

# Translating, Interpreting and Understanding 'the Other'

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I was flattered to be asked to deliver the Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture and I accepted out of respect for her memory.

I knew Jill, not well, because she was married to my Parliamentary and Ministerial colleague Dr Neal Blewett. Neal, born in Tasmania, became a Rhodes Scholar, studied at Oxford and married Jill Myford in 1962 when he was lecturing at St Edmund Hall. They lived in Adelaide from 1964 and had two children, a son and a daughter. Neal was elected to the House of Representatives in 1977, the same year as me, and after 1983 served as Minister for Health, Minister for Trade, Minister for Social Security, then High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

Jill became a Senior Lecturer with the Community Language Program at the Adelaide College of TAFE, then co-ordinated the Level 3 Interpreting and Training Course at the South Australian College of Advanced Education, now part of the University of South Australia. She became a director of the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) from 1983, and chaired NAATI's Qualifications and Advisory Committee, responsible for approving translation and interpretation (T&I) courses and for the assessment of overseas qualifications in T&I held by applicants for accreditation in Australia.

As your website notes: 'An interpreter and translator herself, she fought for the establishment of high standards and for regulation of the profession. It is largely as a result of her efforts that Australia has been recognised internationally as a leader in the field of community-based interpreting. Jill was admired by all who knew her for her dedication to the profession and for the concern she showed and the encouragement she gave to individuals'.

She had a very cool, precise manner, careful with words, sometimes sharp edged, and was - I thought - wary of displaying emotion. She was intensely interested in French language and culture. She chaired the South Australian State Theatre Company. She died in October 1988 and at her funeral, people who knew her infinitely better than me, such as Bill and Dallas Hayden, poured out their hearts and grieved deeply. She is commemorated by the Jill Blewett Playwright's Award.

Neal Blewett, in *A Cabinet Diary* (1999), in his entry for Saturday, 7 November 1992, writes: 'Attended a memorial lecture for Jill at the annual meeting of the Australian interpreters and translators. Group a bit incestuous ... but it brought back to me all her enthusiasm and indeed her battles in the interpreters' cause'.

The inaugural lecture, presented in conjunction with the National Language Expo in Melbourne, was delivered by Prof. Adolfo Gentile, Head of Interpreting and Translating at Deakin University.

I was, and am, grateful for the extensive briefing material provided to me for this evening, but it may come as something of a shock to you to learn that I am less familiar with the working conditions of professionals in interpretation and translation, and the Byzantine complexities of the accreditation process, than you are. Accordingly, I can speak only in a very broad way about the importance of language, the development of communication skills, the general concept of translation and interpretation, and the problem of bridging the chasm that separates different cultures, both collectively and individually.

I have had a long interest in how communication evolved:

- Gestures and sounds > eye and ear 2 000 000 BCE
- Speech: mouth > ear 150 000 BCE
- Speech: mouth > messenger/ memory > ear 100 000 BCE
- Representation and symbols in cave art > eye 40 000 BCE
- Tally sticks, use of symbols, markers, knotted cords 15 000 BCE
- Speech to writing > messenger > ear and eye 7000 BCE
- Stories, sagas, epics, scriptures, codified laws 4000 BCE

We need to emphasise the paradox that Australia is both unilingual and multicultural. The overwhelming dominance of the English language in Australia and its hegemonic significance throughout the world has been a major disincentive to learning another language.

In the era of globalisation, Australia's linguistic capacity appears to be under threat. *The Australian* reported (October 4, 2004) that of 'the OECD countries for which information is available, Australian students spend the least amount of time on learning foreign languages at the ages of 12 to 14, the period when the largest proportion of children have language studies as part of the compulsory curriculum. 'On average, Australian junior secondary students have fewer than 60 hours of instruction in LOTE in a school year, less than half the amount of instruction time in many OECD countries.

^ In the senior years of secondary school, foreign languages are elective subjects. According to national figures from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, there has been very little change in overall LOTE enrolments in the last decade.

'In 1991, 11 per cent (20,414) of Year 12 students studied a foreign language. In 2002, the proportion was only slightly higher, with 13.5 per cent (26,413) of students studying LOTE in Year 12,

'Numbers of students studying major European languages have been stable, while Asian languages have grown in popularity. Japanese has overtaken French as the most popular language, but Chinese and Indonesian have also doubled their student numbers'.

