THE COMPATIBILITY OF IMMEDIATE SOLUTIONS WITH SOCIO-CULTURAL DIFFERENTIALS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

By

Giuliana Brozich Lipizer

University of Trieste

Paper presented at the International Conference for Translators and Interpreters of the Alpe-Adria Region, 8th-10th October 1992, Portoroz, Slovenia.

We cannot accept the definition of language as "an instrument of communication", for in politics the word is more than an instrument; it is the substance, the ontological reality of politics - M. Cranston and P. Mair

Fairly recently, during a congress on questions of translatology, a speaker from Zagreb stated tersely that "a good interpreter must think as the speaker thinks". Although I broadly share this view, I was led to reflect on the demands placed on the interpreter by various types of discourse, their differing degrees of entropy and ambiguity and, above all, the different contexts in which they are made. It was clear that the speaker was not referring to widespread telepathic abilities in professional interpreters, but to the development of empathy, which is partly the fruit of individual sensitivity and the innate gifts of instinct and mental flexibility. However, as these faculties can to a large extent be acquired with experience and multidisciplinary study (psychology, the theory and sociology of communication, etc.), the question arose as to how appropriate it might be to devote more attention to this question in the teaching of interpretation.

I reflected on my own experience acquired, on the one hand, through more than two decades of interpretation in a vast and detailed network of international meetings - regularly held behind closed doors and with a low media profile - in the context of Ostpolitik, under the aegis of the CSCE and in the spirit of a regionalism that aimed at overcoming the divisions of Europe long before the "velvet revolution" and, on the other, from more than fifteen years of teaching in our school with students from a number of countries in Europe and other continents.

I remembered that the greatest difficulties in the mediation process arose between people from countries that were geographically quite close and which shared a fairly homogeneous cultural past but had been ideologically separated for decades and were now desperately seeking historical, cultural and, above all, economic reconstruction in a series of international meetings at a regional level in the Alpe-Adria and Hexagonal organisations, the Adriatic Initiative and the Community of the Danube. The working languages were, and still are, Italian, two or three Slav languages, Hungarian and above all German - spoken immediately to the East and West of the former Iron Curtain - and English, the lingua franca par excellence. Besides the problems deriving from the structural differences between languages of Indo-European origin - Romance, Germanic and Slav - and the Finno-Ugric group, there were, and still are, a great number of accumulated difficulties to overcome in the search for the most homogeneous solutions possible.

Comparing my experience with that of my colleagues, who work mostly or entirely in the EEC, I made a contribution to the discussion in which I stressed the importance of empathy in interpretation, above all in communicative events of a political nature. Although the ensuing debate was somewhat heated, its participants were in
broad agreement about its conclusions.

It started from the usual premises:
- the interpreter is an instrument of communication, placed between the source and the recipient of the message, with the function of an inter-language transformer;
- he must be familiar with the peculiarities of the two language worlds between which he is called upon to mediate - traditions, institutions and culture
- and be able to adapt to the extralinguistic context of the communicative event;
- the production of an original message takes place as part of a process of reflection whose length is determined by the speaker, while the co-production of the mediated message requires rapid and definitive solutions at a pace imposed upon the interpreter from outside.

It was agreed that, in technical-scientific congresses, mediation presupposes above all thematic and terminological knowledge as it is aimed at the communication of information, whereas political debate, based mostly on rhetorical devices and drawing on traditional lexical combinations, allusive expressions, implicit ideas and innuendo, also requires the reproduction of intangible, emotive and evocative effects.

Considering therefore a politician as an exponent of certain interests pursued by ethnic groups, ideological communities or social classes, his messages are the expression of a power which aims at obtaining the consensus of a particular target audience concerning objectives, choices and methods. Addressed to different recipients at different times, the tone, form and function of these messages are tailored to the contexts of the different communicative acts in which they are embedded. Political discourse may take the form of a speech made during a celebratory function, the contribution of a member of parliament to a parliamentary debate, or a press conference or interview with a journalist. Hardly surprisingly, therefore, the speaker must have a suitable range of expressive instruments at his disposal. Audiences at international meetings are never homogeneous. They are made up of different people with different cultures, characters and ideologies. Part of an audience is able to receive the message only through the mediation of an interpreter, through a channel which, though subtle and transparent, inevitably remains a filter.

