

BEHIND OPENING DOORS:  
PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AWARENESS IN A LINGUISTICALLY  
AND CULTURALLY HOMOGENOUS CENTRAL EUROPEAN SOCIETY

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Of all the people who declared French as Ig C in the descriptions of their interpreting competences during a recent round of EC/EP examinations for translators/interpreters in Warsaw not one agreed to enter the booth. According to those present, the SCIC representative ostentatiously tore up the list and left, slamming the door and murmuring some, undoubtedly unflattering, words about honesty and professionalism.

A group of students who, under the TEMPUS programme went to study in the Vienna Institute for Translators and Interpreters, declared German as their language C. It turned out that what they spoke was a folk version of Silesian German, totally useless vis-à-vis modern textual and topical requirements.

This is a Polish situation but problems are not limited to Poland alone.

In 1989 and the early nineties, when the translational situation became the focus of attention, much time and paper was used to assess and criticize the practices of the forty post-II World War years. Mary Snell-Hornby visited Central and Eastern European countries in search of possible links and cooperation, EST came into existence in 1991 and the Polish situation was described by Elżbieta Tabakowska in the issue of the ESSE Messenger devoted to translation-related problems of the new democracies. Many people and institutions vowed to take proper steps to lead translators, active and potential, and the emerging profession, towards proper goals.

What came later was total chaos on the one hand and serious attempts to raise the degree of professionalism, on the other. Chaos was characteristic of the

area of practice. In the totalitarian regime only the selected few were allowed to produce carefully censored versions of carefully screened literary works (*and* still managed to produce superb translations of most world classics and bestsellers – to give them due credit). The early mid-nineties were a time of the hyped-up capitalism and intoxication with freedom. Everybody took up translating because it meant free choice and democracy (in practice, free access to whatever anybody thought fit to translate, regardless of the levels of trashiness and vulgarity, a bit like early internet production); because it was relatively good money that could be made on the side; and because there were no quality standards nor control pending. Anybody who knew, or thought they knew, a foreign language offered their services to publishers who agreed, almost indiscriminately, because they could offer lower fees: the competition was tremendous. In interpreting, the overnight self-made experts were getting their first thrashings from the relatively few trained specialists, experienced self-taughts, graduates of the only existing T/I training centre in Warsaw and an army of dissatisfied clients. The employers saw a good opportunity to save money based on a simple recipe: hire one person to do a day's job requiring two and if there are no booths available have the interpreter sit on an upturned crate emptied of bottles of the nouveau-democratic drink.

The tone I have adopted so far reflects, hopefully, the ridiculous aspects of those days. On the other hand there really was much done to improve standards, imitate, learn and teach. Educational cooperation and programmes were launched under the TEMPUS programme, conferences and workshops were organized, professional translators and interpreters offered their precious time and expertise in an attempt to level standards here and there. In Poland alone numerous translation schools and courses were launched and publications appeared, both specialist and popular, designed at increasing social awareness of the need to translate professionally. One could thus say that no educational aspect was neglected and the whole campaign conducted from both sides should have produced excellent or, at least, satisfying results. But old habits die hard and the problems we face today are potentially more serious than a decade ago. Moreover, we seem to be circling back towards a comparable unprofessional state of affairs. In what follows I will attempt an explanation of the reasons why matters seem to have taken the wrong course.

### **Schools**

These started springing up like mushrooms after the rain. There are now about a dozen schools for translators functioning all over Poland. Most of them are state schools, very few are private. Most operate in academic cities and are part of institutions of higher education. In most, tuition is very high. Of the few in which

no charge is made, the Warsaw Institute of Applied Linguistics should be mentioned, a well established school with a misleading name, and my own Department of Translation Studies, well-hidden behind the façade of the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. We are the only school to recruit only from among our own fourth year students, to ensure high language standards. This policy, despite its obvious disadvantages, has proved correct when one considers the relatively high ratio of graduates who have actually passed the EU exams against other Polish centres. The number of enquiries from all over the world will probably change our recruitment policy in the future. Most of the staff are experienced practising translators and interpreters and academics at the same time. Ours is an MA programme.

