 freelance) were enrolled in courses to acquire passive skills in the languages of the 12 new member states, as well as Irish, Croatian, and Turkish (European Commission 2024b). This indicates a concerted effort to reduce reliance on retour interpreting by increasing passive language knowledge among interpreters of older languages. Now, 20 years after the first major wave of enlargement, we can evaluate the success of this initiative and its impact on the reliance on retour interpreting within the EU's multilingual framework.

1.3 Objectives and Methodology

As previously outlined, the objective of this study is to map the extent and frequency of retour use among the official languages of the EU within the context of DG LINC and DG SCIC. We aim to analyse the extent to which retour was employed across individual languages, identify which languages were used in retour interpreting and determine to what extent individual languages were covered as passive (C) languages in other language booths. This analysis will allow us to assess whether retour interpreting is an exception or a necessity in supporting the EU's comprehensive language regime.

The methodology employed consists of analysing two sets of data. The first involves an examination of publicly available documents published by DG SCIC and DG LINC, from which we can derive the practical importance both institutions place on retour when accrediting new interpreters. Since accreditation is regarded as a prestigious recognition within the interpreting industry, the language profile requirements defined by these institutions serve as important indicators of language priorities in individual language units.

The second source of data derives from practical information collected in 2024, focusing on mapping the use of retour in various meetings. We approached both DG SCIC and DG LINC with requests for relevant data, specifically seeking details on the total number of staff interpreters, accredited freelance interpreters, and their respective retour languages. While DG SCIC did not respond to our request, DG LINC provided the required data, which will be presented at the outset of our findings to contextualise the subsequent analysis.

Additionally, we conducted an in-depth analysis of 30 interpreting teams at high-level meetings featuring the full-language regime (23 active and 23 passive languages)² where interpretation was provided by DG SCIC during the first semester of 2024. Furthermore, we examined 20 interpreting teams

that provided services during plenary sessions of the European Parliament within the same period. The meetings included in our analysis were selected randomly, with the primary criterion being the necessity to cover meetings with a full-language regime (23/23). This language regime is typically employed at high-level meetings such as plenary sessions of the European Parliament or ministerial meetings of the Council of the European Union. Although such high-level meetings represent only a fraction of the total number of meetings, both DG SCIC and DG LINC apply stringent internal interpreter quality control schemes to ensure that only interpreters with the highest performance ratings are engaged in these sessions.

1.4 The Interpreter Pool of European Parliament

Before proceeding to our research, let us first examine the current pool of interpreters serving the European Parliament. As previously mentioned, we requested detailed information from both institutions on the composition of their interpreting workforce. However, only DG LINC of the European Parliament provided a response, with the data being supplied in September 2024. Although we lack specific data on the interpreter pool at DG SCIC of the European Commission, we believe the composition is unlikely to differ significantly. This is because both institutions rely on the same freelance workforce (Auxiliary Conference Interpreters – ACIs), with one notable distinction: DG SCIC imposes an age limit of 65 for recruiting freelancers, whereas DG LINC of the European Parliament does not enforce such a limit. As a result, DG LINC has access to a somewhat larger pool of ACIs (Table 4.1).

The table above provides a detailed overview of the interpreter pool for the European Parliament, organised by the primary language booth, interpreter status (staff or freelance ACI), and the number of interpreters providing retour interpreting into different B languages. The final column presents the percentage of interpreters within each booth who have a retour language. In this chapter, we compare the ‘old’ EU15 languages (pre-2004) and the ‘new’ languages (post-2004 accession) to assess trends in the use of retour interpreters. As of September 2024, the total number of interpreters working for the European Parliament stands at 1,343, including 244 staff interpreters and 1,099 ACIs (freelancers). The table does not include data for consecutive retours (55 in total), which may be used occasionally for field missions or ad-personam interpreting, but are irrelevant from the perspective of our research scope because they cannot be used in full-language regimes of conference interpreting. Also, we have only mapped the presence of retour in five languages – English, German, French, Spanish and Italian – because these are the languages used in the vast majority of cases. In principle, any official EU language can be accredited as a retour language, but as we will show later, even within these ‘big’ five languages, there are large asymmetries and other languages are only used in a negligible number of cases.

