

EDITORIAL

There can be little doubt that the world of interpreting and, by reflection, the Universities where interpreting is taught have reached a crossroads where vital decisions have to be taken. At national level, the spread of English as the language of conferences has led to a shrinking of the national market, though, paradoxically, to an increased demand for "interpreting" services (liaison and the like) outside the conference hall. In Italy, the "clean hands" operation has deprived political parties of much of their autonomous spending power with a subsequent decline in the funds available for international political conferences. At European level, too, the traditional interpreting models have been severely shaken. The traditional Western European model born of and with the European Community with interpreters working from their foreign languages into their mother tongue survived the first rounds of enlargement by recycling experienced interpreters who added additional Germanic or Romance languages to their existing ones. One of the editors, however, recalls from personal experience that in the early days of the United Kingdom's membership, before, that is, Britain and Ireland had produced the number of interpreters required, about half of the occupants of the English booth were not of English mother tongue. The model even survived the membership of Greece, forcing older and younger interpreters alike to renew their acquaintance with a classical language or to study *ex novo* a language whose structures and lexicon are by no means inaccessible to interpreters of Germanic or Romance mother tongues. The arrival of Finland has changed everything. Taboos have been publicly broken, the sacred cows have been slaughtered on the very steps of the temple itself and we all know that, with very few exceptions, in the European Parliament and at the European Commission, interpreting from Finnish, out of sheer necessity and in the teeth of long-standing convictions, is carried out by Finnish interpreters working into their first foreign language.

Western Europe has been forced to adopt the very model which had evolved for different reasons and under very different circumstances in Eastern Europe. The authors remember Professor Denisenko's impassioned defence of interpreting from the mother tongue into the foreign language at the Trieste Conference in 1986, but the ideological undercurrents pervading such a model were formidable. Before 1989 it was hardly conceivable that the interpretation of Soviet thought could be entrusted to non-Soviet (or non-Sovietised) interpreters. Only the privileged could travel abroad and there was no free access

to the vital, living sources of the language – personal contacts, free choice of reading matter and the like. A great deal of effort, therefore, went into the training of Eastern European interpreters to work into their foreign languages with excellent results though leading inevitably to a certain stunted, artificial quality in the production of that foreign language without unhindered access to all its sources – what Sir Geoffrey Howe in his memoirs calls "the strange, folksy quality of the English of my otherwise excellent Russian interpreters".

Now, of course, those ideological constraints no longer prevail and, in addition to their excellent grounding in (foreign) target-language production, Eastern European interpreters, indeed all interpreters, not only from the Atlantic to the Urals but all over the globe, have free access to a great variety of source and exercise material. Though there may be some Western interpreters with Polish and Czech, it is highly improbable that there will be sufficient numbers of Britons, Germans or Spaniards to cater for the needs to which the membership of Hungary and Estonia would give rise. The Finnish model (Eastern European plus free access) will, therefore, of necessity, be repropounded and, for the foreseeable future until sufficient numbers of Westerners have been initiated into the mysteries of non-Indo-European tongues, like their Finnish colleagues, Hungarian and Estonian interpreters will be providing their Western colleagues with relais in English, German or, hopefully, French.

The Universities in those European Union countries whose languages are not vehicular languages (i.e. everywhere except France, Great Britain and, with some reservations, Spain) which are also those, and this can hardly be a coincidence, where interpreting and translating degrees are available as first degree courses are, by a quirk of fate, already accustomed to catering for these market realities. No Danish, German, Dutch, Austrian or Italian interpreter could possibly survive (outside Brussels, Luxembourg, Strasbourg, Paris or Geneva) were (s)he not prepared to work regularly into the first foreign language. The statutes of University faculties conferring interpreting and translation degrees in those countries recognise the imperfect world we live in (though also its perfectibility) and have always included compulsory courses of interpretation into the first foreign language. For how long will prestigious schools with exclusively postgraduate courses be able to continue to claim that B into A is the only possible way of working? Most of us would agree that it is the most highly desirable way of working, but ought we not all be prepared to bow our heads in the face of grim necessity and admit that, outside the above-mentioned cities, it never really has been? "Are these things then necessities, then let us meet them like necessities" without bewailing the impossible perfections of the past but determined to prepare our young interpreters for the realities of a shrinking and highly competitive market. The forthcoming enlargement of the European Union already provides us with an opportunity to grasp the bull by the horns.

Experience with Finnish has shown that it is not realistic to expect even talented and experienced interpreters with a working knowledge of the language to recycle in the same period of time that it would take from one passive Germanic or Romance language to another. Hungarian promises to confirm this, though as Polish and Czech both belong to the family of Slav languages it may in future prove as feasible to recycle from Polish to Czech (as passive languages) as it now is from German to Swedish or from Italian to Portuguese.

The University of Ljubljana organised a conference in May 1996 accepting not just the necessity of interpreting and translating into the non-mother tongue but also the advisability of doing so. The healthy realism of a small country whose language is spoken by less than three million people, but whose credentials for belonging to the European family are as convincing as those of the powers who once ruled the waves and whose languages still rule the radio waves need not enter into conflict with larger states' more majestic visions of the rôle and destiny of their languages. However, *l'appetito vien mangiando* and, once Western interpreters have begun to grapple with the languages of Eastern Europe, they will doubtless succumb to their charms and, perhaps, even succeed in overcoming the reluctance of Finns and Slovenes alike to believe them both willing and able to acquire Finnish and Slovenian as passive working languages. The Eastern European model may then have revealed itself to be a purely temporary solution. The wheel will have come full circle, European interpreters of both East and West will once more be able to interpret into their own languages, the purists can exult and the whole debate begin all over again.

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