As is frequently the case, the least professional schools have the best equipment and considerable financial advantages but rarely the experienced professional staff. The greatest harm they do is through promoting the 'we-mean-well-and-we-are-doing-the-best-we-can' attitude with which they vaccinate their graduates against true professionalism. Some (no names, of course) have gone as far as pinching programmes from other schools' official web pages. I once got a demand for explanation from the organizers of such a pirate course, concerning terminological databanks and sensitive texts. We intend to teach those, so we must know what they are, was the (logical!) argument. Other pathological situations occur in schools which exist mainly to strengthen the star status of their staff. There is little intention there to produce quality graduates in order to create a healthy market and 'unnecessary' competition.

The major problem of all schools is the lack of professional translators and interpreters, expertly trained according to Western standards who would themselves be good didacticians and have multiple language combinations.

### **Academia**

In 1982, for the first time in the post- II World War history of philological departments in Poland, I created a syllabus and implemented professional translation techniques in a language-teaching component at what was then the Institute of English Philology of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Since then numerous foreign language departments in our universities have introduced courses in translation. Most, however, are firmly based on traditional philological principles. Language is treated as the main object of study, there is no serious pragmatic tool-building, translation and interpreting (or rather a misapprehended form of interpreting -or both) are taught through lectures and seminars by academics who may be self-taught but rarely are professionally trained translators and interpreters.

Syllabi focus on contrastive linguistics, in some cases on literary translation, on general language texts and marginalia. There is wide misunderstanding as to terminology and techniques, the kind of textual material to be used, direction of translation (into the mother tongue, not into foreign), and the need for a functionalist approach. Knowledge of foreign languages is treated as tantamount to skilled translation *and* interpreting. Reluctance, if not hostility, towards the vocational aspect of translation prevails, recent theoretical and methodological advances are dismissed as non-academic and non-intellectual by the ultraconservative part of the academia. Research into theoretical aspects of interpreting, machine and computer-aided translation, teletranslation, subtitling, voice-over or language technologies in general are placed outside the scope of interest of language specialists despite the global and rapid emergence of new modes of communication. The gap between theory and practice remains as wide as ever and interdisciplinary research is viewed as lacking explanatory power and methodologically suspicious.

The above are just some symptoms of the inability to implement professionalism in the area where it should be taught. Underneath, however, there is an even greater, almost insurmountable obstacle of historically based attitudes and inadequate aptitude, both of which preclude any increase in translational awareness, except a very superficial one, which is the case now.

### History and society

The Polish society is relatively homogenous. This is truth apparent because its history and policy over the centuries testify both to diversification and tolerance. A powerful state in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it stretched from the Baltic almost to the Crimea. The early and late medieval periods witnessed frequent, both friendly and hostile, contacts with neighbouring nations. Its relative religious tolerance made it possible for various immigrant groups to seek refuge there. Its geographical situation made it a territory of foreign influences and a battlefield of Europe. Its upper classes were cosmopolitan but the salt of the earth was patriotic to the point of nationalism. Its language was a value to be preserved at all costs. Even in the times of prosperity, the Renaissance poets criticized the tendency to replace Polish with Latin and other foreign languages (Mikołaj Rej's famous comparison of foreign speech to the clangor of geese and a reminder: may these foreign nations remember that Poles are no geese and have their own language).

The present views and mentality were formed and strengthened at the time of the partitions when German and Russian were imposed as the official languages of the oppressors and Poland disappeared from the maps of Europe. Preserving language and culture became a patriotic duty, reluctance to learn

these languages was absorbed with mother's milk. The 5 years of II WW German and 30 post-war years of compulsory Russian at all levels of education confirmed their status for many decades to come. The memory of greatness affected the status of neighbouring languages as peripheral varieties of Polish. Byelorussian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian were treated as dialects. The brief, if shameful, period of hostility between Czechs and Poles was reduced to insignificance in subsequent years and the language problem did not emerge officially. French, as the language of aristocracy, was bred out, together with class, in communist Poland. English ruled briefly in the positivist period as a marker of technical and agricultural progressive thinking on the part of the small landowners. At the same time the positivist literature ridiculed the aristocracy and landed gentry for their habit of using foreign languages in everyday communication. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century waves of economic emigration contributed to the attitude problem. In countries where Poles were second-class citizens, their language and culture were their only treasure, particularly as the second generation wanted to merge with their new environment as soon as possible and shed the status of immigrants. At some point between 1945 and now almost every Polish family could boast relatives abroad, but keen interest in their financial achievement did not trigger extensive interest in foreign language acquisition although, gradually, foreign languages other than Russian were introduced to schools, mainly in bigger cities. Most learners were entitled to unlimited language tutorials at the higher level of education, free of charge, until a few years ago when, due to financial reasons, the number of 'free' languages was limited to two. The political and economic circumstances of the period caused, however, only very few to take advantage of the FL situation. It was fashionable for the elite few to give their children private language tutorials, but seldom in more than one language, even if these classes resulted in relatively high language standards. A major manifestation of developing interest in foreign languages was the opening, in the early sixties, of the first secondary schools with English and French as languages of tutoring in all sciences and an extended programme of the language itself. Yet, the undercurrent mentality seems to have remained unchanged although the minorities radicalized their linguistic and cultural views slightly. Officially, the recognition of the heterogeneity came as late as in June last year, in the language and nationality section of the national census. A small percentage of minorities indicated languages other than Polish as their native means of communication, the first sign of a budding multicultural and multilingual awareness.

