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2002-03-22

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*An open letter to the Minister for Finance*

Dear Minister,

I should like to begin by congratulating you and your ministry, and especially the Euro Changeover Board of Ireland, for the extraordinary success we have had in Ireland in making the change.

I am writing to you, however, to bring to your attention one significant area where Ireland has performed very badly. In sociocultural and sociolinguistic terms, the way in which the plural of our new currency has been promulgated – in English and in Irish – is a very serious error, which, unfortunately, appears to be due to a misunderstanding of the intent of some EU legislation.

I write to ask your ministry to act swiftly to correct this. It would not take more than a letter from you to several key organizations to do so.

To give you a bit of background as to who I am, I should say that since 1996 I have been involved in standardization of the EURO SIGN € in computers as NSAI's representative to the ISO/IEC JTC1 sub-committee responsible for computer character sets. When you see the EURO SIGN in your fonts and on your keyboards, and when you see it in web pages, know that I had something to do with getting it there. I am a polyglot linguist, font designer, and typesetter, who has long taken an interest in minority languages, language rights, and cultural diversity in information technology.

It is perfectly correct to use “euros” and “cents” when talking about our new currency, despite what the government seems to believe, and despite what has been taken up by (or given to) the Irish media. Indeed, outside of certain legislation, it is *incorrect* to use the false plural without *-s* – *according to the European Commission's Translation Service*, which agrees with the points I raise here. In fact, they have stated explicitly that they fully support my effort.

It is true that Council Regulation (EC) No. 1103/97 of 17 June 1997 states the following:

Whereas ... the European Council furthermore considered that the name of the single currency must be the same in all the official languages of the European Union, taking into account the existence of different alphabets...  
This Regulation shall be binding in its entirety and directly applicable in all Member States.

What this *really* means is only that every country must call the currency “euro”, and that no country is allowed to say “We'd rather call it a ‘crown’ or a ‘ducat’.” It means that EURO and EYPO are to appear on the banknotes without variation. It does *not* imply anything about the spelling or grammar of the word in ordinary speech or writing.

There is no reason to believe that the word must be invariable or that it shall be immune to the grammar of natural languages. Indeed, the European Commission Translation Service's *English Style Guide*<sup>1</sup> states specifically that the *s*-less form should be used *only* when quoting legislation which uses it, and that in other contexts the normal English plural should be used:

Guidelines on the use of the euro, issued via the Secretariat-General, state that the plurals of both 'euro' and 'cent' are to be written without 's' in English. Do this when amending or referring to legal texts that themselves observe this rule. *Elsewhere, and especially in documents intended for the general public, use the natural plural with 's' for both terms.* (My italics.)

At a meeting of the Monetary Committee in 1998, the Euro Changeover Board – fearing that the use of different spellings for the single currency might lead to legal problems – claimed that “euro” and “cent” should be invariable in all languages, as decided in Madrid and Verona. The principle of invariable spelling was therefore accepted, but some countries (Finland, France, Portugal, Spain) got it accepted at an early stage that the plural inflections natural to their languages would be used. In addition, Greece was “allowed” not only continued use of the word for the drachma subdivision (λεπτό) but also its plural inflection (λεπτά). In *practice*, therefore, “invariable” meant “invariable for some languages but not for others” right from the start. Ireland did not make a similar decision – but we should have done. Why not insist upon the natural plural in English? There is *no* reason not to do so.

Television and radio news and advertisement is certainly meant for the general public. Surely the Irish government should take account of the recommendation of the European Commission's Translation Service and encourage Irish television and radio news and advertisement to “use the natural plural with 's' for both terms”!

It is true that the invariant plural was used in Irish legislation, in both English and Irish in section 11(1) of the Economic and Monetary Union Act, 1998. It is also used in two other EU regulations: Council Regulation (EC) No. 974/98 of 3 May 1998 on the introduction of the euro stipulates that “one euro shall be divided into *one hundred cent*” (Article 2), and “as from 1 January 2002, the ECB and the central banks of the participating Member States shall put into circulation banknotes *denominated in euro*” (Article 10), and finally that “as from 1 January 2002, the participating Member States shall issue *coins denominated in euro or in cent*” (Article 11). Regulation (EC) No. 2560/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 December 2001 on cross-border payments in euros talks about cross-border *payments in euro*, cross-border *payment transactions in euro* and cross-border *credit transfers in euro*. (My italics.)

But the Irish finance ministry has implemented the *s*-less plurals in contexts *other* than legislative ones, such as in the publications of the Euro Changeover Board of Ireland and the Revenue.