The mediator, the interpreter, is therefore a bridge between two linguistic worlds. In order to perform his task and to avoid ambiguity in the communication of the message as much as possible, he must pay heed to a series of signals given out by the source to help him follow the speaker’s thinking. H. D. Lasswell, one of the foremost scholars in the field of political language, identifies three categories of semiotic resources on which attention should be concentrated:

a) symbols of the values and ideals with which the politician identifies and which he believes to be unconditionally shared, that is to say, ideological assumptions, or credenda;

b) symbols of what he believes to be good, favourable or desirable, that is to say models, or miranda;

c) symbols of what he believes to be evil, hostile or deplorable, that is to say anti-models, or antimiranda.

An examination of these features in some of the speeches made in the second half of 1992 on entirely different occasions by four political leaders of the highest level - the American President, the French President, the German Chancellor - shows that there are signals that were recognisable in three epoch-making speeches of the second half of the 20th century. Those speeches were:
- Winston Churchill’s Zurich speech, made in September 1946;
- President John F. Kennedy’s speech in Berlin in August 1963;
- Mikhail Gorbachev’s speech in December 1989.

The salient examples are:
- credenda: peace, freedom, democracy and progress, human rights, overcoming the divisions in Europe;
- miranda: solidarity between peoples, economic development and growth in employment;
- antimiranda: war, underdevelopment, economic disparity, racial intolerance, etc.

Another feature, however, is worthy of note. The role of miranda has been taken on by the very individuals who were the first to point out to their

---


2 Referring to a classification proposed by Charles Merriam, a scholar of political doctrine, in New Aspects of Power, University of Chicago Press, 1925.
international interlocutors the values with which they should identify - over the years they have come to be seen as the most evident embodiment of those values. Winston Churchill, for example, is often quoted for the stereotypes that originated from his speeches - the United States of Europe, in need of a great France and just as great a Germany and of the reconciliation between victors and vanquished. For decades President Kennedy symbolised hopes for the reunification of Germany as a result of his historic utterance "Ich bin ein Berliner!" President Mikhail Gorbachev is remembered for his objective, proposed in speeches and in writing, of a common European house.

From a semantic point of view Lasswell, along with many other authors, stresses the importance of certain signals able - by dint of their evocative, emotive, symbolic and captivating power - to recall pre-existing relations between the explicit and the implicit, already-acquired information and already-internalised models: key terms which may only be nouns (democrazia, Wirtschaftswachstum, stagnation) or syntags (l'Europe des patries, der real-existierender Sozialismus, a new World Order, etc.), slogans (No fortress Europe! We are one World! One world, one future! Peace now!, etc.) and stereotypes or clichés (The return of the new democracies to the European fold, European Construction and Integration, the crumbling of barriers and walls, etc.) These are elements of a common heritage of pre-existing texts and contexts which are consciously resorted to or upon whose evocative power the recipient unconsciously draws. Most stereotypes are an exception to this, however, in that the context in which they are coined is different. They are rather to be seen as results of the linguistic inventiveness of journalists forever seeking to create an effect. With the ubiquitous presence of the mass media these results spread to other fields of communication, not least the political field.

In the interpreter's recoding of segments of discourse containing the speaker’s ideological substratum the search for immediate solutions (Sofort-Lösungen) may lead to the use of lexical items which are common to different ideological positions but which carry a different semantic charge. The emotive effect on the recipient of this kind of ideological polysemy may result in a momentary interruption of the flow of communication. The term autogestione (self-management), for example, is open to a number of different interpretations depending on its historical-geographical location in the context of a planned or market economy.

Political discourse thus presents not only the obvious difficulties inherent in the linguistic differential, but also and above all those posed by the social differential. This is an example of what J. Lemke calls heteroglossia, meaning the different language used by speakers to express different attitudes regarding a particular subject. The degree of heteroglossia increases in proportion to the degree of conflictuality reached in a debate within a given group or society. Examples are the contrasting ideological positions recently adopted on such controversial subjects as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, aid to the third world and shelter for refugees.

