

Interpreting and Symbolic Capital Used to Negotiate Borders in Estonia 1944–1991

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Der Artikel behandelt die Verdolmetschung zwischen Estnisch und Russisch im estnischen Parlament in der Periode der Sowjetrepublik Estland (ESSR 1944–1991). In dieser Zeit wurde anstelle von Englisch und Deutsch Russisch als die Sprache der internationalen Kommunikation eingeführt. Die Verfasserin untersucht die Spezifik des Dolmetschens in Sowjet-Estland im Rahmen der allgemeineren Geschichte des Dolmetschens in Estland. Im Mittelpunkt steht das Simultandolmetschen im Obersten Sowjet der ESSR, dem Parlament der Sowjetära. Die Verfasserin befragte hierzu 49 Personen bzw. 23 Dolmetscher und 26 Auftraggeber oder Nutzer von Dolmetschleistungen. Im Ergebnis der Durchsicht von 1200 Fotos und 154 Wochenschauen zur Arbeit des Obersten Sowjets (OS) aus nationalen Archiven wurden 29 Fotos und 27 Videoclips von OS-Sitzungen mit Kopfhörern ausgewählt, die frühesten davon aus dem Jahre 1945. Theoretische Grundlage der Studie ist der Ansatz von Bourdieu mit den Begriffen symbolisches Kapital und Feld. Soweit der Verfasserin bekannt, wurde symbolisches Kapital bisher noch nicht mit Dolmetschen in Verbindung gebracht. Der Artikel beschreibt die Rolle des Dolmetschens im Estland der Nachkriegszeit.

Keywords: Estonia, parliamentary interpreting, symbolic capital

1 Introduction

This article focuses on interpreting in Estonia from 1944 to 1991, when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. More specifically, it focuses on interpreting from and into Estonian and Russian in the Supreme Council of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), the Soviet-era parliament, hereinafter referred to as the parliament. The article fills a gap in the history of interpreting between Estonian and Russian in order to preserve the oral heritage of interpreting in the period under review. After presenting the demographic and linguistic context of the period, the author moves on to discuss parliamentary interpreting. The focus is on the role of interpreters in maintaining Estonian in a drastically changing indigenous linguistic setting in Estonia. At the time, the languages used previously for international communication (German and English) were being replaced by Russian. This article treats the border as a line separating two languages: the native language and the foreign language. In the period under review parliamentary interpreting had a broader meaning than merely facilitating communication. Indeed, an interpreter interpreting from and into Estonian contributed to the Estonians' right to use their own language in the parliament, one of the highest bodies to implement and execute Russification.

The author's initial aim was to establish whether parliamentary interpreting was used in Estonia, and if so, to what extent it was used, who the interpreters were and when it was

used. Analysing the post-war interpreting context, the author draws on the concept of symbolic capital by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

2 Demographic Change

It is common knowledge in Estonia that during the interwar period educated Estonians spoke three local languages: Estonian, German and Russian. After World War II not only the political order but also the linguistic environment changed in Estonia, as Russian was introduced as a language of international communication. The share of Estonian-speakers dropped from 94% in 1945 to 76% in 1950 (Raun 1991: 182), then shrinking to 61.5% by 1989 (Vare 1999). There were two distinct communities in Estonia at the time: people who communicated in Estonian and people who communicated in Russian. During the interwar period Estonia had been considered the most homogeneous of the three Baltic countries (Zetterberg 2011: 400). Unlike Central European countries, Estonia lost its monoethnicity, as industrialisation was carried out by importing a Russian-speaking working class and mass deportation to Siberia preceded collectivisation (Aarelaid 2008: 73). The influx of Russian-speakers (about 180,000 from 1945 to 1953) meant that about every fifth person was an immigrant in Estonia (Raun 1991: 182). The 1979 census revealed that “only 13 percent of the Russians deemed themselves fluent in Estonian. Many of them were footloose migrants; for every 100 arrivals to Estonia, there were about 80 departures” (Taagepera 1993: 103). The share of Russians leaped from 8.2% in 1934 to 20%, according to the 1959 census, and to 30.3%, according to the 1989 census (Vare 1999). Immigrant children usually attended schools with Russian as the language of instruction regardless of their mother tongue. The 1989 census reveals that 78% of Jews, 63% of Poles and 56% of Germans living in Estonia considered Russian as their mother tongue (Vare 1999: 77).

