

The virtues of native speaker translation

by Jon Tappenden

I came across this text on the English page of a Polish website.

Map of Warsaw Uprising 1944 Memory Places

The Interactive Map of Warsaw Uprising Memory documents the places bound up with the Warsaw Uprising that are spread all over the city. It was prepared basing on the map "Places of Memory of Warsaw Uprising" issued by The City of Warsaw Promotion Department on the 60-th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. The basic material was supplemented with new commemorating plates and monuments that were not marked in the above publication. The layout and construction of the map allow comfortable journey through the districts of Warsaw. The map will be verified and mastered.

I was curious what the basis of such a strange text could be, so I went to the Polish "mapa pamięci" page to see whether this was a translation of an original Polish text. It was. This is the original:

Interaktywna Mapa Pamięci Powstania Warszawskiego 1944 stanowi dokumentację miejsc związanych z przebiegiem Powstania rozsianych po całym mieście. Skonstruowano ją na podstawie planu "Miejsca Pamięci Powstania Warszawskiego" wydanego z okazji 60-tej rocznicy wybuchu Powstania przez Biuro Promocji Miasta Urzędu m.st. Warszawy a opracowanego przez Wydawnictwo Kartograficzne DAUNPOL Sp. z o.o. w Warszawie. Pierwotny materiał został uzupełniony o nowe tablice i pomniki, których nie umieszczono na w/w planie. Układ i konstrukcja mapy pozwalają na dogodne przemieszczanie się po poszczególnych dzielnicach Warszawy. Mapa będzie sukcesywnie weryfikowana.

I don't think it was translated or *verified and mastered* by an English native speaker. How did this happen? How could a text like that be translated in that way, not proofread, and then put on the website of the Stowarzyszenie Powstania Warszawskiego 1944?

The memory of the Warsaw Uprising is sacred to Poles. It is solemnly commemorated every year in Poland, which makes this oversight even more surprising, and for some, possibly upsetting.

I asked Assistant Professor of English at Gdańsk University, and author of many articles on Polish-English translation, Dr. Łucja Biel, why the quality of English translation in Poland is so poor:

The translation flow from Polish into English is perhaps as large as the flow from English into Polish. Since Polish is a so-called language of limited diffusion, which means that few people outside Poland use it, there are not so many (in fact very few) native speakers of English who know Polish and are capable of translating from its specialised varieties. For this reason it is a standard situation where translation into English is done by native speakers of Polish, which is regarded as unprofessional in Western European countries. The quality of translation into English is in general low in Poland: translation is not always provided by well-trained translators and, even if it is, it is seldom proofread by native speakers of English. As a result, a translation has a flavour of 'translationese', ranging from mere stylistic clumsiness and unnaturalness if the quality is relatively good, to language errors which impede comprehension in more acute cases. Why are translations not proofread by native speakers of English? In my opinion the main reason is the clients' low awareness of translation quality and their inability to assess the quality of non-Polish texts. As a result, they are unwilling to pay for proofreading, which certainly increases the total cost of translation. Many agencies compete with price rather than with quality and they do not educate clients about the importance of revision. While there are cases when proofreading is

less necessary, some texts require top publishable quality, in particular if they are contracted by public institutions and refer to important events in Polish history.

It's been twenty-one years since the fall of communism in Poland, and huge economic growth has occurred since then, but it will take another generation before some markets catch up with the West.

Polish students graduating with English language degrees and qualifying as certified translators have a great deal of knowledge of the technical terms needed to provide legal and commercial translations, but these students are taught an old-fashioned and very stiff-sounding style of English which in my opinion puts them out of touch with the real English of today, and, even more frighteningly, Polish businesses look for the cheapest translation solutions, leading to publication on websites of texts like the one above. This is due to two reasons: firstly to save on translation costs, and secondly because they are not aware that the level of service is so poor.

With the influx of Poles to the UK over the last few years, English language translators from Poland are settling and providing their services in the UK and Ireland. This hopefully means that their contact with the real English language will lead to an improvement in the skills of Poles offering English translation services.

This contact with the *real* language will, with time, reduce the number of instances of poor translation [and lack of proofreading] such as the example described above. As also discussed above, Polish native speakers also have the monopoly over translation into English in Poland as there are very few English native speakers in Poland [and elsewhere] capable of doing this to a professional standard, especially in specialist fields.

Why is the rule of translating into one's native language so important? Some translators take the view that a translation should have the feel of the original language, and find it acceptable for a translation to sound like a translation. In my view this is saying that source language interference is acceptable. It is true that we should convey to the reader the cultural and/or political context, style and register of the source text, but we should use natural language to do it.

In some areas of translation there are set terms that require only a dictionary knowledge of the source language, and little translation skill, but the rendering into English of *notions* used in a Polish source text requires knowledge of semantics *and* an understanding of those notions and experience in using them. This understanding and experience is the factor giving us the capability to produce a natural (and not an artificial) sounding text, and is the hallmark of what I define as a "professional" translator.