When the ECBI began its campaign with advertisements featuring Kian Egan and Paul McGrath, both of them said “one euro and twenty-seven cents”, correctly using the natural English plural. On 17 November 2000 I received some printed material from the ECBI which used the “legislative” plural. I contacted the ECBI and complained that this was a bad thing to do. I was given the following answer: “It's true that all official documents use euro and cent in all instances but we accept that the reality is that people will say euros and cents, and this is reflected in our current advertising campaign.” This was not the case, however, and all the rest of the ECBI's adverts had news presenters and actors saying “one euro and twenty-seven cent”.

Then came Budget Day. Now, everyone watches Budget Day and you yourself certainly did a fine job of using the “legislative” plural. Unfortunately, this had an enormous impact.

The news media and advertisers are conscientiously saying “euro” and “cent” when the natural English plurals “euros” and “cents” are expected. It is jarring to the ear and confusing to the average citizen. In January I was in Cleary's buying a kettle priced at €40. One of the cashiers said that the ten per cent discount would be “four euros”; the other cashier told me that the price would therefore be “thirty-six euro”. Last week in the Centra in Camden Street an Australian clerk (who would have grown up with “dollars” and

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1 <http://europa.eu.int/comm/translation/en/stygd/enstyle.htm>

“cents”) used the plural “cent” with me when handing me back my change. When I queried her on this, she said, “Well, they changed it, you know.”

*They?*

Yesterday in an off-licence in Camden Street I saw a notice that “15 cent” was to be charged on plastic bags, and I asked the shop proprietor about it. He said that he used that spelling because although he himself prefers to say “15 cents”, he felt that he was obliged to write it without the -s because that was “official”.

Exactly what well-informed *linguistic* authority is it that imposed such a change to our language on him? The Council of Europe?

And today when I spoke to a woman serving me coffee about this matter, I told her that the Commission’s Translation Service recommended the natural plural. A huge smile broke onto her face and she said “You mean we have permission to say ‘euros’? It’s really hard to remember to say ‘three euro’.”

Must we have *permission* to speak English naturally?

On the streets throughout the country, a great many people are saying “euros”. But one also finds that many merchants are saying “euro”, or are trying to avoid the issue by omitting the currency name altogether. This is where Ireland has performed *badly* in the changeover. People feel uncertain and uncomfortable. It’s natural to say “euros and cents” but the media continue to impress upon us that we’re “supposed” to say “euro and cent”. We, the Irish people, should *not* be made to feel uncomfortable about any aspect of our new currency – least of all how to say it naturally.

It is my belief that the Irish Government misunderstood the intent of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1103/97 and that we are suffering from that misunderstanding now. Some people have even suggested that “cent” could be the plural for the euro subdivision, while “cents” could be retained for the US, Canadian, Australian, Hong Kong and other currencies – but this is both objectionable in principle and impossible in practice. I have seen more than one RTÉ presenter read off the exchange rates between the euro and the dollar, saying, in obvious error, “one dollar and fifteen cent”. This is intolerable – it makes us all look rather ridiculous. The media in the US quite happily use the natural plurals “euros” and “cents” in all contexts and the *Washington Post* has ridiculed the “legislative” plural – doubtless not the only newspaper to do so.

It is important to note that in France, Portugal, and Spain, the official forms are pluralized naturally: *euros* and *centimes*, *cêntimos*, and *céntimos* respectively. In Catalunya, the Institut d’Estudis Catalans published an official recommendation in January 1998 that *euros* and *cents* (or *cêntims*) be used.<sup>2</sup> Why may we not write and say *euros* and *cents* in English? There is *no* reason. The Greeks are “allowed” to engrave, instead of *cent*, their own word on their coins – (ΛΕΙΤΟ, and plural ΛΕΙΤΑ, appear on Greek coins while CENT appears on the other national coins) and the Finns are “permitted” to write the nominative plural *eurot*, the partitive singular *euroa* (after numbers) as well as the nominative singular *sentti*, nominative plural *sentit*, and partitive singular *senttä* (after numbers). A Commission document giving the forms that are to be used in Community legislation is attached.<sup>3</sup> Note that the author of this document has added a footnote apologizing for, but hardly defending, the bad grammar: “This spelling without an ‘s’ may be seen as departing from usual English practice for currencies.” There is no attempt to explain why the English plural should be anomalous while the French, Portuguese, and Spanish all have plurals in -s. The error is that Ireland did not seek to defend natural grammar in 1998 when other countries did.