As you are all well aware, more than one hundred and fifty languages are spoken in Australia. One of the hardest questions to ask an Australian is: 'What is Australia's second language'? The 2004 *Encyclopaedia Britannica Yearbook* suggests that Australia's second language is still Italian, at 439,000 (2.2%) with Chinese at 332,000 (1.6%), Greek at 310,000 (1.5%), Arabic at 194,000 (1.0%) and Vietnamese 160,000 (0.8%). However, the pecking order might be hard to substantiate, due to the large number listed as ^Other/ not stated' (1,352,000 or 6.5%). The Chinese figure that I quoted is a combination of Cantonese and Mandarin. Italian has been falling steadily as a percentage of total population for years and we can be pretty confident that Chinese is now the largest non-English language group, with Arabic, Cambodian and languages from the former Yugoslavia increasing at a rapid rate. Speakers of Aboriginal languages are numbered at 53,000.

We have had some feeble attempts to grapple with the implications of a national language policy, but most of our efforts have been directed at encouraging integration of migrants into the mainstream language. What *should* be Australia's second language in schools? Indonesian (proximity?), Japanese (trade?), Chinese (long term implications for the region?), Italian (the language of many migrants)? Spanish (which is spoken by far more people internationally than French or German)? Until we have a clearer sense of who we are and what our priorities are, we will not develop a national language policy.

In some countries, language and the division between a majority/minority culture can be deeply disruptive where the minority is of a significant proportion, or dominates a particular region, as with Canada, Belgium, the former Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation, Romania and Spain. Fortunately, this has not been our experience.

There are very modest levels of competence in languages other than English in our government, parliamentary, judicial, public service (other than DFAT) or business sectors. This is in striking contrast to Canada, where bilingualism is mandatory. It is hard to identify many prominent figures in our public life, living or dead, who are bilingual, and I blush to confess that I am not an exception: I wish that I was. Our first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, was said to have been fluent in Latin and to have engaged in a lively discussion with Pope Leo XIII. I like to think it was true. Gough Whitlam had a passionate interest in language, was formidably erudite and lived for several years in Paris as Ambassador to UNESCO. Regrettably, his French was little better than mine. It is a shared frustration. Kevin Rudd, Labor's Shadow Foreign Minister, is fluent in Mandarin - but this seems to be actually held against him, as part of our 'tall poppy' syndrome.

People of non-English speaking background are significantly under-represented in Australian public life. Steve Bracks' family came from Lebanon. Sir James Gobbo, former Governor of Victoria, grew up in Italy. Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales, is of Lebanese descent. There have been Federal MPs of Lebanese, Greek and Italian origin, but only three of Chinese descent and *very* few Aborigines (Neville Bonner and Aden Ridgeway being the exceptions). Our courts are monolingual as are our service delivery agencies-hence the importance of translators to ensure that justice is administered, but this is a matter of ongoing concern in the Aboriginal community. Translation and interpretation is especially important at hospitals, and effective translation is a valuable way of improving delivery of services and reducing long term costs. Nevertheless, there are few hospitals with translators employed on staff. Police, Customs and Immigration are essentially outsourcing their translation services.

I studied Latin for two years at Caulfield North Central School. It was my first formal exposure to foreign language teaching and I did well, but there were limitations. There were no Latin speakers around, other than Catholic priests, and no newspapers or novels to read, no films to see. I had picked up some German vocabulary from reading magazines and books on Wagner, but setting out tables of word equivalents was absolutely the wrong way to grasp how language works, in a human or social context. People of my generation and the next were taught French at school because England was only 39 kilometres from France and we inherited its education system and many teachers had studied French, a practical example of recycling.

*Interglossa* by Lancelot Hogben (1895-1973), subtitled 'a draft of an auxiliary for a democratic world order' had a strong, but as it turned out, misguided influence on me for a time. This was an attempt to create an auxiliary universal language, like L. L. Zamenhof's Esperanto. The book was published by Penguin Books in 1943 and for a time I carried it everywhere. Hogben, a biologist, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, wrote two best-selling works of popularisation: *Mathematics for the Million* (1933) and *Science for the Citizen* (1938). The entry regarding him in

the *Dictionary of National Biography 1971-80* records that he had 'a genius for making enemies' and was notorious for his 'complexity and irrationality of character'. Hogben used symbols, called isotypes, devised by Otto Neurath, to illustrate concepts in Interglossa. It looked very neat, logical, systematic, invariant, and devoid of emotion - in short, all the things that natural language is not. It was one of my private vices. I had nobody to share Interglossa with. As a communication system it failed the first test.

