3 Classifying Balloons

In Brussels, everything is up for negotiation.

'You have to be a psychoanalyst to understand what is really going on in this room', mutters Léo to himself as he looks down at his notes.[1] The meeting has only just begun and he is already exhausted. Through the windows of Léo interpretation booth, the meeting room seems strangely far away. While he can see all the participants, the angle of the glass makes it harder for them to see him. The meeting room is in an annexe building of the Commission with a view over Parc Léopold. If it weren't for the massive rolldown screen blocking the view, he would be able to see the swaying tops of the sombre winter trees.

The room is rectangular, with two rows of tables arranged in a horseshoe as if for a banquet. But rather than mood lighting, the light is bright and a screen displays a giant Word document with a three-columned chart. Around the tables, delegates from the twenty-seven member states are still settling in. With their bags dumped on the floor, their coats hung over chairs and their documents arranged, they embrace the task of the day: discussing the nuances of a new legislative text and trying to find a wording they can all agree on.

It's a dark Tuesday in December, and Brussels has not seen the sun for days. We have been given the unique opportunity to directly observe a meeting of a working group of a customs committee: a rare lens through which to observe how officials mobilise digital technology as a mediating tool in negotiation. In this chapter, we provide a detailed account of this meeting and unpack how the affordances of

[1] Fieldnotes, 2 December 2019.

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digital platforms and tools shape, facilitate and constrain the performative and discursive practices of negotiations.[2]

Léo shares the interpreters' booth with Louise and Victoria. In the EU, it is common practice for interpreters to work in teams of three to alternate and cover as much as possible of a meeting's language regime. The meeting begins with muttered mumbles, greetings and comments in different languages, which the interpreters' headphones pick up from the microphones installed on the tables on the floor. As proceedings begin, coffee cups are set down, papers stacked and handshakes and kisses exchanged. Soon the room is filled with the clicking of keyboards, the rustling of paper and the muted buzz of phones on vibrate. Some delegates are texting, while others are browsing the internet for information and images to use during the negotiation. As the minutes tick by, the delegates, a handful of Commission officials, and a dozen interpreters descend deeper and deeper into the weeds of negotiating new classifications of everyday consumer goods.

THE CUSTOMS UNION

How to deal with the customs union was one of the thorniest questions during the Brexit negotiations between the EU and the United Kingdom. Once it became clear that the UK wanted to quit not just the single market, but the customs union, the problem of a hard border was put on the table. Leaving the customs union would mean that every single box of coconuts, crane of firecrackers and every single iPhone would have to cross a customs border on the otherwise borderless island of Ireland. As the protective membrane of the EU, the Customs Union is tasked with ensuring that the same tariffs on goods imported from the rest of the world are applied in the same way on all the EU's borders, and that cheap copies of cigarettes, illegal drugs and lethal weapons are blocked from entering the Union. The Union's customs checks ensure that health, safety and environmental standards, as well as rules of

[2] See also Adler-Nissen, R., & Drieschova, A. (2019). Track-Change Diplomacy: Technology, Affordances, and the Practice of International Negotiations. *International Studies Quarterly*, 63(3), 531-545.

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origin requirements, are met. The EU is the world's largest trader of manufactured goods and services.[3] In place since 1968, the customs authorities of all EU countries work together as a single unit.

But this Union is not an abstract entity. It begins and ends with the seemingly endless collective drafting of documents in meetings like this one. This is the work that Enzensberger is indicating when he speaks of 'arduous labour'. It follows the well-known pattern of small steps forward, routinely interrupted by small or large steps backward when participants stall, disagree or fail to form a consensus on a specific formulation. Hour after hour, day after day, national experts, political delegates and European civil servants shuffle through piles of papers, each stuffed with acronyms and jargon, trying to understand the latest proposal, update or amendment.