Being a native speaker is not a substitute for subject area knowledge

On the other hand, a person translating into their native language who does not possess a good knowledge of the subject area will not be able to produce a translation that sounds "natural" as the fact that they do not feel at ease in writing about the subject matter will be apparent in their writing. This lack of comfort in the subject area forces the translator to resort to a literal translation of the source text, rendering their prime asset, their native knowledge, worthless. Consequently, the more confident the translator feels in the subject area, the more the translator will be able to depart from the literal wording and produce a good, natural sounding, professional translation. This maximises the "native knowledge effect".

Choose a native English language translator who has experience of life in Poland

Total immersion in a foreign language, by living for an extended time in a country in which that language is the native language, is the crucial aspect leading to the "real" contact with the

language. A nation's culture moulds the language it uses, and although the mentalities of native Polish and English speakers are in many ways very similar, there are specific elements of Polish culture and history that might pose linguistic difficulties for translators translating from Polish into English.

Some notions that exist in the Polish language that cause these difficulties are *sklep monopolowy, zameldowanie, lustracja, spółdzienia lokatorska, użytkowanie wieczyste* – I mention these terms (and there are many more) in order to give examples of words of which the dictionary translation will not convey the entire cultural and political context in which the term is used. Some explanation or additional words or phrases, or even a footnote with a full explanation of what a term means in the Polish context, will be needed.

Anyone living in Poland for an extended period of time will know that in the Polish language there are many words and phrases translation of which requires first-hand knowledge of areas such as social relationships, current affairs and popular culture in Poland and in the respective English-speaking country in order to avoid misrepresentation of the intention of the speaker.

The need to account for Polish "cultural-linguistic baggage" should be foremost in the mind of the native English speaker translating from Polish into English. Adherence to this principle of adaptation to terminology used in the country of the target language, and not the country of the source language, helps avoid "Polish English" phrases, or to use the fine phrase used by Dr. Biel, *translationese*, such as *air forces* instead of *the air force*, *self-government* instead of *local government* or *autonomous organization*, etc.

To use a simple example with which any learner of Polish will be familiar, Poles use *Pan* and *Pani* without a surname as a polite form where English native speakers just use *you*. Here again, knowledge of the social norms, and not just of semantics, is required. An example of a social norm in the English language is the use of *can*, *could* and *would* and use of long phrases to soften a message. This is more important in English than in Polish. An English native speaker feels compulsion to say things like *I'm very sorry but I'm going to have to ask you to leave now*, while a Pole would not use such an elaborate phrase. Longer phrases do also soften the message and express politeness in the Polish language, but the Polish speaker feels less obliged to use them; compare *Sorry, you're not actually allowed to smoke here* and *tutaj nie wolno palić* used in similar circumstances with no less expression of respect intended towards the addressee. Saying *you're not allowed to smoke here* to one's customer in English certainly sounds rude; another very obvious example is the Polish *nie*, which sounds abrupt and rude to a foreigner (for example from the UK) who speaks Polish, and sends a message to the inexperienced Polish learner that the other party (for example a shop assistant) has no interest in dealing with them, when this does not have to be the case at all. Lack of regard for social norms in the source or target language can lead to misrepresentation, and thus to mistranslation.

Polish people have an animated way of speaking that can also be very upsetting for someone new to Poland, and emotions can appear to get very high during an animated exchange of views when in fact there is very little true animosity at all. In the UK a similar use of raised voices and gestures and most of all emotional use of language would certainly mean a breakdown in communication. Social and cultural issues such as these also affect the way a text is translated from Polish into English.

So we see that culture, behaviour, and social protocol are inextricably linked to use of language, and from this point of view knowledge of semantics without appreciation of the issues discussed above is a good point of reference for a potential client assessing the ability of a translator.

Another and perhaps the most visible result of this long-term shortfall of native English speakers translating from Polish into English are names of Polish administrative institutions. For many years these have been translated literally into English in a manner that is confusing and does not

convey the function of the institution. Here one could return to the *translation should sound like a translation* argument, but who is the translator accommodating, the author of the source text or the translation addressee? To translate names of institutions well one has to have some knowledge of similar institutions in an English-speaking country, and the usual point of reference is the UK or the US. I am not propagating application of the terms currently used in the UK (for example) to Polish institutions – such over-compensation would show disregard for the Polish political context - but some happy medium needs to be found by comparing the English names of Polish institutions and the names of the equivalent institutions in the UK. Unfortunately, rather strange-sounding names have been adopted by the English-speaking business community in Poland and are now so ingrained that no amount of presentation of more logical and better-sounding alternatives will result in them being replaced. I cherish the rare moments in which I am called upon to think up English equivalents for names of institutions for which there is as yet no “established” equivalent.

A translator translating into his/her native language should not refrain from using this attribute to the full when producing translations; the quality of a translation is undermined considerably by adherence to a literal translation through fear of criticism or inadequate knowledge of the subject matter.

Above all, beware of translations that look like they were made on Google.

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