It drew heavily on Latin and Greek; for example, the Lord's Prayer begins: 'Na Parente in Urani: Na dicta volo; to Nomino gene reverso; Plus to Crati habe accido; plus u Deos acte harmono to Tendo epi Geo homo in Urani...' In English, the Lord's Prayer runs to 55 words, in Interglossa there are 74. Interglossa also failed because of the irresistible momentum of English, encouraged in part by the Basic English movement of C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards. Put crudely, English was the dominant language of the Allies who won the war. George Orwell attacked artificial languages as 'Newspeak' in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* and an important essay, 'Politics and the English Language'.

My two greatest intellectual disappointments were in failing to play musical instruments well or to speak foreign languages fluently. I experimented in both disciplines, but never mastered either. Later I could read French tolerably, but spoke haltingly with an atrocious accent. I could follow Italian operatic libretti or German lieder, make sense of newspapers in Romance and Germanic languages and but that was the extent of my capacity. Later, I studied Russian briefly, with no more success.

My book *Sleepers, Wake!* (1982) was published in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Swedish and Braille (for Australian businessmen), and I spent time with the translators. As a Minister, I was impressed by the level of interpretation services at international conferences. The famous Japanese interpreter Masumi Muramatsu, known in the trade as 'MM', was the best I ever observed. His capacity to reproduce pace, rhythm, emphasis, humour was extraordinary.

My longest exposure to a non-English speaking environment was during my period working for, in and around UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. In the period 1990-97, I spent a total of about two years in Paris, serving on UNESCO's Executive Board 1991-95 and on the World Heritage Committee 1995-96. UNESCO used six official working languages, cautiously set out in alphabetical order: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish, and Russian and the quality of interpretation was extraordinarily high. There were some anomalies, of course: Chinese, although spoken by more people than any other language, was the language of only one country-and China was not always represented on our Executive Board. To whom was the interpreter speaking through the headsets when China was not seated at the

table? I was flattered to think that my remarks were being simultaneously interpreted into Chinese-but if no Chinese were in sight, for whose benefit was it being done? Brazil was irritated that Portuguese was not an official language. Neither Japanese, German nor any language of the Indian subcontinent enjoyed this status.

I hoped that my Paris sojourn would improve my spoken French - but whenever I attempted to engage in conversation, my respondent would invariably reply in English. This even happened with President Chirac, on one occasion, much to my mortification.

I was very conscious that literal interpretation can be unhelpful, and if the cultural context is misunderstood, profoundly misleading. A classic illustration of this, with which you will all be familiar, was the exchange between President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in 1969. Nixon asked Sato to limit Japanese textile imports to the United States and Sato replied, 'Zensho shimasu'. This literally means, 'I'll do my best', and Nixon took it to be an agreement to his request. However, in a Japanese context, 'Zensho shimasu' is generally understood as an evasion, or rejection.

In the current conflicts in the Middle East, in which Iraq is only a single element, the lack of foreign language expertise in the CIA, State Department and Defense Department is costing the United States-and the cause of world peace-dearly. During the 1990s, Arab speakers were weeded out of important agencies and replaced by MBAs-people lacking in experience or understanding of cultures other than their own. Hence, the lack of a critical analysis capacity, and the increased reliance on tainted sources of information, men in suits who spoke English, refugees or exiles from Iraq who had a message to sell- and they sold it.

Apart from areas such as California and Florida with a very large Hispanic minority, the United States is even more monolingual than we are. In our case, it probably doesn't matter much, but with the world's only hyperpower it matters a great deal. It is also a very sensitive matter-and it becomes increasingly clear that when outsiders, particularly Europeans, poke fun at President George W Bush's mangled syntax and primitive vocabulary, this actually wins him votes. But the linguistic divide brings a wall of incomprehension between us and 'the Other', who then is speedily transmuted into 'the Enemy'.

I am very conscious of the historical significance of great translators of the past, and how they have created or transformed our culture, and in English the two most important have been John Wyclif and William Tyndale who, more than any others created the basis of the English Bible. In Germany, the profoundly ambiguous figure of Martin Luther helped to create the modern language with his Biblical translation.

As I consumed the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in my late teens and early twenties, I understood my debt to the great translators, and as I moved on to Homer, then to Cervantes, and to Montaigne, Pascal, Flaubert, Proust, Camus and Georges Perec, Lady Murasaki and Robert Musil, among many others, my gratitude expanded.

I understand that as our world becomes increasingly fractured and complex, with the development of expertise and technical vocabularies that require translation and/or interpretation even within the same language family, let alone another one, the challenge for professionals will become even greater-and the rewards even less adequate. We pay a price for super-specialisation: I recognise its importance but I have tried consciously to make great generalisations that cut across the boundaries, helping us to make sense of the world to ourselves and to each other.

It won't be easy and I wish you luck for your part in it.