On other occasions, uncertainty as to what the speaker means or the fear of creating an effect he does not intend with an over-literal translation may lead the interpreter to resort to euphemisms, that is to say to words chosen to cushion the impact of an expression which is too crude or too strong. Compare, for example, the disquiet that could be aroused in an Italian audience by the phrase la possibilità di licenziamenti di massa (the possibility of mass dismissals) with the softer effect of la probabile messa in mobilità della manodopera in esubero (the likely release of superfluous labour force).

Speakers also use neologisms that in certain geographical areas pass automatically from one language to another in the form of loans or calques but have not yet been assimilated in other, adjacent, linguistic worlds which have different political-economic structures and are, therefore,

---


4 This term is used by the linguist Otto Kade on page 45 of his book Die Sprachmitteilung als Gesellschaftliche Erscheinung und Gegenstand Wissenschaftlicher Untersuchung (Verlag Enzyklopedie, Leipzig, 1980) to indicate "the differences inherent in the structures of language systems and in the pragmatic-communicative norms of language use".

5 Ibidem, p. 46-7: "a condition resulting from the social position of the participants in a communicative act, their respective historical social contexts and the ethnic-cultural substratum of the semiotic community to which they belong. The greater their socio-economic, political-ideological, cultural etc. differences, the greater will be the 'comprehension gaps' between them".

culturally distant. This happens frequently with the relatively recent (and productive) use of terms with the prefix -euro- in the Latin and Germanic languages written and spoken in the EEC member-states that have for decades shared a similar development. These compounds have no difficulty in being absorbed - it is almost as if they constituted a fifth commodity with freedom of movement in addition to people, goods, services, and capital. The terms Euro-enthusiasm, Euroboom, Europessimism, Eurosclerosis, The Reawakening of Europe ("Eurorisvegilio" in the original), The Relaunching of Europe ("Eurorilancio" in the original), Euromania, Euroscepticism, Europhobia all have strong temporal and contextual connotations.

Euro-enthusiasm is used to refer to the spirit of the founding fathers - Jean Monnet, Paul Henry Spaak, Robert Schumann, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide de Gasperi - a spirit shared by the majority of their generation of Europeans, that in the 1950s led to the creation of the first communities: the European Coal and Steel Community, the EEC and EURATOM.

Euroboom is used to refer to the following decade, the 1960s, marked by rapid economic growth as a result of the lifting of customs duties in what was known as la petite Europe (literally, Little Europe, formed by the founding members - France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg).

Europessimism refers to the resurgence of protectionism in the 1970s following the energy crisis and a rise in inflation rates.

The Reawakening of Europe is used to indicate the initiative, undertaken at the beginning of the 1980s by Foreign Ministers Emilio Colombo of Italy and Hans-Dietrich Genscher of the Federal Republic of Germany to attempt to gain the support of EEC member-states for a relaunching of European ideals and plans for integration.

The Relaunching of Europe is the stage following the approval of the Single European Act and the third enlargement of the Community in the mid-1980s.

Euromania refers to the epoch-making events of 1989, the return of democracy to eastern Europe and the project of the Single Market and the European Economic Area, to take effect from 1993.

Europhobia is a recent addition. Belonging to the post-Maastricht period, it refers to the uncooperative attitude of the British government, the flat "No" expressed by Denmark on June 2nd 1992, France's faint "Oui" to economic and monetary union and the growing suspicion towards the EEC being expressed, surprisingly, in Austria.

Euromadness refers rather bitterly to the vicious outbursts of extreme nationalism that in slightly more than a year have caused the violent break-up of multi-ethnic states such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Now Czechoslovakia has also split, albeit bloodlessly.

A rapid examination of the languages of some of the third countries with which the EEC has recently signed treaties of association shows that "Euromeologisms" have not produced satisfactory calques everywhere. Thus the evocative effect that translation should also be able to achieve is not yet automatic.

The same applies to certain referential synonyms for deeds and events of historic importance within the EEC. Their semantic content is unmistakable in the languages of member-states but doubtful or ambiguous outside them. The following are examples.

Little Europe is a term first used in the 1950s and early 1960s to refer to the original nucleus of what is now the Twelve. The six founder-members were France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg. In recent months, however, opposing positions that have emerged in some member-states in the wake of the recent currency crises have given rise to the use of this term to refer to the Paris-Bonn axis and the Kohl-Mitterrand agreement.