PLEASE SWITCH OFF YOUR MOBILE PHONE

'I don't know what is going on', the Danish delegate tells her colleagues shortly after the meeting has started. Like them, she is dividing her attention between the people around her and the information projected on the big screen in front of them.[4] 'I have to admit I also don't understand', says Maria in her Spanish-accented English.[5] As a Commission representative, she is chairing the meeting today. Sitting directly opposite the screen, her ponytail dances on her back as she turns her head from side to side. She's eager to get through the day's agenda. 'We need to specify what we're talking about', Maria says. The delegates defend their arguments and find accompanying images so that a whole range of customisable consumer products can be classified logically and consistently. This, perhaps, is as close as we can get to Jürgen Habermas' dream of democratic deliberation.[6] Maria continues: 'I also didn't understand this text when I read it for the first time, but now I do. I'm getting another comment from the native speakers that "surrounding" is misspelt... Where exactly is it misspelt? Ah, OK, I see it now.'[7]

[3] https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/eu-position-world-trade_en, accessed 23 January 2025.
[4] Fieldnotes, 2 December 2019. [5] Ibid. [6] Ibid. [7] Ibid.

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Whenever there is a language issue, Maria turns to David, the native English speaker on her right. Ever since Brexit, British representatives and English interests have been sidelines in Brussels, but David remains willing to help out on the language front. 'There's an H missing in the first paragraph', he tells Maria, who makes a simultaneous track change in the text. David suggests that the text in the square brackets should also be kept because it describes the product. 'But this is only my personal opinion', he adds.[8]

Already when the meeting started, Louise and Léo knew that it would be an extraordinarily long day in the interpretation booth. Sitting literally in the walls on the sidelines of the room, they listen for sounds more than for meaning, conscientiously translating the negotiation drama as it twists itself into knots and then attempts to untangle itself. When she first saw that Maria would be chairing the meeting, Louise remarked, "Oh no. Her English is very poor."[9] Despite its elaborate national language policies, this is where most EU meetings at the level of this working group are at today. Most delegates speak in more or less shaky English. Euro-English. Euro-lingo. It is easier for those sitting at the negotiation table, but it makes the task of simultaneous interpretation much harder.

But Maria is committed to the procedure – and to its results. On the second page of the stack of documents in front of the participants, 300–400 pages long and at least 4 cm high, some housekeeping rules are listed. At the top: 'Please switch off your mobile phone as it might cause interference with the microphones.'[10] A much more common interference with the microphones, however, is when a delegate forgets to turn theirs on or off. Later in the afternoon, Maria will accidentally silence the mic of the German delegate in the middle of his intervention. Amid annoyed looks, she will apologise and turn it back on. Most delegates know the rules about not using their phones, but they seem more like suggestions than actual guidelines.

[8] Ibid. [9] Ibid. [10] Ibid.

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As she speaks, Maria gestures at the screen opposite her. Official statements from ministers and heads of state, press conferences and the big treaty books displayed at the museum across the park, which are all part of the EU. But it is the kind of negotiation happening in this room that really binds the Union together on a day-to-day level. In this room and in others like it, delegates persist, article by article, in their quest to hammer out rules and standards. The future of their continent depends on it.

The Swedish delegate launches into a long explanation about car axes and car shafts, about how cars turn, and how the power from the car's engine is transmitted to the wheels. While the discussion flounders on how to classify the plastic cover of a car radio, the Dutch delegate is reading a newspaper on his tablet. Others are checking their email or leaning back in their chairs to stare at the images of the car on the screen. Four security cameras dangle from the ceiling, all displaying attentive green lights. A laminated notice on the door explains that anyone going into the room may be subjected to filming and/or audio recording.

It may be hard to imagine that what is happening in this room has excited decades of political and economic commentary, filled the dreams and minds of generations of university students and produced libraries of academic contributions on the ins and outs of the EU single market. And yet the sentences being cobbled together on the screen and the snippets of poor English that Léo and Louise are swiftly crafting into more elegant phrases form the basic building blocks of the EU edifice, and its place in the world.

In the same week as the customs meeting, Anu Bradford, a professor at Columbia Law School, has been invited to give the digital keynote speech at a civil-service-meets-industry event hosted at the Brussels Campus of the nearby Maastricht University. It is early evening, when she reaches the point in her talk where she announces that 'The EU is a regulatory superpower'.[11] Speaking over a seamless

[11] Fieldnotes, 15 December 2022.