Table 4.1 Pool of interpreters for the European Parliament as of September 2024 with information on retour languages

	<i>Primary booth</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>ACIs</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>EN retour</i>	<i>FR retour</i>	<i>DE retour</i>	<i>ES retour</i>	<i>IT retour</i>	<i>Percentage of retours</i>
'Old' EU 15 languages	FR	19	89	108	12		5	4	2	21
	DE	20	71	91	8	4		1	1	15
	EN	22	122	144						0
	IT	17	60	77	9	4	2			19
	ES	14	75	89	16	4	11		1	36
	NL	9	43	52	6	2			1	17
	PT	9	42	51	3	6	1	2		24
	EL	9	42	51	11	3	1	1	1	33
	DA	7	26	33	8		3			33
	FI	10	28	38	10	2	6	4		58
	SV	10	34	44	4	2		1	1	18
'New' EU languages	CS	7	54	61	27	11	9	2	1	82
	ET	4	37	41	27	6	4	1		93
	LV	8	31	39	19	5	9			85
	LT	10	38	48	25	6	8	1	1	85
	HU	13	35	48	14	7	13	2	3	81
	MT	1	22	23	18	1			2	91
	PL	17	47	64	30	12	8	1	4	86
	SK	8	40	48	20	3	12	1		75
	SL	5	36	41	12	4	9	1	4	73
	BG	8	40	48	33	3	9			94
	RO	9	45	54	23	7	5	3		70
HR	7	42	49	30	3	6		3	86	
GA	1		1	1					100	
Total	244	1099	1343	366	95	121	25	25	25	47

A clear pattern emerges when comparing the share of retour interpreters between the 'old' and 'new' EU languages. In the booths for the 'old' EU15 languages – such as French, German, English, Italian and Spanish – the proportion of retour interpreters is notably lower. English, for example, has no retour interpreters, which reflects its dominant position as the primary relay language for other booths. This indicates that English is frequently used as a pivot language, with no need for retour interpreting. The highest proportion of retour interpreters among the 'old' EU languages is in the Finnish booth, at 58%, followed by Danish and Greek, both at 33%. In contrast, most of the 'old' EU languages exhibit retour coverage below 30%, with the French, German and Italian booths all having their share below 21%. These lower percentages suggest that the 'old' EU language booths rely more heavily on direct interpretation into A languages or use other established booths for relay interpretation.

In contrast, the ‘new’ EU languages, which joined after 2004, demonstrate a significantly higher reliance on retour interpreters. Nearly all post-2004 languages exhibit retour coverage rates above 70%. Booths such as Estonian (93%), Latvian (85%), Lithuanian (85%) and Maltese (91%) display a heavy reliance on retour interpreting. Bulgarian stands out with the highest retour percentage at 94%, highlighting its dependence on retour interpreters. Even the booths with the lowest retour percentages among the new languages, such as Romanian (70%) and Slovenian (73%), still show a significantly greater reliance on retour compared with the ‘old’ EU languages.

Additionally, the share of staff interpreters versus ACIs also reflects a disparity between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU languages. The ‘old’ languages tend to have more staff interpreters. In contrast, the ‘new’ EU languages rely more on ACIs.

When comparing the share of individual retour languages – English, French, German, Spanish and Italian – across the entire population of interpreters, English is by far the most commonly used retour language, representing 366 interpreters across both staff and ACIs. French follows with 95 interpreters using it as a retour language, while German has 121, Spanish 25 and Italian 25. This distribution highlights the central role of English in the retour regime, being the preferred B language across both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU languages (cf. Albl-Mikasa, 2010).

A noticeable trend is the significantly higher reliance on English as a retour language among the ‘new’ EU languages compared with the ‘old’ EU15 languages. In the ‘old’ language booths, the use of retour into English is less frequent. In contrast, the ‘new’ EU languages heavily depend on English as their main B language, with much higher percentages of retour interpreters. Additionally, while German, French, Spanish, and Italian are present as retour languages, their usage is more evenly spread across both ‘old’ and ‘new’ language booths, though still significantly lower compared with English. This underscores English’s dominant position as the primary relay language in the EU’s multilingual regime, especially for the newer member states.