3 The Linguistic Environment

Immigrants to Estonia had no reason to learn the local language since Russian was used as an ideological tool to enhance the socio-political cohesion of Soviet society. The spread of Russian thus started to imbue everything, and Russian classes were introduced not only in primary school but also at university. Despite the steps taken to introduce bilingualism, in the 1960s “the Estonian intelligentsia began to reassert itself” and a kind of “renaissance [took] place in cultural life” (Raun 1991: 189); culture in fact remained a sector in which the use of Russian made slow inroads (Taagepera 1993: 85). While all over the USSR ten-year secondary education prevailed, in Estonia (as well as in Latvia and Lithuania) it took eleven years; the extra year, however, “was a modest victory for the Estonian language [as] Russian was made an optional subject in theory but mandatory in practice” (1993: 95). Although the party governance style was foreign, locals learned to live with Soviet peculiarities (Aarelaid 2008: 74). Russian began to spread to

all spheres of life. In the Estonian Communist Party many of the top positions were reserved for monolingual Russians, who could not participate in events held in Estonian without interpretation.

Language has always been a mark of national prestige, and to curb this prestige, the USSR Council of Ministers passed a secret decree in 1978 on learning and teaching Russian in Soviet republics, setting as its primary aims to limit the use of Estonian in public settings and to ensure bilingualism of Estonians. The 1982 Education Act of Estonia (Education Act 1982) stipulated in §24 that the Soviet people had *voluntarily* accepted Russian as the language of international communication.

4 Methods and Materials

The sources researched for this article comprise textual sources (interviews, articles, verbatim reports of parliamentary sessions) and non-textual artefacts (photos and news-reels). To analyse interpreting during the years under review, the author conducted 49 semi-structured interviews: 23 with interpreters and 26 with people who recruited interpreters or occasionally used interpreters. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling. The interpreters interviewed represent two different target language groups: Russian (11) and other (12). For this article only interpreters with Russian as their A or B language were taken into account. That group of eleven interpreters included two who exclusively interpreted drama performances as full time in-house simultaneous interpreters. They are not discussed here. Six out of the remaining nine interpreters had worked for the parliament. The interviews conducted also led to the rediscovery of the names of 25 other interpreters who had interpreted between Estonian and Russian, but who could not be interviewed, as they were either ill or deceased.

Historic facts and data to confirm or refute recollections from interviews can be searched for in archives. The relevant archives to be consulted in this case are the National Archives of Estonia. To the author's knowledge these sources have not previously been examined from the point of view of interpreting. Although Franz Pöchhacker states that "basic techniques for data collection might be summarised as watch, ask and record", he mentions that research into interpreting also makes use of documentary material (2006: 64). Comprehensive information about newspaper articles published in Estonia (1944–1991) is available in the bibliographic collection *The Chronicle of Articles and Reviews*, which lists article titles. Fourteen articles from 1944 to 1977 were thus selected for examination based on their titles. None of them discussed interpreting in the parliament from or into Russian. Verbatim reports of 47 sessions (1990–1991) are also accessible online, and few of them contain references to interpreting. In addition, the author searched for photos depicting the use of parliamentary interpreting in the Digitised Photos Database; the visual "is only just beginning to attract detailed atten-

tion” (Wolf & Fernández-Ocampo 2014: 2) in translation studies, but it offers a lead since factual material about interpreting is scarce. Out of 1200 digitised parliament photos, 29 – that is, 2.4% – showed headphones being used. The author also searched the Film Archive Online Database to find relevant newsreels from its Movie and Sound Collection. Each entry in the database comes with a brief description of the footage, and the author watched all relevant footage (154) from 1944 to 1991.