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Zoom connection from her office in New York, Bradford highlights the key claims of *The Brussels Effect*, the smash hit book that has propelled her into academic stardom.[12] 'The Brussels effect is the EU's ability to unilaterally set rules for the global marketplace', Bradford explains. 'Few global companies can afford not to trade in the EU so these companies need to comply with European regulations as the price for access to the 450 million relatively wealthy consumers. This is what I call influence.'[13] And why not a Washington or a Beijing effect? She asks, rhetorically. 'Well, there you have large markets too but for instance, in China, you don't yet have the sophistication and the expertise of the bureaucracy of Brussels that is able to generate the kind of rules and apply them even across borders'.[14] Her story is a feel-good one. Scheduled for the end of the working day, it is just what the Brussels officials needed to hear. As she tells them about the reach of their institution, they smile. But the EU's path to global influence is also a story with an open ending.

Back at Parc Léopold, it is now 11.50 a.m. and the negotiation has moved to item 7.3 on the agenda: the question of what to call and how to classify the plastic parts of a vacuum cleaner that sucks the cable back into the body of the machine. As before, the collective attention in the room is focused on a three-column Word document projected onto the screen. One national delegate who has already offered her comments is now scrolling through properties and holiday apartments to rent online. Every few moments, she looks up from the sun-drenched villas on her screen and checks the big screen in front of the window to make sure no one has challenged her suggested alteration.

Then, into the working silence, a phone rings. Have the delegates forgotten? As per the sign on the meeting room wall, all phones are supposed to be switched off, or at least put on mute. That can't be too much to ask for, given that many diplomats and ambassadors

[12] Bradford, A. (2022). *The Brussels Effect*. Oxford University Press.
[13] Fieldnotes, 15 December 2022. [14] Ibid.

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working in the other buildings around town are instructed to leave their devices behind in their offices. But here in Brussels, phones and people are increasingly fused to one another. Every official in Brussels can tell you a story about the time they forgot to turn their phone off, and how a cheery marimba ringtone interrupted the equilibrium of the room. How you react to getting an audible phone call may say more about the meeting you are in, and your status in it, than about the urgency or importance of the phone call. While Brussels newcomers will jump to attention and either slip out of the room red-faced, or frantically stab at the screen to reject the call, more seasoned members of the Bubble may just silence the call, turn their phone face-down on the table – or, indeed, lean back, clear their throats and answer it.

Maria ignores the interruption. 'If we can't agree on the text', she pushes on, 'the one in the brackets, let's just delete it. What should we call it, cable winder or just cable or cable winding system, what do you think? I guess we all agree we have a cable and we have a plastic thing that we wrapped the cable around, the question is what do we call it?'[15] The Swedish delegate says, 'We should just call it cable winder as that's what it's called and what we've called it in the past. Otherwise, we'll confuse the person reading and trying to use this regulation.'[16] Some member states would like to classify the product as part of a vacuum cleaner, while others do not see it as clearly recognisable as such.

Maria reminds the room of the tightness of her schedule, which, of course, is everyone's schedule. 'I was planning to have a lunch break at 12.30, but that is not going to happen obviously. Hopefully, we can finish this item soon.'[17] Energy is leaking from the room by the second and Maria tries to motivate the delegates to find a solution. 'Let's do an indicating *tour de table*'.[18] The room is divided. Thirteen member states would classify the product as part of a vacuum cleaner, and fourteen member states would not. 'We cannot make any

[15] Fieldnotes, 2 December 2019. [16] Ibid. [17] Ibid. [18] Ibid.

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conclusion now; we will keep you informed about what we do with this one.' Maria leans forward in her chair. They need a break. '*Bon appetit* and enjoy your lunch break.'

THE BRUSSELS EFFECT

One of the important ways in which politics is conducted in the EU is through law. The proposals, regulations and files that wander through the complex administrative structure in Brussels have an impact not only on the everyday life of Europe's 500 million citizens, but on any international party engaging, and especially trading, with the Union. Brussels' influence in moulding these domestic and international relations in its interests and according to its values is what Bradford calls 'the Brussels effect'. Others, like the political scientists Ian Manners and Ben Rosamond, have referred to the European Union as an economic and normative power.[19] The EU is a big player in international relations, not because of its military or hard power capabilities, but because of its large and prosperous single market based on democratic values.

