

PROMISING WAYS OF IMPROVING SCIENCE AND SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS

Abstracts of XXV International Scientific and Practical Conference

Warsaw, Poland

(June 26 – 28, 2023)

UDC 01.1

ISBN –9-789-40369-762-8

The XXV International Scientific and Practical Conference «Promising ways of improving science and scientific solutions», June 26 – 28, Warsaw, Poland. 281 p.

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The recommended citation for this publication is: Fursova J. The pride of the collection of the palace of Hetman of Ukraine Kyrilo Rozumovsky. Abstracts of XXV International Scientific and Practical Conference. Warsaw, Poland. Pp. 70-72.

URL: <https://eu-conf.com/events/promising-ways-of-improving-science-and-scientific-solutions/>

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A GLIMPSE ON THE WTO LAW MULTILINGUALISM, ITS ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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WTO (World Trade Organization) is an international governmental organisation founded following the Uruguay round of negotiations in 1995. It regulates nearly all trade aspects including trade in services, trade-related intellectual property issues, agriculture, safeguards, technical barriers to trade etc. The WTO Member States must implement the rules adopted under this Organisation auspices into their legislation. It is necessary to translate WTO treaties and agreements officially in each Member State to fulfill this obligation. Thus, WTO law language specifics plays a crucial role in this process.[1]

WTO Secretariat has three official working languages: English, French, Spanish. Nevertheless, English takes a leading place among them. It means that most documents are first disseminated in English and only then distributed in the other official languages after the translation process is complete.[2]

The annual document volume is one of the major WTO law linguistic challenges. It adds up to some 43 million words or 86000 pages, using the WTO's conversion factor of 500 words per page. At the same time the Members require that documents be received in all three languages, except most room documents or other short-lived documents.

Overseeing multilingualism at the WTO and the publication of content in its three official languages is the Language and Documentation Services Division. The Division provides interpretation services at WTO meetings, translates official and administrative documents, publishes these documents in print and on dissemination platform Documents Online, registers notifications of trade measures by Members and provides graphic design support for publications and events.

All full-time translators and interpreters at the WTO work are under Division. In 2020 the headcount of regular staff, according to the establishment plan was 114, of which 46 were translators. The internal interpretation team was made up of five interpreters (i.e., 2.5 booths). All the remaining interpreters were freelancers.

The reason why the majority of linguists working at the WTO are translators is that out of all the documents emerging from the Organisation only two kinds are not translated: the Daily Bulletin which is distributed in English, and the Panelist CVs which are distributed in their original language.

Machine translation is increasingly used as a part of the WTO translators' toolbox, mostly in combination with translation memories. The machine translation (MT) is not systematically post-edited. Translators make decisions on every translation based on proposals from an MT engine, a translation memory, or the translator's acumen. The WTO translators created the WTO terminology database and the WTO's trilingual corpus in order to facilitate this process. [3]

In light of the growing importance of research in natural language processing, in particular in machine translation, and also to help translators concerned with international trade subjects, the WTO is willing to allow access to its public trilingual corpus. The corpus made available contains most of the WTO public documents produced from the WTO creation in 1995 to December 2018. All documents have been human translated. It is sentence aligned automatically which contains metadata. Even though the alignment quality is good, it has not been reviewed and therefore the WTO cannot warranty accuracy and completeness of alignments. The WTO Public Corpus is available in the three WTO working language bidirectional combinations (English-Spanish, English-French and French-Spanish). It must help lawyers all over the world to apply WTO law rules in their nation states.[4]

Nowadays many lawyers in French-speaking and Spanish-speaking jurisdictions rely on authentic WTO documents in their mother tongues. Nevertheless, there are some differences between the three official languages. Thus, the question arises which authentic text is the most correct.

The researchers distinguish such kinds of differences between WTO authentic texts as:

1. Simple errors.

For example, GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) Article XVII: 1 uses "and" in English and French but uses "or" in Spanish.

2. Difficulty in translating ambiguous terms.

Constructive ambiguity is sometimes used in treaty negotiations, for instance when it is not possible to reach agreement on more precise language or the terminology definition.

Safeguards Agreement Article 4.1(c) defines the term "domestic industry" using different terminology in Spanish (una proporción importante) than it does in French (une proportion majeure) and English (a major proportion).

3. Harmonisation problems.

In the category of harmonisation problems, phrases that are identical across different WTO agreements in one language diverge in another. For example, many agreements draw upon GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) terminology, using the same phrases in other agreements as other used in GATT to express similar obligations.

For instance, TRIPS (Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) Article 27.2 incorporates some language from GATT Article XX. In English and French, TRIPS Article 27.2 uses the same form of the word necessary as in GATT Article XX, but in Spanish there is a small variation ("necesarias" in GATT and "necesariamente" in TRIPS).

4. Different placement of words.

In TBT (Technical Barriers to Trade) Agreement Annex 1.1, the location of the word “requirements” creates an ambiguity regarding whether the requirements refer only to labelling. In French, the equivalent word, “prescriptions”, appears to refer to packaging, marking or labelling. In Spanish, the equivalent word, “prescripciones”, refers to all of the terms in the list: terminology, symbols, packaging, marking or labelling.[5]

It is worth noting that even taking into account all language discrepancies in WTO Law and its use in French-speaking and Spanish-speaking jurisdictions most of the legal commentaries, textbooks and manuals concerning international trade law are written in English relying on English WTO documents.

Thus, English plays a prevalent role among the three official languages. The WTO multilingualism presents certain challenges some of which are only partially solved now. We can hope that the number of issues will reduce in the nearest future.

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