

Translation and computers; an overview of the Polish translation scene

Bogdan Chojna

Polish Translators' Association

My educational background is in English language translation and interpreting as well as in computer science. For over a dozen years now I have also been running several businesses I have owned along the way. I have now settled for business and finance consulting and business promotion.

I have been invited to comment on the general translation scene in Poland, with particular focus on computer use in such activity.

After briefly sketching the translation environment in my country I would like to draw some general conclusions and then outline a proposal addressed to members of this distinguished meeting.

For many years Russian used to be the foreign language most widely taught and officially promoted in my country. That was the obvious result of our former Big Brother's dominant position in Poland's politics as well as of the extensive, though hardly beneficial, economic ties with countries which are now referred to as the post-Communist bloc. Consequently, Poland was late – though perhaps not as much as others in the bloc – with the personal computer boom. The steep prices of IBM compatibles and all sorts of limitations imposed on technology transfers during the period of martial law in the early 1980s were the reason for the slow progress in the use of computers for translation.

Luckily, we are now witnessing a rapid development of political, economic and cultural relations with the West. The emerging market economy in Poland calls for frequent contacts between Polish professionals and their counterparts elsewhere in the free world. The privatisation

process in Poland promotes the establishment of thousands of new private and cooperative enterprises, whose future lies in all sorts of cooperation with Western firms.

Legal regulations and mechanisms have been laid down to enable foreign investors to enter the Polish market. A large number of joint ventures are flourishing in Poland.

With the united Germans and the divided Soviets as our next-door neighbours, we can and should become an important factor in many fields of the new East-West process. Efficient communication – and language communication in the first place – provided, especially at this stage, by competent translators and interpreters is crucial. Cities like Warsaw, Cracow and Gdansk play host to an increasing number of East-West meetings. However, the number of well-trained, versatile, full-time translators and interpreters falls far short of the current demand in Poland. This is particularly true of English-to-Polish and Polish-to-English translators and interpreters, and is an obvious drawback too, given the importance of this language on the international political, business and cultural scene.

Most of the country's top translators and interpreters whom I have had the pleasure to meet and talk to in the course of my freelance interpreting for government officials were self-taught translators and interpreters who mastered the profession the hard way, by trial and error, sweating it out on their own and having little more than rudimentary postgraduate training to back up their effort.

In my opinion, translator training in Poland has numerous shortcomings, such as

- absence of mechanisms which would help turn the considerable theoretical knowledge of the few individuals active in this field as well as the vast experience of elite translators and interpreters into university-level and postgraduate curricula;
- almost total absence of permanent institutions offering training in these skills; the few existing ones suffer from a severe shortage of hardware and software;
- absence of uniform dictionaries in a number of fields; e.g. many terms concerning market economy, finance, banking etc. are foreign to the Polish economic environment;
- as regards computer use, translators are using haphazardly chosen, pirated and consequently frequently incomplete software packages; software piracy is a formidable problem, as we are dealing with a whole generation of PC users accustomed to free-of-charge software;
- finally, absence of financial incentives for experienced translators and interpreters to devote some of their time to teaching the profession.

On the other hand, there are the thousands of people of all ages, and especially young ones, who are willing to master a foreign language, preferably English. Each year about 10,000 people from Poland attend all sorts of English language courses in Great Britain. The British Council library and the newly-opened Longman's bookshop in Warsaw are crowded with visitors. Attending one of the few prestigious foreign-language evening courses is the 'in' thing for many young people in major Polish cities. Quite a few private entrepreneurs who are visibly out to make a quick buck offer foreign language courses too. However, I shall refrain from commenting on their academic standards.

In step with the changing economic situation in Poland, the small army of individuals seeking to master a foreign language or improve their language skills for professional reasons may benefit from the corresponding drop in hardware prices and the gradual lifting of the COCOM restrictions.

Estimates show that about 1.5 million personal computers are currently in use in Poland.

Efforts are being made to bring order to the software market. Mechanisms for extending legal protection to software are emerging. Last summer, Poland signed an agreement on software copyright as a part of the Geneva convention on copyright. Computer users are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits stemming from abiding by these agreements and eradicating software piracy. This is connected with the joint effort of PC users against the software virus threat.