After lunch, the discussion is deadlocked, so the diplomats move forward with the agenda, leaving the item pending. Maria invites everyone to think about it before the next meeting. 'We can close this file for today and will come back to it in January.' The European compromise demands deep, if piecemeal commitment, the acceptance of recesses, and above all, time. 'Okay, let's have a coffee break. We'll continue in 10 minutes.'[20]

Up in the interpretation booth, Louise has been using her interpretation breaks to plan a family holiday. Whenever her colleague Victoria is 'on', she has been highlighting passages and sticking Post-its into a travel guide she brought in with her this morning. This is how daydreaming fills moments between translating agenda items in

[19] Manners, I. (2002). Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), 235–258; Rosamond, B. (2014). Three Ways of Speaking Europe to the World: Markets, Peace, Cosmopolitan Duty and the EU's Normative Power. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 16(1), 133–148.

[20] Fieldnotes, 2 December 2019.

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the booth, similar to how images of Spanish villas accompany the making of track changes, inserting or deleting brackets, googling images and reaching linguistic compromises. The delegates come back into the room, and the discussion on the floor shifts to the question of how to classify transparent plastic balloons with lights or other decorations inside them.

'Should we leave it in the plural? What do you think, native speakers, David? Please? What do you think?'[21], Maria asks. Balloons or balloon? Language matters. 'Leave it in, balloons', David says. Maria's assistant makes the changes to the document from a desktop computer installed at the head of the horseshoe, the only fixed device in the room. The track changes appear in blue and red, projected onto the big screen. Maria looks down at her laptop. The full focus of the discussion is the formulation of the text. Maria now dictates the new text to the colleague who is typing, including commas and full stops. Germany puts up its plastic sign vertically, the signal for asking for the floor. Maria says: 'We need to find an image to match our text, so we'll just go and find a random image of the balloon on the Internet. After all, an image speaks more than a thousand words. The question now is whether this item should be classified as 9503 or 9505?'[22]

Germany makes a comment and then France reads out an alteration to the text. While the delegate is presenting her point, Louise and Victoria get a chance to chat, because when the floor speaks their language, the interpreters can take a break. These pauses are small, celebration-worthy moments for the interpreters, who smile and start chatting about the world outside the meeting room. The word is given back to Germany, and Louise starts working again. The delegate reports that Germany is not happy about these explanations for the classification, because the classification refers to private and public events, which is a very blurred distinction. Interpretation time among the interpreters is usually split into twenty- to thirty-minute intervals: you are on for half an hour and off for the next. But the interpreters

[21] Ibid. [22] Ibid.

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cannot leave the booth when they are not 'on', as they must be ready to jump in at a moment's notice if their colleague cannot cover the language spoken on the floor. Not only do they need to follow the live conversation, but they must also monitor their partner's portfolio and fill in their language gaps. The need to cover the widest possible span of the EU's twenty-five working languages is the reason the interpreters get assigned to the booth in pairs. *Pas de problème*, right?

WE JUST FOUND THEM ON THE INTERNET

The conversation has now moved on to the subject of Christmas decorations as examples of decorative balloons. The Italian delegate gets up and walks over to Maria to show her an image of a deer statue made from twisted wires and plastic and covered in LED lights. 'Where are these images from?' Maria asks. The French delegate says, 'we just found them on the Internet'.[23] To look at the images, the designated typist now accesses YouTube on the shared computer screen. The Danish delegate raises her plastic sign and says it's unclear what occasions these particular balloons are used for. Maria intervenes: 'We must decide if our articles are for festive reasons or not. We should not go in circles, we have had many debates about what is a festive article and what is not, but this is broader than what is covered under this heading here.'[24] It is now almost 3:30 in the afternoon and it is starting to get dark outside. The meeting started six and a half hours ago. 'Whenever we discussed something like this', Maria goes on, 'everyone seems to have personal opinions. . .'[25] 'Yes, I see France and Germany want to say something. Who's first? Okay, Germany.'[26]

The German delegate warns against opening the classification up for too many products not related to balloons at all. The French delegate makes a supportive remark, and the Portuguese delegate intervenes: 'We need two regulations because we are talking about two different products.'[27] Maria tries to bring closure to the conversation. 'We should avoid making more regulations', she says, 'when we

[23] Ibid. [24] Ibid. [25] Ibid. [26] Ibid. [27] Ibid.