In conclusion, the data reveal a significant divide between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU languages in terms of retour coverage. The ‘old’ EU15 languages benefit from greater resources, more staff interpreters, and direct interpreting capacity, while the ‘new’ EU languages depend heavily on retour interpreting and freelance interpreters. This suggests that despite efforts to expand language coverage, the newer languages still face challenges in achieving the same level of interpreting autonomy as the older languages. The prominence of English as a pivot language reinforces its central role in the interpreting regime of the European Parliament.

1.5 Retour and Accreditation Criteria

As previously mentioned, we begin by examining the formal accreditation criteria outlined by the EU institutions in the document titled *Language*

Profiles in Demand with the EU Interpreting Services, published by the Interinstitutional Committee for Translation and Interpreting (European Commission 2024c). This document, covering the period from 2024 to 2026, serves as a guide for individuals seeking to take the EU interpreter accreditation test. It outlines the language priorities for the 24 official EU languages and specifies the minimum language profiles that candidates must meet in order to be eligible for the accreditation procedure.

Upon reviewing the document, the 24 official languages can be divided into four categories based on the importance of retour interpreting. The first category applies solely to English, where the minimum language profile does not require any retour capability (A-B is not mentioned). In contrast, all other languages list a B language as part of the minimum profile in at least one combination (e.g., A-B or A-CC).

At the other extreme is Latvian, where only candidates with a retour capability (A-B or A-BC combinations) are admitted. The remaining 22 languages are divided into two further categories: those for which an A-B combination is sufficient and those requiring a more complex A-BC combination. The first group, typically consisting of smaller EU languages or languages of countries that joined the EU after the 2004 enlargement, includes Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Estonian, Finnish, Gaelic, Hungarian, Croatian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, and Slovene. The second group, consisting of larger EU countries, requires a more extensive A-BC combination as a minimum. This group includes German, Greek, Spanish, French, Dutch, and Swedish. Italian has the highest bar set, with the minimum language profile requiring either an A-BCC or A-CCC combination (European Commission 2024c).

Regarding the preferences for retour languages, there is a clear emphasis on English, German and French, which are the specified B languages in the minimum language requirements for several languages, including Bulgarian, Danish, Greek, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian. In some cases, the portfolio is broader, with Italian and Spanish also accepted as B languages, as seen with Maltese or Croatian. For languages such as Finnish and Slovenian, an A-BC combination with English as a passive (C) language is required if English is not the B language. Similarly, only English is permitted as a B language in an A-B combination for Hungarian. In languages such as French, German, Spanish, Gaelic, Italian and Swedish, English is mandatory as the B language. Furthermore, in several instances where English is not the specified B language, it is still required as a passive (C) language, reinforcing its central role in the EU's language regime.

To summarise, we can say that the EU interpreter accreditation process demonstrates a clear preference for retour interpreting in most languages, except for English, where retour is not required. Languages like Latvian have the strictest requirements, admitting only candidates with retour capability. For smaller EU languages, typically from post-2004 accession states, an A-B combination is generally sufficient, while larger EU languages like German,

Spanish and French require a more complex A-BC combination. English, German and French dominate as preferred B languages, with English holding a particularly central role, often required either as a B or at least a C language in many language profiles. Final comment regarding the importance of retour relates to its ‘weight’ vis-à-vis passive languages. As can be seen from the language profiles for accreditation (European Commission 2024c) and also from the criteria for long-term recruitment (a special policy intended to recruit interpreters with a favourable domicile and language combination on a long-term basis), a B language has in principle the weight of two C languages.

1.6 Retour Use at Meetings

The third source of data in our analysis is derived from the examination of teamsheets – information documents that summarise the language regime of each meeting where interpretation services are provided. These documents detail the names and language combinations of interpreters in each booth, as well as the list of relay and retour languages for each language. In meetings with a full-language regime, a minimum of 23 booths is present, with at least three interpreters per booth. Additional booths or interpreters may occasionally be required, for instance, if Ukrainian is offered at a ministerial meeting or if the language of the presidency necessitates four interpreters per booth. However, for the purposes of our research, we focused exclusively on the 23 booths representing the official EU languages, with a minimum of 69 interpreters per meeting. The data was anonymised, using only language combinations and the list of relay and retour languages for analysis.

