



A Language Labyrinth

Translators sometimes come to particular assignments in weird and wonderful ways. SATI member Heléne van der Westhuizen shares her experience of working as a translator in Poland.

I had the privilege to live in Poland for five years – a country that I as a South African, used to the diversity of our country, found incredibly strange. The people there were all white. Ninety-nine per cent of them were Roman Catholic, and they all spoke Polish. Within the first week of arriving for my husband's posting there I realised that, if we were to survive, we'd have to learn this horrible language with all the sz and cz sounds strung together in the same word with no vowel in between. Little did we know that the pronunciation would be the least of our linguistic problems.

I became streetwise over the next four years. I could have fights with taxi drivers who wanted to overcharge me and I was able to chat to the waitrons in restaurants about this or that dish that I'd never seen or heard of before – 'strangled pork' being one that I distinctly remember, although I could never really figure out what this English translation on the menu actually meant. I could ask for directions and I knew how to bargain at the *bazary*¹ in an almost perfect accent, but all in a nominative present-tense Polish, in which the other **six** cases, and past and future tenses, rarely featured². Yes, they have seven cases – not only four like the Germans – and they even conjugate names! You would, for example, go to see the new film of *Jamesa Bonda*³.

I also worked on two book projects for the South African Embassy in Poland – simultaneously done in English and Polish for promotional purposes. Although my grammar did not improve much during the publication processes of the two books, I built a large vocabulary and eventually understood much of what I read in Polish from the context of the material.

In South Africa some of us feel confident enough to translate between Afrikaans and English, but after my experiences in Poland, I firmly believe that only in the rarest of cases would any Polish person be able to translate competently into English, or vice versa, and even then I would question the quality of the translation. The syntaxes of the two languages are just too different. In Polish you would for example say, 'Ja

chcę, żeby on śpiewał', or 'I want, that he sang' (comma and all), instead of 'I want him to sing', which is what is actually meant.

In written Polish they have a peculiar habit of always putting a comma before 'that':

'Ona mówiła, że w Polsce dużo pada.' – 'She said, **that** in Poland lots of rain.'

However, when they speak, they never pause at the comma and they stretch the sound of 'że' so much that the comma before 'that' literally becomes a pause **after** 'that'.

Oh, just in case you think my Polish is very good, a Polish person would tell you (like my Polish teacher did when I was checking this information with her) that you **can** use this sentence as it is in my example above, but you can also formulate it like this:

'Ona mówiła, że w Polsce pada dużo.' – 'She said, **that** in Poland rain lots of.'

'Ona mówiła, że dużo pada w Polsce.' – 'She said, **that** lots of rain in Poland.'

It all depends on the context!

The myriad ways in which you can say the same thing is probably at once the saving grace and the biggest problem of learning the Polish language. Another problem lies in the fact that Polish people know how difficult their language is and are rather proud of it, on top of which they are a very polite people. Therefore, they don't correct your grammar if they can understand what you are saying, even if you ask them to. Polish also has no definite or indefinite articles, so Polish people find this concept very difficult to grasp.

Having said all that, let me emphasise that I am not a linguist and I know Polish only to the extent that made me streetwise and helped me to make friends where I never would have

1 The informal markets all over the cities and towns where you could buy anything, from freshly baked bread to evening gowns, for next to nothing.
2 The philosophy of our language school was one of 'speaking Polish' – no matter how crooked. They only started with grammar much later.
3 James Bond. You will do well if you pronounce this with simple Afrikaans phonetics.

In Practice

been able to, had I not learnt the bit of language that I did. The observations that I've tried to set out here are just that – observations of someone who had a five-year-long love-hate relationship with the language that gave her wings and then clipped them – all at the same time. Let me also say that I only mention four of the myriad problems that I picked up along the way. Let me add that the pitfalls of translating from English into Polish are just as numerous and cause just as much, if not more, of a predicament.

In April 2010 a Polish film director approached the embassy, asking for the name of someone who could translate parts of a film from Afrikaans into English. You can't imagine how thrilled I was at the prospect of working on a Polish film with a South African story!

*'Tato poszedł na ryby'*⁴ was a film about Juan van Tonder and the Emmanuel Children's Home that he established in Pomfret, South Africa, for the orphaned children of the (in)famous 32 Battalion soldiers who had died while serving under the apartheid government.

The translation that I had to do was very fragmented – bits and pieces throughout the film – and I only had a vague idea of the story line. The film still had to be edited and it would be quite some time before it was finished. I asked the director if he could let me know when the other work was done, so that I could watch the whole film, because I was sure that some adjustments to the translation would be inevitable. Almost a year passed and only in March 2011 did the film find its way back to me for what I believed to be the final touches.

I was so shocked when I saw the state of the rest of the English subtitles that I asked the director either to allow me to edit all the subtitles or to please remove my name from the end credits. I explained to him many of the Polish-English hazards that I had picked up during our five years in Poland and illustrated my point with examples from the subtitles as they were. I eventually convinced him to let me edit all the English subtitles, a slow and cumbersome task we did, literally sitting side by side, over the next two months.