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can cover them in one explanatory note. We can just include more pictures of products to clarify what we mean'.[28] More and more statements are made. More and more time passes.

On average, the EU passes over eighty directives, 1,200 regulations, 700 decisions and countless recommendations and opinions every year. A *directive* is a legislative act that sets out a goal all EU countries must achieve, though it is up to individual countries to devise their own laws on how to reach those stated goals. An example is the EU single-use plastic directive, aimed at reducing the negative impact of single-use plastic items on the environment. It has led to the banning of items such as single-use plastic cutlery, plates and most famously, plastic straws. A *regulation* is a binding legislative act that must be applied in its entirety across the EU. A popular example is the EU's regulation on ending roaming charges while travelling within the EU, first adopted as Regulation (EU) No 531/2012 in 2012. When the regulation expired in 2022 following its initial ten-year period, the Parliament and Council quickly adopted a new regulation (Regulation (EU) 2022/612) to ensure that a common approach to roaming charges was applied for a further ten years. Meanwhile, a *decision* is an agreement that is only binding to those whom it addresses: for example, on 1 January 2023, the Council issued a decision to allow Croatia, the Union's newest member state (since 2015) to adopt the Euro as its national currency.

'Okay, let's summarise what we have for now', says Maria. 'What is it that we did so far by looking at the text... Are all member states involved okay with the description we have now? Please also look at the images... Any concerns about the description only now?'[29]

The Dutch delegate has a problem with the formulation 'repetitive use'. 'I don't think balloons can be repetitively used', he says.

The French delegate suggests contacting the producer. 'We believe it is the whole product now, meaning the balloon and the lights on the stick, but we need to ask the supplier and the operator.'

[28] Ibid. [29] Ibid.

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'I will highlight repetitive here in my text', Maria concludes.

The UK delegate raises his hand. 'Can we not just delete repetitive? Does it make any difference?'[30]

But Maria pushes back. The idea, she explains, is to make a distinction between these products and regular balloons. 'But we can also put a link to a video in here. We'll think about the word repetitive in the meantime.'[31]

The Maltese delegate puts their name tag vertically and is given the word. 'A balloon is not repetitive because you have to tie a knot into the plastic that cannot be undone.'

'Okay', Maria says, 'so the lights and the LEDs, that is what is repetitive, but not the balloon. Do we all agree?' No more comments. It is now 3:45. 'We will take a short break', Maria says, and asks the delegates to return to the meeting room at five past four.

JUST THE VOICE IN THE MACHINE

Behind the glass of the translation booth, the interpreters are more than ready for a pause. Louise goes to fetch coffee from the café downstairs, but Léo remains in the booth. A few years ago, he decided to go to university: alongside his job as an interpreter, he is studying cognition and was recently awarded his MBA. 'I don't know why [more colleagues] don't scream for change, because the administration treats us badly', he says.

> They work according to procedures in the administration, while we work more like… artists… What we do, and in order to do it well, we need to think outside the box, you know, … we need to be flexible, to interpret, to be flexible, almost like investment bankers. Your work is so intense for a short period of time, and then you stop immediately. But you need some sort of release, that's why many become alcoholics. You need some sort of release.[32]

Louise comes back into the booth with her coffee. What is the hardest part of her job? 'The problem is that our work is so intangible',

[30] Ibid. [31] Ibid. [32] Ibid.

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she says. 'It's just the spoken word. And we're the voice in the machine when you push a button … The only time it gets tangible is when there are recordings and when there are complaints from the delegates about us.'[33] Interpreters, like many of the other administrative staff we have met, do the 'invisible work' that keeps the machinery of the EU running. Like protocol officers and meeting managers, their presence only comes to the foreground when something goes wrong. Louise and her colleagues hate it when this happens. Sometimes, delegates in the room forget to put their microphones on when they speak, which means that the interpreters have to break the fourth wall of the booth and try to catch the ear of the meeting's chair directly. But this is minor compared to getting a complaint from a delegate about the quality of their interpretation. Most delegates simply listen to the English spoken on the floor, but on rare occasions, a participant will ask the chair to slow down or repeat an agenda item because the interpreter is lagging behind or is hard to understand. In moments like this, the temperature in the booth seems to drop. In most higher-level meeting rooms in the EU, the interpreters and delegates speaking the same language are placed opposite one another so that they can maintain eye contact. Understanding is about much more than the words that are spoken. Interpreters must also get the intention, speed, nuance and intonation of a statement just right.