2 Coverage of Passive Languages

The first aspect we evaluated was the coverage of each official EU language in other booths as a C (passive) language. In line with the principle of prioritising interpreting into the A language and relying on retour interpreting only when necessary, we considered it essential to assess the extent to which individual official languages were covered passively in other booths. Given that there are 23 official languages (excluding Gaelic, which did not have its own booth in any of the meetings analysed), the maximum possible coverage was 22, meaning a given language was interpreted by at least one interpreter in every booth. The minimum coverage was 0, indicating that the language was not passively understood in any other booth.

Our analysis covered 30 meetings interpreted by DG SCIC (European Commission) and 20 by DG LINC (European Parliament); the teams comprised staff and freelance interpreters in all cases. The numbers in the attached table represent the average coverage across all meetings in our research (Table 4.2).

The order of languages in the table corresponds to their booth number (e.g., FR = 1) and coincidentally aligns with the chronology of member state

Table 4.2 Passive coverage of official EU languages in meetings interpreted by DG SCIC of the European Commission and DG LINC of the European Parliament

<i>Coverage of given language in other 22 booths (as 'C' language)</i>												
	FR	DE	EN	IT	ES	NL	PT	EL	DA	FI	SV	
SCIC average	21.10	18.70	21.67	16.32	15.31	9.98	6.52	3.24	3.74	2.09	5.11	
LINC average	21.40	20.90	22.00	18.90	17.75	8.50	7.60	2.90	4.15	2.30	6.00	
	CS	ET	LV	LT	HU	MT	PL	SK	SL	BG	RO	HR
SCIC average	1.80	0.87	0.00	0.00	1.08	0.34	2.22	1.80	0.65	0.28	2.37	1.52
LINC average	1.85	0.35	0.00	0.10	1.50	0.50	3.70	1.60	1.30	0.25	2.10	1.90

accessions to the EU. The table is divided into two parts, reflecting languages from pre-2004 accessions (French to Swedish) and post-2004 accessions (Czech to Croatian). As shown, the first three languages – French, German and English, the EU’s working languages – have widespread coverage in nearly all booths, with English enjoying full coverage in all analysed European Parliament plenary meetings. Italian and Spanish, while slightly less prevalent, still maintain significant coverage, particularly in the European Parliament. These five ‘big’ languages are prioritised for passive knowledge and relay interpreting, with average coverage between 15 and 22 booths across both institutions.

The next group, consisting of Dutch, Portuguese, Greek, Danish, Finnish, and Swedish, has considerably lower average coverage. Dutch stands out within this group, with average values of 9.98 (SCIC) and 8.50 (LINC), while Finnish demonstrates notably low coverage, averaging just 2.30 (LINC) and 2.09 (SCIC). These languages are clearly not prioritised as relay languages and are seldom available as passive languages.

The third group includes languages that joined the EU in the 2004, 2007 and 2013 accession waves. These languages are infrequently covered by other language units, with Polish and Romanian slightly outperforming others, though none of these languages achieved an average coverage higher than 4.0. In many cases, the coverage reflects internal reciprocity, such as Czech being covered in the Slovak booth and vice versa, with limited coverage beyond these language pairs. Baltic languages (Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian) and Maltese stand out for their particularly poor coverage, with Latvian coverage absent from all 50 surveyed meetings.

Summarising the passive language coverage, three key conclusions can be drawn. First, the dominant presence of English, French and German, followed closely by Italian and Spanish, underscores the central role of the “big five” languages in EU institutions, with English holding a particularly prominent position. This is already evident in the accreditation criteria and becomes even more pronounced in the use of *retour*. These languages serve as essential pivot languages for relay interpreting, and their widespread coverage

highlights their crucial role within the EU’s multilingual framework. Second, the significantly lower coverage of languages from smaller member states, particularly those that joined after the 2004 enlargement, reveals a notable asymmetry. Languages such as Finnish, Greek and Portuguese, despite being part of earlier accession waves, exhibit lower average coverage and are not commonly used as relay languages. Lastly, the post-2004 accession languages, especially the Baltic languages and Maltese, show minimal to no coverage in other booths, indicating a lack of reciprocity and integration into the broader language regime. This demonstrates that even 20 years after their accession, the EU’s language regime continues to rely heavily on retour interpreting for these languages, and their passive knowledge in other language booths – particularly the “big five” – remains extremely limited.

