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## Pride or Prejudice?

“You speak my language, so I don’t need to speak yours”

### Uvod

Avtor članka je imel kot predstavnik DZTPS referat s tem naslovom na konferenci *Evropa – skupnost enakopravnih jezikov*. Konferenca je bila v Piseku na Češkem od 8. do 10. oktobra 1998 (poročilo o konferenci smo objavili v Biltenu DZTPS decembra 1998). Referat je bil med udeleženci dobro sprejet in je vzbudil zanimanje za razmere v Sloveniji, zato ga v celoti objavljamo v Mostovih.

English has indeed become a world language, but it is by no means everywhere and it is by no means always welcome.<sup>1</sup>

Citizens of small countries are generally more polyglot than those of large ones. And, with English as an increasingly global language, more and more people have to invest in learning it, however many people share their native tongue.

(The Economist)<sup>2</sup>

I should, perhaps, begin with an apology to Jane Austen for having borrowed, and slightly altered the title of one of her best known novels. Yet I trust I may be forgiven, for the two words *pride* and *prejudice* are aptly suited to the themes of this conference.

My subtitle – “You speak my language, so I don’t need to speak yours” – reflects an attitude which most of us have encountered, if not precisely in those words.

In what follows, I should like to offer a personal and professional review of the –

sometimes troubled – relations between what are politely referred to as the “languages of greater and lesser diffusion” in Europe. Or, to put it more bluntly, the “bigger and smaller” languages. My reason for even daring to speak on these matters is that, as a native speaker of English, I have lived and worked for nearly twenty years in various parts of Central and Eastern Europe – mainly in Slovenia, from where I now come.

As a translator and language editor, working mainly from Slavic languages, I am constantly faced with the same difficulties as those faced by my Slovene or Croatian colleagues who, unlike me, are *not translating into their mother tongue*, but into the foreign language, English. It is because I share their problems that I feel I can understand them. In addition, I admire their skill, knowledge and professional devotion – for their task is harder than mine. This leads me to the first main point:

### I. Translation in the New Europe

We begin with a paradox. During the era of socialism, especially during 70s and 80s, most countries of central and eastern Europe had flourishing state-funded publishing houses, many of which still survive today, e.g.

<sup>1</sup> Crystal, David

<sup>2</sup> “Little Countries”, *The Economist*, 3 January 1998.



Corvina Press in Hungary or Državna založba in Slovenia. These publishers produced books which were often of high quality and well translated. Some also churned out numerous unreadable tomes (in translation) with catchy titles such as "The role and function of workers' decision-making in the self-management process", or "Artistic-cultural and social manifestations in the year of 1979". It did not greatly matter whether or not the books had been sold or read – probably not – because the publishing had been paid for by the state.

Now, however, it does matter. State subsidies for books have been considerably reduced. Less money is available for "prestige" publications. As a result, many projects have to be abandoned. Also, if books are not sold, the publisher makes a loss, which in socialist times would have been covered by the state.

The second part of the paradox is this: while in the past many unnecessary works were being published, today there are many vitally needed publications – particularly dictionaries and glossaries relating to the "new" European terminology – which cannot be printed, or which appear too slowly, due to lack of (state) funds. In Slovenia, since the gaining of independence in 1991, we have been obliged to re-translate most of the legislation to bring it gradually into conformity with EU regulations. At the diplomatic, scientific and academic level, there is a constant demand for new official documents – protocols, quality assessments, university curricula, etc. All this must be done, and quickly done, in a foreign language – usually English. This is a problem which, I feel sure, faces all countries of central and eastern Europe during this period of transition. It is well expressed in these words from a recent article in Slovenia's main daily newspaper *Delo*:

Res pa je tudi, da je znanje angleščine v zadnjih letih, ko je Evropa odprla okna in

vrata svojih držav, zelo napredovalo in, če nam je všeč ali ne, je treba priznati, da *angleščina prodira in se vsiljuje* tudi v slovenski jezik, zlasti kadar gre za nove tehnološke izraze.