Moments later, the meeting starts again. Most people's screens show the columned Word documents: only a few delegates are looking at their email programs or reading something on a website. But most delegates – probably 90 per cent – have their laptops in front of them, and most are also working with large stacks of paper, using pens and highlighters. Some delegates are also typing on their phones. Negotiation work is done both online and on paper.

> 'We need a better picture of the product, but we can't simply go to Google and find another one', Maria pushes the delegates. 'We need to find one maybe from you, France… Any other comments?'

[33] Ibid.

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The Swedish delegate is on a website called partyhallen.se and is looking at images of party balloons.

'Now', Maria continues, 'does it matter if there's an inscription on the product? What do we want under the heading 9505. . . What's important to know at the moment of import into the EU?'[34]

Silence.

'To get anywhere on this without us discussing another four hours requires a quick *tour de table*', Maria concludes. As the meeting continues Louise clicks through the next couple of months in the electronic work calendar on her laptop whenever her voice is not needed.

There is an indicating vote in the room under which regulation to classify balloons featuring words such as *Happy Birthday*. From time to time, Maria switches her mic off and addresses one of the colleagues sitting close to her directly. It is now four thirty in the afternoon.

'We definitely can't simply use the images we found on the Internet', Maria stresses again, 'even if the image can be found in the BTI database, we still need to check'.

The Dutch delegate raises his hand. 'I would like to ask our colleague David how we use the word "to equip" here in the sentence. . . Shouldn't we better say, "to combine?"'

'Okay', Maria says. 'Any other suggestions'?

Before being prepared for service consultations, the agreed text must be tidied up, revised and shared with everyone for a final reading. Different legislative procedures apply depending on the kind of file being negotiated. In general, legislative files originate in the proposals of the European Commission, from where they are sent to the relevant working parties and committees in the European Parliament and Council. Inside the institutions, the priority is on closing the file as early as possible, which entails reaching a consensus on the formulation of the text at the lowest working level. If no agreement is

[34] Ibid.

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reached, the file is escalated up to the next highest level. In the Council, for example, this means that all those files that cannot be closed at the working group level are moved up to the diplomatic level and will be discussed by COREPER in one of its weekly meetings. If no agreement can be found here, the file is sent up another level to the Council of Ministers, and if that too fails, it will end up at the European Council and on the desks of the European Heads of State and Government.

> 'All of this looks good so far', Maria concludes. 'We just need to improve the text and the pictures. [We. . .] will produce the final draft. That's everything for the balloons for now. Good work everyone.'[35]

The next product to be classified is something called a 'room in-room system', which gives rise to detailed discussions about whether small shelters like bike sheds, walled-in office cubicles or indoor phone booths are permanent or movable. The crux of this classification is what material they are built from, and it gets especially thorny if they are made from aluminium. At this point in the meeting, the daylight has faded, and Parc Léopold now lies in darkness. The Belgian delegate comments in French to support what the French delegate had suggested. Using the short break from her duties while the floor speaks French, Louise hands out information sheets to the interpreters in the other booths.

> 'Now we spent two hours discussing this item', Maria says, 'with all arguments that were already around the last time we met'. It is now almost 6:30, and Maria summarises where they have got to. 'We'll revise the draft for interservice consultation', she says, admitting[36] 'we're not making as fast progress as I was expecting, so we will resume with this item at 9:30 tomorrow morning'.

Before closing the meeting, Maria announces that some of the colleagues will meet tonight at La Riviera on Rue Franklin,

[35] Ibid. [36] Ibid.