3 Retour Coverage

Having established that passive language coverage remains limited, particularly for languages introduced after the 2004 accession, we further analysed the extent of retour interpreting, focusing on which languages provided retour and into which target languages. In both institutions analysed, the rule is that if a language is only covered by retour (i.e., if retour interpreting is the primary source of relay for other booths), two retour interpreters are assigned to ensure redundancy. If the language is covered by relay in at least one other booth, particularly in the ‘big five’ languages, only one retour interpreter may be present. For the purposes of this research, however, we focused solely on whether retour was provided and into which languages.

Table 4.3 summarises the data from 30 high-level meetings with a full-language regime, where interpreting was provided by DG SCIC, and 20 plenary sessions of the European Parliament where interpreting services were provided by DG LINC.

The data reveals that retour interpreting is never used for the first six languages (French to Dutch) in both institutions. Additionally, in the European Parliament, retour was used in the Portuguese and Swedish booths, though the Portuguese had very limited retour presence at DG SCIC meetings, while

Table 4.3 Use of retour languages in meetings interpreted by DG SCIC of the European Commission and DG LINC of the European Parliament

<i>Use of retour per language booth</i>												
	FR	DE	EN	IT	ES	NL	PT	EL	DA	FI	SV	
SCIC	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	13%	70%	47%	63%	43%	
LINC	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	70%	35%	95%	0%	
	CS	ET	LV	LT	HU	MT	PL	SK	SL	BG	RO	HR
SCIC	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	97%	97%
LINC	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	95%	100%	100%	100%	100%	90%	100%

the Swedish saw higher rates of retour use (43%). Danish booths provided retour occasionally in both institutions, while Greek retour was used in 70% of meetings across both institutions. Notably, the Finnish booth utilised retour in nearly all European Parliament plenary sessions. The ‘new’ languages exhibit an almost complete reliance on retour at all 50 analysed meetings.

4 Retour Language in Meetings

Lastly, we analysed the distribution of individual retour languages per language booths, as depicted in Table 4.4. Data in this table summarise the average values for retour use in individual language booths for 30 high-level meetings organised by DG SCIC and 20 plenary sessions of the European Parliament. We have only included those language booths in our analysis, which actively use retour. For example, out of all cases where retour was provided from the Greek booth (EL) at the meetings of DG LINC, 57% were in English, 14% were in German and 21% were in French. Therefore, unlike the previous table, which maps the frequency of retour use, here all retours are analysed as a total, and we only investigate the share of retour languages focusing on both ‘old’ EU languages (Portuguese, Greek, Danish, Finnish, Swedish) and new EU languages (Czech, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Croatian). Our analysis explores the prominence of individual retour languages, the differences between the institutions (DG SCIC and DG LINC), and the disparities between old and new language booths.

First of all, English emerges as the dominant retour language across both institutions and nearly all booths. Its usage is particularly prevalent in the ‘new’ EU language booths, where the reliance on English retour often reaches 100%, as observed in the Maltese booth. In contrast, English retour is less prominent in the ‘old’ EU language booths, though still frequently used, with usage ranging from 21% in the Danish booth (SCIC) to 77% in the Swedish booth (SCIC). German ranks as the second most used retour language, though its coverage is considerably lower than that of English. German’s use is inconsistent across both institutions and language booths. For example, German retour is used in 42% of Finnish booth meetings (SCIC), but it is completely absent from other booths, such as Bulgarian, Romanian and Greek (EP). In the new language booths, German is slightly more prevalent, with notable usage in the Hungarian booth (EP), where it is used 42% of the time. Nevertheless, German’s overall presence as a retour language remains significantly lower than English.

French is also used less frequently as a retour language. While French does maintain a modest presence in some old EU language booths, such as Danish (36% in SCIC), it is generally underutilised, especially in the European Parliament, where its use is often 0%. In new EU language booths, French is rarely used, with percentages generally remaining in the single digits. This

Table 4.4 Distribution of retour languages per booth in meetings interpreted by DG SCIC of the European Commission and DG LINC of the European Parliament