(*Delo*, my underlining)<sup>3</sup>

(It is also true that, in recent years, as Europe has opened the doors and windows of its states, the knowledge of English has increased and that – whether one likes it or not – it must be admitted that English is penetrating into and also thrusting itself upon the Slovene language, particularly in the domain of new technological expressions.)

<sup>3</sup> Alja Košak, in *Delo*, 25 May 1998.

A further comment from the same article:

Kljub razširjenosti angleškega jezika ali prav zato pa je sredi Evrope še vedno trden babilonski stolp, ki se še naprej vzpenja v nebo. Gre za Evropsko unijo in njen sedež v Bruslju, kjer je trenutno priznanih že 11 uradnih jezikov. S pristopom Češke, Estonije, Madžarske, Poljske in Slovenije bo število uradnih jezikov, v katerih ministri v EU lahko uradujejo, še občutno povečalo armado prevajalcev.

(Despite the increasing diffusion of the English language – or, indeed, precisely because of this expansion – there still endures in central Europe a solid Tower of Babylon which continues to reach towards the skies. This is, in effect, the European Union with its headquarters in Brussels, where at present no fewer than 11 official languages are recognized. With the accession of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, the number of official languages in which the EU ministries can operate will lead to a significant increase in the "armada" of translators.)



This fact that English is penetrating into and thrusting itself upon smaller languages is one which David Crystal acknowledged in saying that "English has indeed become a world language, but it is by no means everywhere and it is by no means always welcome".<sup>1</sup>

If there is *pride* on the part of those who speak the big European languages, it may be partly unconscious. A native speaker of English, German, French or Spanish may be accustomed to seeing documents impeccably translated from "smaller" languages, and may also give scant thought to the problems the translators may have had in adjusting the subtleties of their own language to the standardised requirements of the EU. To give just one brief example: recently, for the Euro-revision of a government law on food-hygiene regulations, I had to deal with the innocent-looking expression "*neoporečnost pitne vode*". I knew what it meant, but I couldn't translate it, because English has no suitable equivalent for "*neoporečnost*". If I had used the dictionary, I would have come up with something like: "the irreproachability/impeccability of drinking water". In the end, with help from colleagues, we came up with a bland Euro-solution: "the safety/assured quality of drinking water". One might have said "water beyond reproach", but not in an official document. Something had to be lost in the translation.

### Something is often being lost in the translation

As far as speakers of the major languages are concerned, the translation is mainly a document for discussion, negotiation, in *their* language. It is a one-way road leading towards the target language, not a dual-carriageway leading back to the source language. You speak our language, we don't need to speak yours.

As a consequence, the countries in transition are inevitably faced with a form of lin-

guistic prejudice: as states they are recognised, but only on condition that they convert (translate/interpret) their languages into the lingua franca of the new Europe. This they must do to survive. The most striking example of this is that legal documents drawn up between two central European states – e.g. a contract between a company in the Czech Republic and one in Slovenia – will be drawn up in three languages (Czech, Slovene and English), but it is the English version which will be accepted in case of legal contest. Both the Czechs and the Slovenes would have no choice but to submit to the authority of the language imposed. It is not only in central Europe that this is so. As an Icelandic economist puts it: "It is simpler to accept from the start that your own language is going to be insufficient. The necessity of speaking English is unquestioned in Iceland." (The Economist)<sup>2</sup>

### Pause for thought

Twenty years ago, at a conference in Paris, jointly organised by the British Council, the Goethe Institut, and the Alliance Française, on the topic of foreign language learning, I began wondering what would have happened if some uniquely valuable mineral had been discovered in Iceland, and that country had become the richest and most influential in Europe. Would we then all be busily learning Icelandic? Would French, German, English become second "second" languages? Would all official publications be first in Icelandic? Would there be a production boom in textbooks such as "*L'Islandique en Vite*", or "*Basic Icelandic*", or "*Vorsprung durch Isländisch*"...? Probably. But, of course, it did not happen. And so we return to the serenely practical words of the Icelandic economist, Markus Möller: "Citizens of small countries are generally more polyglot than those of large ones."