Such thinking and attitudes could not produce conditions favourable for translational professionalism. Years of limited contacts with countries other than Soviet satellites made the demand for professional services scarce in areas other

than literary translation. In infrequent multilingual interpreting, relay dominated for several decades – another indicator of the scarcity of plurilingual specialists. Even today most translators and a lot of interpreters have only languages A and B and it is late-bilingual type B – a relic by professional Western standards. The only, relatively small, professional groups in Poland with two, three or more foreign languages are the Foreign Ministry employees and students of economy and marketing. Other than that there are only individual enthusiasts. It may take years and profound migratory changes before the situation changes. Meanwhile there are some dark clouds gathering. Despite the slowly increasing awareness, there is very little done towards meeting the European requirements on a larger scale. Secondary schools still offer only one foreign language on a mandatory basis. Most foreign language teachers are unable to distinguish between translation as an FL-teaching means and as an end task and are not terribly motivated to find out. Mainly, because they mistakenly assume that this would involve demanding theoretical studies. Moreover, their own language standards are rather low – school teachers can usually be traced back to students mediocre, rather than excellent while translators should excel in language, their basic tool. This is also one reason for the low quality output of most graduates of the translator and interpreting training centres. No-one seems to appreciate the importance of general knowledge and other translational competences. Numerous myths are dying very slowly.

The situation is also aggravated by the highly unprofessional conduct of numerous translation agencies which very quickly decided to implement monopolistic mechanisms. The well-trained professionals demand higher wages, acceptable working conditions and deadlines. Untrained language students, unaware of their ignorance, will do the same work for half or quarter the price. Quality ceased to matter. A young colleague quoted a situation in which he was asked by the formerly reliable institution to appear within 30 minutes of the phone call and do three hours of interpreting without the booth all by himself. They said they knew that by the end of the session he would be tired but so would the delegates and there was no danger of anybody noticing the potential errors and losing reputation. Naïveté or cynicism? Certainly finance, as ever the root of all evil. The Polish economy is stagnant, money has become scarce, companies are going bankrupt. Anything has to cost double to make up for long periods of inactivity, which drives away present and potential partners and investors and contributes to the vicious circle. Unaccustomed to professional standards, more and more clients are beginning to think of specialist services as irrational expenses.

The situation behind the opening doors seems now more grave than ten years ago. Even well-established translator/interpreter training schools in some

applicant countries face the danger of closing down. Professional translator associations have an increasingly hard time trying to secure their members' basic rights, often with little or no effect. There are also some worrying signs coming from the West. The very recruitment by SCIC indicates the tendency to drain the candidate countries of their T/I potential, rather than to build new potential through partnership programmes which would further and satisfactorily increase the language and T/I awareness without which inequality will deepen rather than disappear. Some Western T/I training centres have started the practice of recruiting students from better Polish schools and offering courses of comparable or lesser standards in exchange for a recognizable certificate and a steep fee and have remained deaf to appeals for guidance and cooperation. Optimism, enthusiasm and determination have been frequently replaced by greed, ill-defined competitiveness and superciliousness. The EU will become the promised land for a handful (ca the 200 best Polish translators) with the right language combinations but it remains to be seen whether, once they acquire the dream job at 7000 Euros a month, the originators of the drain will send them over to the T/I training centres of their countries of origin to spread the light. If not, Eurospeak will become the official language of Eastern and Central Europe and that, rather than teletranslation and machine-generated textual matrices, will bring the true end of institutional translation here.