A Citizens' Europe refers to the Community, which had already extended its membership to include Britain, Ireland and Denmark, in its election of the members of the European Parliament by universal suffrage from 1979 onwards.


Single Currency Europe is supposed to be the European Monetary Union, still the subject of bitter controversy in almost all the EEC member-states.

L'Europe à la carte is a recent coinage attributed

---

8 See the difference between prestiti di lusso e prestiti di necessità in Lessico Internazionale nella Lingua Russa Contemporanea by G. Siedina in SLAVIA 4, a quarterly cultural journal (Oct. - Dec. 1992) published by the Istituto Internazionale di Cultura e Lingua Russa in Rome (pp. 138-158).
to President Mitterrand during the European Council summit in Edinburgh and immediately taken up by the press to refer to the far-from-solid front presented by the Twelve, each of which, acting in narrow national interests, wished to opt out of certain Community commitments and impose others.

What of the metaphor whose evocative effect is bound up with historical memory and shared sociocultural habits?

*The European pillar* is a long-standing image used by NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner. It implies a division of roles between the United States/Canada and the European NATO members.

The connotations of the *club of twelve* (*der Zwölfersclub*) as a synonym of the European Community are clearest to those who are familiar with the life and culture of English-speaking countries and have a full knowledge not only of the advantages and disadvantages of private clubs but also of the customs which make them indispensable.

The connotations of the figurative expression *command economy* (*Kommandowirtschaft*) are unmistakable only from a Western perspective.

A stylistic feature recently observed in the political speeches of Chancellor Kohl offers an example of what is required in the communication of original expressions. To ally fears aroused by the idea of a European currency at a time when the purchasing power of the Deutschemark overwhelmed the other currencies, Kohl repeatedly stated "Wir wollen keinen Moloch Europa!" ("We want no Moloch Europe!") using an image from oriental mythology which had probably passed through Yiddish. If it were for the consumption of a Latin audience the image would retain its effect if adapted and placed in a more classical Mediterranean frame: "Europe must not become a Chronos devouring his own offspring".

A rapid mobilisation of the interpreter's imagination and linguistic creativity is indispensable when he is confronted with related informal situations, when, particularly in interviews, the speaker resorts to irony or sarcasm, using the sort of pun especially beloved of the media. An example of this was provided not long ago by the Italian Prime Minister - rightly called *Doctor Subtle* - (though "sottile" in Italian also means "thin") who described the international currency chaos with a joke based on a semantic re-routing and a clever substitution: "Dopo il Settembre nero l'Europa è intasata dai marcotraffici!" (*After Black September Europe has been over-run by marco-traffic!* - punning on the similarity between the Italian suffix "narc", "drug", and "mark"). Of equal quality was the substitution attributed to the then German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, apparently overwhelmed by the prospect of the "Entnazifizierung" of his country.

More than five years have passed since we in our Faculty last had the opportunity of comparing our professional and teaching experiences with those of our counterparts from all over the world. Many things have changed in Europe. The potential for conflict between two opposing political blocs has diminished, but there are new antagonisms, latent or open, within them. The extremes of bipolarism have given way to widespread ambiguities with obvious destabilising effects. European integration from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the White Sea to the Black Sea will not be easily accomplished. It has been repeated many times and in many quarters that one of the obstacles is formed by language barriers and by distances between cultures. Interpreters are still being and will continue to be called upon to perform gratifying but more complex roles in the communicative events held by inter-regional organisations such as the Mitteleuropa Initiative, the Adriatic Initiative and the Community of the Danube, or supranational organisations such as "Greater Europe" with nine, twelve or eighteen different languages. They will be able to make their contribution to bridging the communication gap between East and West, and, as much as the speakers themselves, to undertake a courageous, patient and humble re-reading of the last few decades of European history, because "la comprensione è soprattutto un processo di fusione degli orizzonti" ("Comprehension is above-all a process in which horizons merge").

So little done, so much to do...

---

9 The term was a play on "Entnazifizierung" -denazification-, used after the Second World War.


---

*English translation by Mark Brady from the Italian*