If citizens of small countries are more



polyglot than those of others, it is because their entire economic life depends not just on production but also on translation.

## II Practicalities

The high visibility of the Web means that the English which is presented on its pages is also highly profiled across the globe. ... What sort of English is being used on the Web? What is linguistically correct? Does it matter that it often appears to be "wrong".

(The Author)<sup>4</sup>

In this second part, I should like to focus more closely upon the precise use of language – *in a foreign tongue*. Those concerned range from scientists, academics and politicians, to journalists, editors, and secretaries, from company managers to hotel waiters. And last, but foremost, translators.

Since we must accept that translation is a "necessary evil" – though often the only cure – let us briefly review what could be done to improve the situation.

### i Professional training

Most translators over the age of 35 are language graduates who preferred not to go into teaching. They had to learn – "on the job" – skills for which they had not been trained, e.g. translating for a pharmaceutical or an electronics company, without a knowledge of either discipline (even in the mother tongue). Translation was used all too often as an examining device rather than a proper subject of study<sup>5</sup>, and the material was strongly biased towards literature. This was of little help to future translators, whose work would be more

likely to involve production quotas than literary quotations.

Although the situation may have marginally improved since independence, it is still the case in Slovenia and Croatia that working translators receive far too little *in-service* (re) *training* to help them adapt to the language demands of the new Europe.<sup>6</sup> Apart from those working in the government offices, many translators are still unsure how to translate into their own language the increasingly prolific "buzz words" of the EU, such as "acquis communautaire", "co-operation procedure", "white paper", etc. Although translators are receiving training in Brussels and Strasbourg, they still remain the hand-picked few and it is difficult for them to pass on their experience to the general body of Slovene translators.

### ii Status of the translator

One could say that translation, in Slovenia, is at present enjoying a "boom". Certainly, there is plenty of work available for those willing to

<sup>5</sup> Although, as a generalisation, this is true, it must also be mentioned that excellent translation courses were already being provided by the universities of Prague, Bratislava, Graz, Ljubljana, Trieste, Zagreb, to name just a few.

<sup>6</sup> In Slovenia, the recently established Department of Translation at the *Filozofska fakulteta* of the Ljubljana University has given an invaluable boost to translation studies and to recognition of the profession. In addition, training is being provided by government services, such as the Office for European Affairs, which acts in liaison with other governmental departments. There is also an independent agency (OST – Educational Consulting Services), which organises regular in-service training seminars for professional translators.

<sup>4</sup> Susie Timms, in *The Author*, Journal of the Society of Authors, London, Spring issue, 1998.



take it on. This is especially true of the government departments, which have to produce an almost unstoppable flow of documents relating to Slovenia's endeavours to attain membership of both the NATO Alliance and the European Union. This work is likely to continue, and to increase.<sup>7</sup>

Heartening though this may be, we still face two constant concerns. Firstly, the *status of the translator*. Suitably qualified translators are able to join the DZTPS – The Society of Scientific and Technical Translators. Membership brings certain rights and privileges, but it does not automatically confer *professional* status upon those who work in companies. Translation – upon which the whole economy depends – is still not officially recognised as a profession comparable in status to that of, say, lawyer, economist, or teacher. Many translators are looked upon as little better than typists with language skills. Hence the translators' often repeated grudge against managers who say: "Type this out for me in German, please. It won't take long." We still have a long way to go before translators' skills are properly recognised.

Secondly, it is a generally accepted principle in western Europe that translations should be done by native speakers of the target language. This may be a sound principle, but in central and eastern Europe it remains, alas, merely an ideal. Quite simply, there are not enough competent native speakers of English, French, or German who are available to deal with the vast quantity of everyday work to be translated from Czech, Croatian, Hungarian, Slovak, Slovene...

If western Europe remains little interested in the languages of central and eastern Europe, it should at least gratefully acknowledge the immense efforts that are made here to satisfy the demands of the "big" languages.

### III An informal note

The Slovene writer, working in a language spoken by little more than two million people, may almost physically feel the closeness of silence.