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a ten-minute walk away on the other side of Schuman. Anyone is welcome to join, she says. 'And for all you other ones, I will see you tomorrow morning, good night.'[37]

In the parallel meeting that evening streaming from New York, Professor Bradford is reaching the end of her Zoom talk, pointing to the dangers ahead for the EU: 'There's a conversation now about strategic autonomy, digital sovereignty, technological sovereignty. There are pressures towards leveraging the Brussels effect as a tool for these ambitions. But let me tell you one thing', she says: 'Brussels, if it can be effective in exporting regulations, can also work as a tool for exporting protectionism.'[38] Bradford does not mince her words. 'I fear that the increasing demands in Brussels to start harnessing the European regulations towards the protectionist industrial policy is really gaining ground.' Especially with the UK out of the picture, there's more space for Franco-German industrial policy-driven instincts to dominate the EU, she explains: the EU needs to figure out how to respond to the increasingly protectionist industrial policy-driven United States and an always protectionist China.[39]

Bradford's audience in Brussels is leaning against the standing tables arranged in front of the big screen, some looking up at Anu Bradford, some scrolling on their phones or uploading photos to their Twitter or Instagram profiles. It is almost seven in the evening, and the moderator is keen to wrap up the formal part of the evening and move on to the social part of the evening. 'Thank you, Professor Bradford, for taking the time to speak with us. At this point, it's just me who is standing between you and the real – not yet virtual – drinks we will have here in Brussels this evening. Despite everything, we still do the drinking in real life. Too bad that you cannot join us this time around.'[40] Anu Bradford and the other virtual participants exit the Zoom call, and the attendees stretch their arms and shoulders and begin to mingle. Moments later, they are swarming around the room with a drink in one hand and a phone in the other.

[37] Ibid. [38] Fieldnotes, 15 December 2022. [39] Ibid. [40] Ibid.

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A LIFELINE TO THE NATIONAL CAPITAL

The next day, grey clouds hang over the Brussels sky, and it is the second day of the customs committee meeting, which opens at 9.30 with Maria welcoming the delegates.[41] She tells them that six languages will be interpreted, and that it will also be possible to speak Portuguese today. There will be a coffee break at 11, and a lunch break at 12:30 or 13:00.

> 'We have to close today at five as some of us need to leave for their flights a little bit early', she says. 'Yesterday we finished item 7.5, and today we'll start with 7.6.' Item 7.6 concerns the heating of aluminium. Her intention, she says, 'is to discuss the items in the order they appear on the agenda because this order reflects the order in which we receive the new files. But first, the rooms need to accept the minutes of the project group meeting last month, and we agreed to close these minutes today,' she says, adding: 'I will not leave this until the end of the meeting', the chair adds, 'otherwise we may never get there'.[42]
>
> Questions, adjustments, clarifications, small breaks and the occasional buzzing phone. The big screen still blocks the view of the park. The same three-columned Word document is projected onto the screen, the first column includes the description of the product, the second the classification code and the third the legal requirements and an explanation of the chosen classification. In the legal column, some track changes are underlined in red and blue.
>
> In the interpretation booth, Louise holds down the mute button on her module. 'The Germans agree with the French, which means that our translation was good and correct.' Her colleague agrees. 'Look at them, they're happy. So good to have both France and Germany happy'. 'When these two are happy,' says Louise, 'we're happy. It means the EU is working'.[43]
>
> The discussion on the floor continues. The Portuguese delegate forgets to turn on their microphone, and the interpreters across the different booths raise their hands and wave at Maria. 'Ah, sorry, sorry you don't have your microphone', she says, and the delegate switches it on.[44]

[41] Fieldnotes, 3 December 2019. [42] Ibid. [43] Ibid. [44] Ibid.

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After some more back and forth, it is time for a coffee break.

> The meeting starts again at 11:15. The participants immediately move to the next item on the agenda: portable interactive electronic education devices primarily designed for children. While Maria is introducing the product, the Polish delegate's phone rings, and she leaps from her chair and hastens to leave the meeting room.
>
> 'Maybe some instructions are coming in from the capital on this very important item to Poland', quips Maria as the delegate leaves.[45] Her words hang in the air for a moment before a quiet laughter fills the room.
>
> Seconds later, the discussion returns to collecting opinions. After some back and forth, the delegates agree that both children and adults can use the product. After they have voted on which formulation to settle on, Maria concludes triumphantly: 'we can finally close this whole file in this meeting, finally one time we can finish on time'.[46]
>
> The rest of the afternoon runs smoothly. Later, many of the delegates will meet again at the airport, where they munch on chocolate bars or tired fruit salads from the Relay stores that dominate the gate area at Zaventem. Heads down, most of them are lost in their phones, responding to the next meeting invitation or email. This evening, the departure screens indicate no critical delays.