Let me remark at this point that Poland has a surprisingly large number of highly competent electronics engineers and software specialists. Sadly, we do suffer from brain-drain too, and find little consolation in the fact that their creativity contributes so much to so many companies elsewhere in the world.

Translators and interpreters are a strange and admirable lot in Poland. According to some estimates there are 9,000 of them. We have our own organisation, the Polish Translators' Association, which has a membership of 2,200: 18 per cent of the members are translators of literature, 41 per cent specialise in science-and-technology texts, 10 per cent specialise in general and publicity translations, 8 per cent are sworn translators, 3 per cent do simultaneous interpreting while 20 per cent specialise in consecutive interpreting. To become a member of the Association one has to demonstrate a record of professional achievement in one of the fields and be introduced by two full members of the PTA.

Quite a few of us are self-employed, full-time professionals bobbing in the sea of well-meaning freelance amateurs. Many of us have become acutely aware of the need to use a computer in our work. Many of us do so. Yet few of us view the computer as something more than just a sophisticated typewriter.

A PC XT or AT with hard disk plus a simple dot matrix printer is the piece of hardware most widely used by translators. The need to install Polish or, e.g. Russian lettering accounts for the popularity of the Chi-Writer v. 2.6 by Horstmann Software. Those who are satisfied with English characters choose WordPerfect v. 5.1 by WordPerfect Corporation. Quite a few translators are satisfied with programs which offer no more than a spell-checking function. Single- and multi-language dictionaries are infrequently used.

To sum up: the translators of Poland are well aware that much remains to be done to expand and upgrade computer use in their work.

For me as a businessman, this awareness spells an opportunity I would like to share with you.

The estimated \$ 20 to 30 billion in private hands in Poland gives an idea of the size of the market. This is the largest privately-owned cash reservoir in the post-Communist countries. A large portion of it could be spent on foreign language learning or, on the other hand, invested in undertakings aimed at offering opportunities for improving specific language skills. Some of the foreign funds earmarked for the promotion and development of the market economy in Poland will be diverted to educational purposes too, once carefully defined targets are presented to institutions and individuals in charge of these funds.

Basing myself on my own personal knowledge I can see the following prospects for enterprising individuals, organisations, companies, institutions etc.:

- starting publishing operations devoted exclusively to language teaching and upgrading of such specific language skills as translation and interpreting;
- setting up specialist courses, such as English for Business, and English for Finance summer schools with native speakers employed as teachers;
- compiling specialist dictionaries for computer use;
- importing and installing hardware to aid teaching;
- improving the legal availability of copyrighted software through cross-border leasing operations etc.

I represent an organisation which has, I believe, established a fairly sound foundation for such activity. The Business Foundation, of which I have the honour of being the president, was established in April this year. Putting it in the most general terms, its aim is to smooth the way for economic and other contacts between the West and the post-Communist East, Poland in particular. Currently, we are in the process of bringing out an English-language business directory of Polish firms entitled *Business foundation book, general trade index*, addressed to users in the West in the first place. The

considerable amount of work we put into translating into English the contents of the Polish-language database encompassing detailed entries on the firms proved a valuable experience. It resulted in a number of customised dictionaries devised to overcome epistemological differences between Polish and English as used in two different economic environments.

Being aware of the importance of such linguistic aspects and having amassed considerable intellectual and material resources to address them, it is only natural that the area of language and translation has become our next most immediate interest. To start with, we plan to establish a language lab offering training in English for business and technology with special focus on translators' and interpreters' needs. This is to be accompanied by distribution of copyrighted software for translators and foreign language teachers and students.

Efficient and thus immediate activity in this respect leaves room for your participation. By this I mean assistance in benefiting from the existing specialist market here in the UK, the US and in the western world at large. Let me put it frankly, we are not looking for charity – we are looking for business partners.

AUTHOR

Bogdan Chojna, Association of Polish Translators, ul Tatarkiewicsaza
8 m 7, Warsaw, Poland.