(Boris A. Novak, Slovene poet)<sup>8</sup>

When the Slovene poet and editor, Boris A. Novak, recently gave a public lecture (in English, of course) in Ljubljana, he spoke with a kind of teasing wistfulness of the fact that one ancient feature of the Slovene language could never properly be conveyed in a foreign language – the *dvojina*, or "dual-form". That is, a special form of the verb for referring to two things – or, especially, to two people. It creates an intimacy: *greva* – let's go, the two of us together – is different to *gremo* – let's (all) go together. To a Slovene, the difference matters; to a foreigner, it is just a further (unnecessary?) language complication – like the many accented vowels in Hungarian (the ó, ő, ü, ú). Yet it is a complication which is no more bothersome than is the use of the article (*the, a, an* etc.) in English, to speakers of Slavic languages.

I raise the point of language here, because I feel that there is a real danger that the dominance of English as the main language of international communication may lead to the gradual erosion of essential features of the mother tongue, such as accents and diacritic marks – e.g. the letters č, ž, š, in Slovene. As a result, business cards, letterheads, addresses and official names are often "cleansed" of accent marks in order to suit Western European tastes. For instance: *Dušanka Požar* or *Jože Senčar* become *Dusanka Pozar* or *Joze Senčar*.

<sup>8</sup> Boris A. Novak, paper delivered at the Conference on Translation into non-mother tongues, University of Ljubljana, May 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Alja Košak, *Delo*, 25 May 1998.



Sencar, and their addresses – *Črnuška cesta* 3, or *Zaloška cesta* 8 – become Crnuska street 3, or Zaloska street 8. This is of no help to anyone, particularly not to the postman!

It seems that different standards are being applied. In the British press, the French accents (*aigu* and *grave*) are generally respected, e.g. the town of Alès is not spelt as Ales (which would suggest a kind of beer). Yet *the same* accents are not regularly used for Hungarian names: Hunyadi Laszlo (László), Bartok Bela (Béla). Even the Portuguese and French cedilla – ç – and the Spanish ñ are usually respected. Yet it took several years of tournament playing before the Croatian tennis star could hear his name properly pronounced in public – Goran Ivanišević (not Ivanisevik!).

To some in the west, these may seem to be trivial matters, but they are not. Every country should have the right to retain its own orthography. After all, there can be few who cannot now pronounce the name of Lech Wałęsa.

I should like to end this informal note with a brief quotation from a letter sent to me from the President of the Dubrovnik Translator's Association:<sup>9</sup>

"I have just returned from a conference in Bratislava, which was extremely interesting because I was able to gain an insight into the work of colleagues in this part of the world, for we have all passed through the same "pains". I was pleasantly surprised when I spoke to colleagues from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland etc., and saw how well they knew and understood our situation. At last, in this part of Europe, the Croatian language has become a recognised language – unlike the way it is regarded in Western Europe."

Underlying these words, it seems to me, there is a feeling which could be shared by all people from central and eastern Europe. The "pains" to which she refers are, of course, those of the war. Also, perhaps, of the problems of transition. But what is particularly striking, and moving, is the need for language recognition.

That need is one which is not always properly understood by those who have the privilege of working almost exclusively in their own language, and of approaching other languages mainly through translation.

Pride or prejudice? A bit of both, I feel. Yet, even though we cannot realistically expect to be receiving faxes in the diverse languages of central and eastern Europe, we may still hope that these languages may be given their due respect.

I end with a brief plea from two scientists whose paper had been returned by an eminent journal, because the referees considered that it needed rewriting:

The main comments of the referee result from the fact that we were limited in space.

We must also admit that we are both not native speakers of English.<sup>10</sup>

Would a speaker of one of the major European languages ever feel the need to make such a polite admission?

<sup>9</sup> Extract from a personal letter from Tereza Matić-Brnadić, Atlas, Dubrovnik.

<sup>10</sup> Extract from a personal letter, written by several authors (one Macedonian, the others Scandinavian), in reply to the editorial criticism of the language of the text.