In fact, there is no real reason to use pluralless forms even in legislation in English – but, in my opinion, what’s written in the legislation isn’t that important, even if the grammar is incorrect. What *is* important is that we *care* about what newsreaders and advertisers broadcast into our homes on television and radio, and about what Irish shoppers and shopkeepers *say* to each other when we use our new currency.

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2 <http://www.iec.es/institucion/secciones/Filologica/llenguacatalana/documentsnormatius/euro.htm>

3 From <http://europa.eu.int/euro/html/dossiers/00219/00219-en.pdf>

Again, it is a certainty that native speakers of English in other countries, such as the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, are already saying “euros and cents”. It is not difficult to imagine that British subjects in the euro-sceptic UK will consider the ungrammatical plurals “euro and cent” to be unacceptable changes to “the Queen’s English” and that they will fiercely resist them as an assault on good sense – jeopardizing the UK’s prospective entrance to the EMU. If, on the other hand, Ireland takes the lead here, at least *this* objection to the introduction of the euro in the UK will be removed. And that is certainly in the interests of Ireland as well as of Europe as a whole.

In any case, for us in Ireland to parrot the artificial “euro and cent” is just plain silly, if not downright embarrassing.

There are problems with the word in Irish as well. Texts are being published which say *an euro*, making us assume that the word is feminine (the masculine would be *an t-euro*) but the genitive in those same texts is *an euro* where the feminine should be *na heuro*. So the word is neither masculine nor feminine. Nor Irish at all. *Euro* also violates Irish spelling rules. The correct forms should be *an eoró*, genitive *na heoró*, plural *eorónna* – based on *an Eoraip*, while accepting the ending *-ó* on the strength of the English *euro*.<sup>4</sup> *Ceint* (plural *ceinteanna*) was published in de Bhaldraithe’s 1959 dictionary, and in the Gúm’s 1989 dictionary *Foclóir Staidéir Ghnó*.

I believe that this is a very serious issue. I trust that you will review the situation and change current government policy by informing the media explicitly that they are *encouraged* – not “allowed” – to use the normal English plurals, “euros” and “cents”. If you will do so, your action would alleviate the confusion the Irish people have about which form is right and which form is wrong. We need your leadership here, or the uncertainty will surely continue.

The Commission’s instructions on spelling – though they did not say so clearly enough – related only to EU legal acts and were *not*, one must assume, an attempt to influence the everyday speaking and writing habits of European citizens.

I call on you, Minister, to issue a statement to the editors of Ireland’s newspapers, broadcast media, banks, and government departments, to encourage the use of the natural plurals of these words in English and Irish.

I should be very pleased to clarify any point made here or to assist in any way I can to facilitate this important aspect of the euro changeover.

Yours faithfully,



Michael Everson

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4 For more information, see my paper in Irish: “*Euro nó eora? Cent nó ceint? An t-airgeadra nua agus Éire*”, or its English translation: “*Euro or eora? Cent or ceint? The new currency and Ireland*” at <http://www.evertype.com/standards/euro/index.html>. A guide to correct formatting and usage of the euro sign in speech and writing is also on my site.

- 12.9 *Currency abbreviations.* The Publications Office uses a single list, ISO 4217, for both [OJ](#) work and non-OJ work. The full list, recommended for use in the Commission by its Secretariat-General in 1996, can be found online at <http://europa.eu.int/comm/translation/currencies/entable1.htm>. The following table shows the names and abbreviations/symbols for the currencies of the EU Member States and some other countries.

Official name	ISO 4217
ECU	XEU ( <i>Exception to rule: use ECU instead</i> )
euro, pl. euros	EUR
Austrian schilling	ATS
Belgian franc	BEF
German mark	DEM
Danish krone, pl. kroner	DKK
Spanish peseta	ESP
Finnish markka, pl. markkaa	FIM
French franc	FRF
pound sterling	GBP
Greek drachma	GRD
Irish pound (punt)	IEP
Italian lira, pl. lire	ITL
Luxembourg franc	LUF
Dutch guilder	NLG
Portuguese escudo	PTE
Swedish krona, pl. kronor	SEK
<i>Note also:</i>	
Canadian dollar	CAD
US dollar	USD
Swiss franc	CHF
Norwegian krone, pl. kroner	NOK
Turkish lira	TRL
Japanese yen	JPY

- 12.10 The currency abbreviation precedes the amount and takes a space:

FRF 2 400; EUR 3 500; EUR 2 billion

When used, currency symbols are closed up:

\$100; £78; €120

- 12.11 Where a sum is written in words, use the form shown in the table above: *a sum of seven million German marks, two million ecus.*

- 12.12 *The euro.* Like 'pound', 'dollar' or any other currency name, the word 'euro' is normally written in lower case with no initial capital.