<i>Institution</i>	<i>SCIC</i>	<i>LINC</i>	<i>SCIC</i>	<i>LINC</i>	<i>SCIC</i>	<i>LINC</i>	<i>SCIC</i>	<i>LINC</i>	<i>SCIC</i>	<i>LINC</i>	<i>SCIC</i>	<i>LINC</i>
Booth	PT		EL		DA		FI		SV			
English	50%	N/A	62%	57%	21%	71%	32%	42%	77%	N/A		
German	0%	N/A	0%	14%	43%	29%	42%	32%	0%	N/A		
French	50%	N/A	38%	21%	36%	0%	16%	11%	23%	N/A		
Spanish	0%	N/A	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	16%	0%	N/A		
Italian	0%	N/A	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	N/A		
Booth	CS		ET		LV		LT		HU		MT	
English	73%	65%	87%	50%	77%	65%	67%	75%	50%	58%	100%	100%
German	23%	25%	10%	20%	3%	25%	13%	0%	13%	42%	0%	0%
French	3%	10%	3%	30%	20%	10%	20%	25%	33%	0%	0%	0%
Spanish	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%
Italian	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Booth	PL		SK		SL		BG		RO		HR	
English	60%	50%	60%	55%	93%	60%	83%	90%	83%	72%	90%	90%
German	33%	10%	23%	35%	7%	40%	17%	0%	3%	0%	10%	10%
French	3%	25%	17%	5%	0%	0%	0%	10%	14%	17%	0%	0%
Spanish	0%	5%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%
Italian	3%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

trend highlights French's diminishing role as a retour language, particularly in comparison with English and German. Lastly, let us take a look at Spanish and Italian. Spanish shows the least prominence among the major retour languages, with minimal presence across both institutions. Its use is sporadic, appearing occasionally in SCIC booths such as Finnish (11%) and Slovak (5%), but it is absent in the majority of language booths. Italian is almost entirely absent as a retour language, with very few instances of its use. For example, Italian appears in the Portuguese booth (SCIC) with a modest 3% and in the Polish booth (LINC) usage, but overall, its role as a retour language is negligible.

When comparing the two institutions, DG SCIC shows a more extensive use of retour interpreting across most language booths than DG LINC, particularly for old EU language booths. For example, in the Swedish and Portuguese booths, no retour was recorded in the analysed plenary sessions of the European Parliament, whereas DG SCIC employed retour interpreting occasionally for these languages. In terms of total shares of retour languages, English remains the most frequently used, accounting for 68.5% of all retour interpreting in DG SCIC and 63.0% in DG LINC. German follows, with 14.2% in DG SCIC and 19.5% in the DG LINC. French is slightly more prominent in DG SCIC, where it accounts for 16.3% of retour usage, compared with 14.8% in the DG LINC. Both Spanish and Italian play minimal roles in retour interpreting across both institutions, with Spanish at 0.8% (SCIC) and 2.1% (LINC), and Italian at 0.2% (SCIC) and 0.7% (LINC).

In conclusion, English emerges as the dominant retour language across both institutions, particularly in the new EU language booths, where its use is essential. DG SCIC exhibits a broader reliance on retour interpreting compared with the European Parliament, which takes a more selective approach. While the 'old' EU languages generally rely less on retour interpreting, the 'new' EU languages show a significantly greater dependence on retour, particularly into English.

5 Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to analyse the extent and frequency of retour interpreting used by two of the largest institutional conference interpreting services in the world: DG SCIC of the European Commission and DG LINC of the European Parliament. With 24 official languages and 23 actively used interpreting languages, these institutions are responsible for managing the most extensive systematically implemented multilingual regime. However, such a large-scale interpreting framework has faced considerable challenges and has required significant adaptation. During the 1990s and leading up to 2004, the system operated with 11 official languages. In this relatively large but still manageable setting, the emphasis was placed on interpreting into the A language, and the interpretation system was structured around this principle. In the pre-2004 language regime, retour interpreting was more of

an exception than the norm, in line with the philosophy coined by the Paris School (cf. Seleskovitch 1978, 1999; Gile 2005).

The 2004 enlargement, which added nine new official languages, required significant adjustments to the EU's interpreting system due to the increased number of languages and the resulting rise in language combinations. Seleskovitch had already predicted this shift in 1999, acknowledging that

the enlargement of the European Union to include Central and Eastern European countries will undoubtedly result in an increased demand for interpretation into B from less widely known languages. Schools will therefore no doubt introduce in their curricula training into B in simultaneous.

