

**CLEAR WRITING FOR EUROPE CONFERENCE
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HOW IT ALL BEGAN -OPENING ADDRESS

**By
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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Let me start by thanking the organizers for inviting me to this conference! My memories from almost a decade ago are starting to fade away, but those which remain have increasingly golden frames! I believe that I indeed had some role to play in the promotion of Clear Writing in the Commission. I wish, however, to pay particular tribute to those pioneers, like Emma Wagner, David Crowther, Paul Strickland and others who relentlessly fought an uphill battle for a better, simpler and more understandable drafting in the Commission.

When I took over as Director General of DGT in the early years of this century, I was struck by a number of things:

- First, the Commission was one of few international institutions which did not practice any compulsory editing of its final documents.
- Second, while an EU Inter-Institutional agreement of 1999 on the clarity of legal texts existed, and the Prodi Commission had declared a policy of "better regulation", these efforts seemed to have little impact in real life. At the turn of the Century, the commission also had launched an initiative "Fighting the Fog" to improve the quality of drafting, but even that initiative had fallen into oblivion.
- Third, the quality of translation was a widely debated subject within the DGT, but it focused more on the output and on the translation process itself than on the improvement of incoming documents.
- Fourth, the forthcoming EU enlargements were expected to explode multilingualism in the EU. This in turn would generate more and more texts drafted by non-native speakers.
- Added to this was the complicated preparatory process where new elements were added through interservice consultations, or so called "creative drafting", where texts were deliberately blurred in order to mask real political differences, thus creating room for different interpretations.

As a consequence of all this, the life of translators was becoming increasingly difficult as they were required to decipher less and less understandable texts. We at the DGT were well placed to evaluate these challenges, since all major documents had to pass by us. I had the dubious joy of reading many of them, and a number suffered from obvious defects: voluminous texts with sloppy drafting, EU-jargon, over-bureaucratic and often recycled texts, conflicting terminology, floral language masking superficial knowledge of the topic, non-native drafting and curious add-ons resulting from interservice consultations. And, on top of it:

the texts sometimes revealed a spicy feeling of arrogance: "we know best in the EU"!

We clearly had a problem here! How would the beneficiaries, EU citizens and experts on the subject receive the communication from the EU? Would it support democratic legitimacy of the EU? Would it increase the understanding of the European project, or rather give weapons in the hands of the EU-opponents?

So something had to be done. My response was twofold. We needed to create both new structures and new processes to make change sustainable. So in March 2006, as part of the first of many restructurings I undertook in DGT – much to the dismay of some of my colleagues – I decided to create a whole new unit for editing in the Commission, with David Crowther as its first head. Through offering a professional service, this unit was to generate a growing demand for editing. However, a first major hurdle had to be overcome, namely the "Aristothelian syndrome" within the lead services: "do not touch my circles"!

But beyond new structures, we also needed new processes. So we created a multi-DG Task Force with members from the DGT, the Secretariat-General, The Legal Service, the DG Human Resources and DG Communication. We started with an on-line survey in November 2009 among all Commission staff. One of the main findings was that the declining quality of original documents was causing wide concern about the democratic legitimacy of the European project itself!

On the basis of the survey, we then - on 17th November 2009 - organised a high level Forum on Clear Writing and Better Regulation, with the participation of the Commissioner for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban, the Secretary General Catherine Day, as well as representatives from the Member States, the European Court of Justice and others. At the Forum, a Campaign on Clear Writing was announced.

As part of the Campaign, the First Clear Writing Week took place in Mid-March 2010, with workshops, exhibitions, training sessions, software presentations etc. During the week, also a Clear Writing Conference was organised under the auspices of the successor of Mr. Orban, Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, All these efforts were supported by a new website, brochures, a guide in 23 languages on How to Write More Clearly, and an On-line Help-line for Drafters.

We were enthusiastic about the support from the highest level in the European Institutions as well as from the member states (which themselves did not always fare much better in clear writing I must say). From the reports I have seen about developments over the last ten years, it has not been in vain. Progress has clearly been made. For example, the 11 000 subscribers to your weekly "Clear Writing Tips" is no little achievement! Can we therefore call Clear Writing a success? This conference may wish to address this question. But my feeling is that Clear Writing is rather a lifelong process, a continuous challenge, a road we must follow.

Our world is filled with words. Words make societies move, words may heal, build or destroy. The way we create, send, translate, receive and understand messages may change the course of history. Therefore clarity is important. This is what makes our topic at today's conference so fascinating.

The need for clear writing for individuals, institutions and societies stands in the no mans land between multilingualism, political struggles, the requirements of legal certainty, citizens' rights and ultimately – democratic ideals. Which is the road we should choose to find our way out of this no mans land? My answer is simple: the signposts we should follow are the ones written in the Hieronymus oath, relevant not only for translators, but for us all:

- Clarity
- Truth
- Trust
- Understandability.

I thank you again for your invitation, and wish you a successful conference.

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Karl-Johan Lönnroth