5 Symbolic Capital

In 1920, the first constitution of the Republic of Estonia established Estonian as the state language (Constitution 1920). The Constitution of Soviet Estonia (1944–1991), on the other hand, included no reference to the concept of state language (Constitution 1972). Rather, it merely stipulated the possibility of using the mother tongue. Forty-five years later, the 1989 Language Act reintroduced Estonian as the state language, albeit while Estonia was still a Soviet republic (Language Act 1989).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) introduced the concepts of *a field* (a relatively autonomous structured social space), *a social agent* (defined by the agent’s relative position in the field), and *symbolic capital* (something the agent can acquire in the field), which are widely used in different disciplines (see Bourdieu 1985; Grenfell 2008). Bourdieu expanded upon the concept of capital to include its different forms. In particular, he spoke not only of economic capital, but also of cultural, social, and symbolic capital (1997). The latter, symbolic capital, is a concept that hovers in the background of all the others, blanketing them (Bourdieu 1998: 47), as it designates the effects of legitimation for one of the other capitals (Swartz 2013: 50). Activities (time, effort, money) of the so-called social agents functioning within the field accumulate as symbolic capital, with no direct economic effect (Bourdieu 2011: 83–84). Hence political acts increase symbolic capital in their field “with only their faces, their names and their honour” (Bourdieu 1999: 119). As stated in *Interpreters as Diplomats*, “language has always been more than a simple communication tool: it has also been a mark of national prestige, and interpreters have brought this prestige to the international arena” (Delisle 1999: 2). Bourdieu also describes language-related linguistic capital as a factor determining the agent’s position in society (Bourdieu 1997: 70). In the context of the article expanding upon Bourdieu’s approach and applying it not just to individuals but to states, it could be assumed that it is possible “to reap symbolic benefits” by speaking “with distinction and thereby distinguish[ing oneself] from all those who are less well endowed with linguistic capital” (Bourdieu 1997: 21). In analysing diplomatic interpreting in the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940), the author defined diplomatic interpreters’ contribution to national symbolic capital as an activity associated with a diplomatic act (Sibul 2015). In the period under review in this article Estonia was no longer independent. However, it was one of the three Soviet republics that employed parliamentary

interpreting, allowing speakers to use their mother tongue. The interpreters, by ensuring the official use of Estonian in the Soviet-era parliament, could rather unintentionally be associated with the so-called resistance to the total domination of Russian. In a parliamentary setting the native speaker speaking his or her own language delegates the contents of his or her discourse to the interpreter, thus accumulating symbolic capital for the Estonian language. Interpreters use their linguistic capabilities, thesaurus and professionalism, assuming responsibility to interpret unambiguously. Applying Bourdieu's approach, interpreters are agents who enjoy the privilege of contributing within the field in which they perform (Sibul 2015).

Half of the interviewed interpreters who worked for the parliament had been deported to Siberia as children by Soviets, had to attend Russian schools, and, once they returned, studied Russian as a subject at university. They had not received any professional interpreter training and can be considered lay or natural interpreters (Pöchhacker 2006: 22). When they interpreted from Russian into Estonian, the interpreters represented the dominant language, and when they interpreted from Estonian into Russian, the dominated language (Bourdieu 1977: 647), in the same linguistic field. It should be born in mind that of the fifteen Soviet republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were the only ones to continue to use their own languages, including in high-level political decision-making bodies. Most of the communist party rhetoric comprised canonised phrases, easily memorised and interpreted (as repeatedly confirmed by the interviewees; for example, interpreters were able to play chess while interpreting). Bourdieu acknowledges that linguistic crisis comes via political crisis (1977: 652), whereas "language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power" (1977: 648). The linguistic and political power of Russian (i.e. interpreting from Russian into Estonian) was exposed, in particular, "in the monopoly of the means" (1977: 652). The linguistic and political power of Estonian (i.e. interpreting from Estonian into Russian) appeared, first and foremost, in the right to speak Estonian, as "those who speak must ensure that they are entitled to speak in the circumstances, and those who listen must reckon that those who speak are worthy of attention" (Thompson 1997: 8). With certain caveats, it may be argued that interpreting from Estonian into Russian in the parliament slowed the process of Russification in Estonia.