(Seleskovitch 1999, 63)

It is worth noting that in Central and Eastern Europe, training into B has long been a standard practice in interpreter education. Despite this foresight and the EU institutions' attempts to provide passive coverage of these new languages in the years following the expansion, these efforts – such as those outlined by DG SCIC in 2007 – did not yield the desired results. As our findings demonstrate, the current system, which now operates with 23 active official languages, remains viable largely due to the substantial reliance on retour interpreting.

Our chapter reveals significant differences between the 'old' EU languages (pre-2004) and the 'new' EU languages (post-2004) regarding the use and reliance on retour interpreting within EU institutions. Two decades after the first major expansion, retour interpreting has become indispensable for the newer EU member states, providing a practical solution to the linguistic challenges that arose after the 2004 enlargement. While the older EU languages benefit from a well-established network of interpreters and predominantly rely on direct interpreting into A languages, the newer languages exhibit a much greater dependence on retour interpreting, particularly into English. This is evident not only in the higher proportion of interpreters from the new member states who hold accredited B languages but also in the practical use of retour in the 50 surveyed full-language regime meetings. A clear divide emerges between the old member states, where the number of interpreters with retour capabilities is low, and most language booths do not rely on retour, and the new member states, where a majority of interpreters possess an active B language, making retour interpreting a standard practice.

Looking at the practical difficulties of providing interpretation from and into 23 languages, some of which are not widely known and often spoken by relatively small communities (e.g., Maltese or the Baltic languages), it raises the question: Is a language regime sufficiently covering relay from all languages, without relying on retour, even feasible? With such a large language regime, the ideals of the Paris School, which prioritise interpreting into A languages, are not only challenging to implement but also increasingly

distant from the reality of the conference interpreting market, where retour has become a standard practice (see Kalina 2015, Opdenhoff 2012).

Regarding language use, one of our key findings is that English dominates as the most commonly used retour language across both institutions – DG SCIC and DG LINC. English is particularly prominent in new EU language booths, where it often accounts for nearly 100% of retour interpreting, as in the Maltese booth. German and French are the next most used retour languages, though they have much lower and more inconsistent coverage compared with English. German is more frequently used in some new EU language booths, such as Hungarian and Polish, while French is underutilised, particularly in the European Parliament. Spanish and Italian play minimal roles in retour interpreting across both institutions, reflecting their limited use as pivot languages.

The comparison between DG SCIC and the DG LINC shows that DG SCIC relies slightly more on retour interpreting than DG LINC, especially for some ‘old’ EU languages like Portuguese and Swedish. Finnish is the only language from the ‘old’ member states that uses retour interpreting in a majority of surveyed meetings. For all the post-2004 languages, from Czech to Croatian, retour interpreting was provided in almost 100% of surveyed meetings. Irish (Gaelic) is an official EU language but does not have its own booth, so it is passively covered in both institutions.

The analysis of passive language coverage also illustrates the asymmetry between old and new EU languages. The ‘big five’ languages (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish) have widespread passive coverage in nearly all booths, underscoring their central role as relay languages. In contrast, the newer official EU languages (such as Latvian, Lithuanian and Maltese) exhibit minimal passive coverage in other booths, further underlining the need of retour interpreting. We could say that despite efforts to integrate these newer languages more fully into the EU’s multilingual regime, they remain reliant on retour as a solution for comprehensive language coverage.

The findings emphasise the ongoing development of retour interpreting within the EU’s multilingual framework, particularly for new EU member states. When focusing on retour languages, English emerges as the dominant B language, playing a crucial role in ensuring communication across booths, especially for less widely spoken languages and with implications for the traditional English booth (see Albl-Mikasa 2010). While old EU languages continue to prioritise direct interpreting into A languages, new EU languages heavily rely on retour to maintain full linguistic coverage. We could say that while retour interpreting was an exception in EU conference interpreting settings before 2004, following the increase in official languages, it has become a necessity.

Funding Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under Contract No. APVV-23-0539.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the whole chapter we use the AIC language classification of active and passive languages (2024).
- 2 Despite the fact that the number of official languages is 24, Gaelic (Irish), the officially notified language of Ireland is not used during the meetings of the Council of the European Union and the European Council, thus reducing the language regime to 23 active and 23 passive languages.