Since it is not my mother tongue, I'm always extra careful when working in English and, if possible, I always have my work checked. This time I asked an English-speaking South African friend in Warsaw, a well-known colourist in the Polish film industry, to help me check the final version, because he knew the pitfalls of working with film.

About two weeks later, Fred called me and asked if I had time to see a film director for whom he had done the colour on

a Polish comedy that was soon to be released. The director wanted him to have a 'quick look' at the English subtitles, but since he had already seen the quality of the subtitles, he told the director that he had no time, but he would ask if I could help.

Excitement! This was another project to put on my CV when we got back to South Africa – not an easy thing for a 40-something-year-old who hadn't earned a salary in what became five years (instead of the normal four years of a posting). The difficulty was that we only had three months left in Poland. I had finished the other film, but then we had to prepare to lift our roots from this strange country that had somehow become home.

Eventually, the lure of the extra project on the CV won me over, so Fred's 'quick look' at the subtitles was duly handed over to me, together with a script with both languages in table format next to each other. The English was as bad as that of the first film, if not worse. What I didn't realise at the time was that this would become a second translation, rather than an edit, simply because the English either made no sense or made me cringe.

I found this example from the opening scene of the film, where a priest was leading a small service at a shrine on the outskirts of a little village:

'Everything that God has created and sustains in existence, every kind of occurrence that he controls through his Providence, as well as human good acts which animate to behave right, affect hearts and mouths of the believers to adore God who is the beginning and the source of every goodness.'

Please note that this was copied and pasted – spelling, grammar, the whole shebang – from the original 'final version' that just needed the 'quick look'. It was taken from the Polish Catholic mass book, but directly translated without checking the official English equivalent. After a month-long search across Europe, the best I could come up with was another bad translation from a Polish priest living in the UK. We had run out of time, so I had to make the best of what I'd received from him.

It had helped that the previous film had been shot mostly in English, not to mention that it had my own multicultural South Africa as background. This time I had to work on a Polish film for Polish people about Polish culture, which I'd

4 Dad went fishing

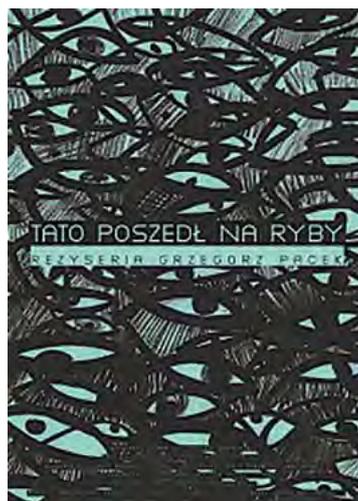
accepted for what it was while I knew that I would never fully understand it and it would never become my own.

In order to land this job, I had to convince the director of three things. The first was that it was possible for me to speak Polish in a near-perfect accent while having almost no knowledge of Polish grammar. Polish people in general didn't want to believe me when my Polish invariably derailed and crashed after four or five minutes. It took quite some time to convince this director that having an almost perfect accent and 'speaking Polish' are not necessarily the same thing.

The second was to convince him to give me enough time to do a proper job, because in his mind the films were done. This was just to be a 'quick edit', remember. The concept of utter



Boys from the Pomfret orphanage



Poster for 'Dad went Fishing'

powerlessness gained a whole new meaning when I had to sit him down and break the news that there would be no 'quick edit'. There was some serious work to be done on the subtitles throughout the film and if my Polish were fluent, I would need at least two weeks. Since my Polish wasn't fluent I would need at least three weeks, maybe even four or five. He looked at me, completely dumfounded, and told me that I must be crazy and that I must please provide an example of this 'bad English'. From the quote above, I asked him what the following phrase meant:

'... as well as human good acts which animate to behave right ...'

Of course, he couldn't give me an answer, but he also told me that it really didn't matter, because no religious babble made sense anyway. What do you say to that? When I told him that it might not really matter whether 'religious babble' made any sense to him, it mattered that it made sense to his mostly Polish, mostly Catholic viewers, he was gobsmacked.

My third job, probably the most difficult, was to convince him that Polish people (himself included) could not translate into or edit in English – no more than English people could translate into or edit in Polish, not even if they had lived and studied in England for a year (like he had).

He looked at this arrogant woman from South Africa for what felt like an eternity – incredulous – but the penny must have dropped, because I got the job and before I was even halfway through, he brought me a documentary to look at as well.

It was probably one of the most stressful three months of my life, but I finished both films – the documentary even before the feature film – after we had already moved into the hotel, three days before we boarded the plane back home to South Africa.

Heléne learnt about publishing and especially translating and editing while living in Poland. She completed two books for the South African Embassy in Poland for promotional and charity purposes. The exposure of the two books provided the opportunity for the film projects described in this article and when they came back to SA, what started out as charity became a full-time job. She has just moved to the country of Oscar Wilde and has no idea what wilde things are yet to come.