6 Parliamentary Interpreting from 1944 to 1991

Parliamentary interpreting is a type of interpreting in an institutional setting, just like medical, legal, and media interpreting (Pöchhacker 2007: 12). It is characterised by its local aspect, unlike conference interpreting, which is "international" (Pöchhacker 2006: 16). That being said, *conference interpreting* is currently the term used for interpreting that takes place in parliaments, although according to Pöchhacker (2006: 16), "one could arguably retain the traditional term parliamentary interpreting for conference

interpreting as practiced in the Belgian, Canadian or European parliaments”. Its history reportedly goes back to Belgium in 1936, when parliamentary interpreting was first introduced in the national parliament (two languages). Switzerland followed the Belgian example in 1946 (Delisle 2009: 27), providing simultaneous interpretation between three languages (Swiss 2008: 37). In Canada, the House of Commons introduced simultaneous interpreting in 1959 and the Senate in 1961, as the future prime minister John Diefenbaker had made “instantaneous translation” one of his election promises (Delisle 2009: 27). The aim was to bring two language communities – the French and the English – closer together, hoping that in the future it would no longer be necessary (Delisle 2009: 29). The practice, however, continues to this day. In Estonia, the Soviet-era parliament convened twice a year and acted as a “rubber-stamp” (Mole 2012: 65), approving decisions taken under the party leadership (Raun 1991: 190–195).

According to the interviewees, the Estonian parliament used simultaneous interpreting throughout its existence, although no interpreter could say anything more specific. Archival research into the minutes and verbatim reports of parliamentary sessions has not yielded any factual confirmation of the introduction date of parliamentary interpreting. Footage from 1945 was the earliest found that confirms parliamentary interpretation. Twenty-seven video clips from 40 sessions (out of 103) held by twelve parliaments (1944–1991) include shots of headphones, confirming that simultaneous interpretation was extensively used. Not all of the sessions were covered in the newsreels. Several clips of the sessions yielded inconclusive outcomes, portraying only standing audiences applauding or only speakers, or are of poor quality (too dark or slightly blurred). In several audio clips the speaker can be heard speaking Estonian, and a few delegates seen using headphones. The electronic search resulted in 1200 digitised photos; however, a mere 29 show headphones in use at sessions and 13 at other parliament-related events, such as at a yearly cycle of significant dates (the anniversary of the October Revolution, Lenin’s birthday, etc.).

As regards preparations for an assignment, several interviewees stressed that there was no new terminology, since overused fixed epithets were intrinsic to the Soviet newspeak found in ideological texts. Use of clichés was deeply rooted in the Soviet officialise. They created safety for the speaker, reducing the possibility of committing a verbal faux pas (Raag 2010: 109). There were certain myths that functioned as approved templates – work associated with heroic deeds, Soviet citizens as heroes, unbreakable friendships, etc. The use of oxymoron, such as ‘a battle for peace’, ‘a burning desire’, to name just a few, was common. The sessions brought together the working class, intellectuals and military elite to listen to speeches dedicated to heroes who had fought on the battlefields and now struggled on the frontlines of labour (Lõhmus 1999). The formalised, set position prescribed by the need to stick to officialise and dictated by party instructions was quite inappropriate for oral presentation.

Several interpreters spoke of cases where a speaker read a prepared text word for word, including comments not intended to be read aloud. These speakers also stumbled at hyphenated words at the end of the line or page or repeatedly split compound nouns spelt as one word in Estonian into two nouns in the wrong place, giving the word a different meaning. The speakers' mistakes were intentionally included in the subsequent interpreting. The interpreter's behaviour was thus clearly unprofessional, including a certain automatism while working, as well as concomitant activities such as knitting and playing chess, and intentionally emphasising text-reading errors made by the speakers. Indeed, some of the interpreters even seemed to take pride in doing this.

The interpreters frequently mentioned that “no one listened to us anyway”, meaning on the one hand, that interpreting from Russian into Estonian was often not necessary as people more or less understood the language, and on the other hand, that the audience could anticipate what was coming. An interpreter recalled that during the delegates' four-year term interpreters could guess by the speaker's name what he or she would speak about. The interpreters could not, however, become too automatic or careless in their guesswork, as their output was monitored. A former head of the Documentation Department of the Presidium of the parliament from 1949 to 1991 mentioned in her interview that occasionally she was asked to listen to the interpreting to check its quality. Another way to check its quality in later years was to compare the text transcribed from tape recordings of the sessions to the original recording. The verbatim texts were translated and published in Estonian and Russian. If a delegate complained that he had not used one or another word, he or she was shown the verbatim text. This demonstrates the idea of using the interpreter as a scapegoat or a lightning rod (Obst 2010: 168).