In tables and documents where monetary amounts figure largely, make maximum use of the abbreviation EUR (before the amount) or the € symbol (closed up to the figure). Note that the € symbol is still not used in the Official Journal.

Guidelines on the use of the euro, issued via the Secretariat-General, state that the plurals of both 'euro' and 'cent' are to be written without 's' in English. Do this when amending or referring to legal texts that themselves observe this rule. Elsewhere, and especially in documents intended for the general public, use the natural plural with 's' for both terms.

- 12.13 Use a point to separate units from subunits:

Price: FRF 7.20; BEF 50.-.

## Altres documents normatius

### TERMES QUE DESIGNEN LA UNITAT DE MONEDA EUROPEA I LA SEVA SUBDIVISIÓ: L'*EURO* I EL *CENT* (Acord de la Secció Filològica del 16 de gener de 1998)

#### 1

Els termes masculins *euro* ('unitat monetària de la Unió Europea') i *cent* ('centèsima part de l'euro') prenen en plural les formes *euros* i *cents*, respectivament, d'acord amb les regles de formació del plural en català.

#### 2

Tanmateix, d'acord amb el considerant número 2 de la Proposta de reglament (CE) adoptada pel Consell de la Unió Europea el 7 de juliol de 1997, relativa a la introducció de l'euro, «l'elecció del nom cent no impedeix la utilització de variants d'aquesta denominació en l'ús quotidià dels estats membres». Així doncs, res no obsta perquè el mot *cèntim*, que ja existeix en la llengua catalana, pugui designar també, quan pertoqui, la centèsima part de la moneda que substituirà la pesseta. Aquest significat ja és recollit en el *Diccionari de la llengua catalana*, atès que el mot hi és definit com a «moneda que val la centèsima part d'una unitat monetària».

Per aquest motiu, la Secció Filològica recomana d'emprar, preferiblement, el terme *cèntim* com a designació usual en català de la subdivisió de l'euro.

#### 3

Finalment, la Secció Filològica considera que, en la pronúncia dels termes *euro* i *cent*, s'han de tenir en compte les diferències fonètiques derivades de la diversitat dialectal que afecten, especialment, la qualitat de les vocals d'aquests dos mots i el grup consonàntic *nt* del mot *cent*. Així, per exemple, en el cas del català central, la *e* de tots dos mots s'ha de pronunciar oberta, i la vocal final de *euro* s'ha de pronunciar com una *u*; i, en el cas del valencià, la *t* de *cent* s'ha de pronunciar.

[Documents normatius \(1962-1996\)](#)

**Spelling of the words “euro” and “cent” in the official  
Community languages - to be used when drawing up  
Community Legislative acts**

	<u>expressed as an amount</u>	*****	<u>with definite article</u>	
language	one unit	several units	singular	plural
DA	1 euro 1 cent	100 euro 100 cent	euroen centen	euroene centene
DE	1 Euro 1 Cent	100 Euro 100 Cent	der Euro der Cent	die Euro die Cent
EL	1 ευρώ 1 λεπτό	100 ευρώ 100 λεπτά	το ευρώ το λεπτό	τα ευρώ τα λεπτά
EN	1 euro 1 cent	100 euro <sup>1</sup> 100 cent <sup>1</sup>	the euro the cent	the euro <sup>1</sup> the cent <sup>1</sup>
ES	1 euro 1 cent	100 euros 100 cents	el euro el cent	los euros los cents
FR	1 euro 1 cent	100 euros 100 cents	l'euro le cent	les euros les cents
IT	1 euro 1 cent	100 euro 100 cent	l'euro il cent	gli euro i cent
NL	1 euro 1 cent	100 euro 100 cent	de euro de cent	de euro's de centen
PT	1 euro 1 cent	100 euros 100 cents	o euro o cent	os euros os cents
FI	1 euro 1 sentti	100 euroa <sup>2</sup> 100 senttiä <sup>2</sup>	euro sentti	eurot sentit
SV	1 euro 1 cent	100 euro 100 cent	euron <sup>3</sup> centen	eurorna <sup>3</sup> centen

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1 This spelling without an “s” may be seen as departing from usual English practice for currencies.

2 The form used is the singular partitive form.

3 Used for references to “the currency” or coins.

The official abbreviation, according to ISO 4217, for “euro” is “EUR” in all languages. There is no official abbreviation for “cent”, but one could reflect on using either “c” or “ct”.