Even if there are clear rules about how and how not to use digital devices in the meeting rooms of European institutions, laptops, tablets and smartphones are in almost constant use by those who work in them. Phones ring, tablets buzz and laptops ping with incoming email, offering EU staff a portal into a world where they can find images to accompany negotiation texts, advice on improving their linguistic formulations – or ideas about where to take their next vacation. The phone, in particular, is a lifeline to the capital back home, to other colleagues working on or interested in a file under discussion, as well as to family, friends and anyone else who may need reaching. With their phones in the meeting room, the delegates and experts who sit centre stage, along with the interpreters, note-takers and observers who

[45] Ibid. [46] Ibid.

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congregate on the sidelines, experience a collapse of context. Their work and private lives mix; they can be both here and there; and information on work-related tasks is no more than a swipe away from the exchange of messages with spouses, children or friends.

Personal digital devices can make the meeting more efficient and bearable, but they can also cause serious disruptions. So how is the professional who sits through marathon meetings and moves the work of the EU along through small text iterations, coffee breaks and negotiations over videoconference supposed to use the digital devices that surround them? How much longer would the meeting in the customs committee have taken if the delegates had been unable to google images of decorative balloons to clarify the story among themselves, or if they had been forced to make all amendments to the text manually? In affording rapid reference and shared understanding, the screen streamlines negotiation. Without it, while delegates might enjoy an unimpeded view of the wintry park, they could well find themselves marking a third day of rhythmic repetition into their calendars just to cover all the agenda points.

Furthermore, how would stricter rules on technology affect those working on the sidelines? For simultaneous interpreters, whose work is intensely demanding, the phone or laptop affords a small but vital escape from the isolation of their booths – whether to quickly access a digital dictionary, have a brief chat with friends or plan their next trip. These devices are not mere conveniences: they extend the interpreters' cognitive and emotional capacity, thereby supporting their role in the broader process. While a range of formal rules and guidelines exist, most of them seem to be ignored in everyday practice. Generally, this is not a problem. Who doesn't check their email or surf the net from time to time while feigning attentiveness during an eight-hour meeting?

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

However, the rise of artificial intelligence is beginning to fundamentally change the balance between human expertise and digital

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mediation in the EU's institutions. As *Politico* reports, 'high-tech machines that can run through Eurocratic jargon at record speed have replaced hundreds of translators working for the EU',[47] shrinking one of its oldest departments by 17 per cent over the past decade. Although translation and interpretation differ in practice, both operate under a shared logic of efficiency, automation and cost control. Speech recognition and AI-assisted systems are now gradually entering booths and hybrid meeting rooms.

That said, many professionals in the Brussels Bubble cautiously welcome AI. 'The world is changing, and translation cannot be left behind', says Spyridon Pilos, who oversaw the introduction of the European Commission's translation engines.[48] 'Machine translation helps translators but cannot replace them. There is always a need for human expert validation.'[49] Yet others see signs of it leading to devaluation and strain. Trade union leader Cristiano Sebastiani links automation to 'an increasing workload and pressure to perform' while younger linguists anticipate that 'post-editing' machine output will soon dominate their work. The shift from linguistic creation to correction raises concerns about the erosion of professional judgement and the diminishment of the craft's human dimension.

These tensions also touch on the EU's core commitment to multilingualism. As Sebastiani warns, 'defending multilingualism isn't a popular battle – because it's expensive'.[50] If automation becomes the guiding principle, the project of linguistic equality may give way to a more monolingual, algorithmic order centred on English and machine mediation. Whether interpreters' expertise will be enhanced or hollowed out by these technologies remains uncertain – but their profession, like the European project itself, is already being quietly redefined through its entanglement with intelligent machines.

[47] www.Politico.eu/article/translators-translation-european-union-eu-autmation-machine-learning-ai-artificial-intelligence-translators-jobs/, last accessed 25 October 2025.
[48] Ibid. [49] Ibid. [50] Ibid.

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