References

- Albl-Mikasa, Michaela. 2010. "Global English and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): Implications for the Interpreting Profession." *Trans-kom: Zeitschrift für Translationswissenschaft und Fachkommunikation* 3, no. 2: 126–148.
- Ammon, Ulrich. 2006. "Language Conflicts in the European Union: On Finding a Politically Acceptable and Practicable Solution for EU Institutions That Satisfies Diverging Interests." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 16, no. 3: 319–338.
- Bartłomiejczyk, Magdalena. 2004. "Simultaneous Interpreting A-B vs. B-A from the Interpreters' Standpoint." In *Claims, Changes and Challenges in Translation Studies*, edited by G. Hansen, K. Malmkjær, and D. Gile, 239–250. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bartłomiejczyk, Magdalena. 2015. "Directionality." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies*, edited by F. Pöchhacker, 108–110. London: Routledge.
- Bartłomiejczyk, Magdalena. 2016. *Face Threats in Interpreting: A Pragmatic Study of Plenary Debates in the European Parliament*. Vol. 3542. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Bartłomiejczyk, Magdalena, and Katarzyna Stachowiak-Szymczak. 2021. "Modes of Conference Interpreting: Simultaneous and Consecutive." In *The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting*, edited by M. Szubko, 19–33. London: Routledge.
- Čeňková, Ivana. 2007. "Retour a Pilotáž: Každodenní Realita pro Konferenční Tlumočníky v Evropských Institucích." *Translatológia a jej súvislosti* 2: 97–112. ["Retour and piloting: the everyday reality of conference interpreters in the European institutions." *Translatology and Its Contexts* 2: 97–112]
- Denissenko, Jurij. 1989. "Communicative and Interpretative Linguistics." In *The Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Teaching Conference Interpretation*, edited by L. Gran and J. Dodds, 155–158. Udine: Campanotto Editore.
- European Commission. 2024a. Annual Activity Report 2023: Directorate-General for Interpretation (DG SCIC). European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/publications/annual-activity-report-2023-interpretation_en.
- European Commission. 2024b. Interpretation: Where Do We Stand after Completion of the Fifth Enlargement? European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_07_77.
- European Commission. 2024c. Language Profiles in Demand with the EU Interpreting Services 2024–2026. European Commission. https://europa.eu/interpretation/doc/language_profiles.pdf.
- European Parliament. 2023. Annual Activity Report 2023: Directorate-General for Logistics and Interpretation for Conferences (DG LINC). European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/285563/10_LINC%20-%20AAR%202023.pdf.

- Gazzola, Michele. 2006. "Managing Multilingualism in the European Union: Language Policy Evaluation for the European Parliament." *Language Policy* 5: 393–417.
- Gile, Daniel. 2005. "Directionality in Conference Interpreting: A Cognitive View." *Communication and Cognition: Monographies* 38, no. 1–2, 9–26.
- Gorton, Andrew. 2012. "'B' Language Interpreting: The Interpreter's Perspective." *FORUM: Revue Internationale d'Interprétation et de Traduction/International Journal of Interpretation and Translation* 10, no. 2: 61–88.
- Graves, Alison, María Pascual Olaguibel, and Cathy Pearson. 2021. "Conference Interpreting in the European Union Institutions." In *The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting*, edited by M. Albl-Mikasa and E. Tiselius, 104–114. London: Routledge.
- Kalina, Sylvia. 2005. "Quality in the Interpreting Process: What Can Be Measured and How?" In *Directionality in Interpreting: The 'Retour' or the Native?*, edited by R. Godijns and M. Hinderdael, 27–46. Ghent: Communication and Cognition.
- Opdenhoff, Jan-Hendrik. 2011. Estudio sobre la direccionalidad en interpretación de conferencias: de la(s) teoría(s) a la práctica profesional. PhD dissertation. Universidad de Granada.
- Opdenhoff, Jan-Hendrik. 2012. "Directionality and Working Memory in Conference Interpreting: An Experimental Study." In *Interpreting Brian Harris: Recent Developments in Translatology*, edited by B. Harris, B. Mayor, M. Jesus, J. Ivars, and M. Amparo, 161–171. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Seleskovitch, Danica. 1978. *Interpreting for International Conferences: Problems of Language and Communication*. Washington, DC: Pen and Booth.
- Seleskovitch, Danica. 1999. "The Teaching of Conference Interpretation in the Course of the Last 50 Years." *Interpreting* 4, no. 1: 55–66.