At the end of the Soviet period, as of 1988 the political environment started to change and the issues under discussion became more substantial. Now according to the interviewees the Russian delegates “clung to interpreters and depended on them in their communication”. All of a sudden every word the interpreter uttered was important for the audience. The interviews reflect a change in the interpreter narrative as well: interpreters had an attentive audience, the message they mediated had meaning, job satisfaction increased, etc. Online verbatim reports also reveal increased attention vis-à-vis interpreting (aspects such as requests to speak or reading the text slowly for the benefit of the interpreters).

Under the circumstances, this diversified work experience turned the interpreters into professionals, and they were regarded as such – bearing witness to Pöchhacker's observation: “historically, it is of course difficult to clearly separate professional interpreting from what we might call lay interpreting or natural interpreting” (2006: 22), a job done by bilinguals who have received no interpreter training. An analysis of the interviews reveals that the interpreters operating in the years reviewed occasionally fell short of the

requirements for a professional interpreter. They were all interpreters by chance: most worked other jobs, as well, and considered interpreting a welcome source of additional income. Out of six parliament interpreters four had a degree in Russian and two in history. The research carried out in the photo collection yielded merely one photograph of a parliament interpreter from 1990, depicting the interpreter not interpreting but rather airing a radio broadcast as a reporter, with a caption providing the profession of the person photographed. Interpreting was the reporter's side job. This outcome was slightly discouraging since the objective behind working through the collection was to find potential early events for which simultaneous interpreting was used.

Apart from simultaneous interpretation, the interviewees also mentioned *consecutive* and *whispered interpretation* as well as *interpretation from a text*. If done in the booth, the latter is called *simultaneous interpreting with text* (Pöchhacker 2006: 19). The attitude of the interviewees' vis-à-vis this mode fluctuated between extremes. Thirty-two years of experience led one interpreter to consider it the best method, as ambitious Russian-speaking officials frequently delivered written texts at breakneck speed. The interpreter took pride in being so precise in his work that the transcription of his interpretation could be printed as a verbatim of the speech, needing very few corrections, if any. He was also proud of frequently getting ahead and thus finishing before the speaker. This may have been possible because the speakers would read their written speech word for word without so much as glancing up once, confirmed by scores of newsreels the author watched for her research. The written text therefore helped interpreters, although it was rarely provided. The interviewees admitted that speakers never added or deleted material or changed the original order of paragraphs. Two interpreters explicitly stressed that the texts were useful to look through before interpreting and could be used to help with figures, but were otherwise just disturbing. One interpreter said unambiguously that he discarded written texts, as one could not do three things at once (listening, reading and interpreting).

Just four interviewees vaguely mentioned consecutive interpreting, mostly at the parliamentary committee meetings, and only one was able to recall a specific case of consecutive interpretation from Estonian into Russian at a youth camp. The rare comments about consecutive interpretation concerned heightened responsibility and insecurity arising from the high visibility of the interpreter as well as embarrassment caused by sensitive topics (such as sexual health and behaviour). Five out of six parliament interpreters mentioned whispered interpretation, mostly provided for a single monolingual Russian, usually a party official or occasionally a guest from elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

7 Conclusion

Changed political circumstances and the influx of Russians into Estonia after World War II necessitated interpretation from and into Russian and Estonian from 1944 to 1991. The Soviet-era parliament, the Supreme Council, convened twice a year, the delegates representing the working class, intellectuals and the military elite, including many monolingual Russians. In researching documentary material in the archives and in interviewing interpreters active during the period under review, the author gathered factual data to confirm that parliamentary interpreting was extensively and regularly used in Estonia. The earliest audio-visual evidence to that end dates from 1945. Apart from newsreel footage, photos and online verbatim reports confirm the use of interpreting throughout the period. The interviews provide data to construct an interpreting narrative and throw light on an otherwise invisible activity: parliamentary interpreting. The scarcity of available images of interpreters confirms the view that interpreting was considered a trivial activity and not worth recording. The use of simultaneous interpreting from Estonian into Russian allowed Estonian to be used at public events at a time when Russian was enforced as the language of international communication. Interpretation is treated as a contributing factor in maintaining the use of the Estonian language in an environment in which a foreign language dominated. Interpreting as an activity was inseparable from the efficient functioning of the parliament, helping to invisibly negotiate boundaries for the use of Estonian in public spaces also under Soviet control. To paraphrase Bourdieu, the interpreter is an agent who enjoys the privilege of contributing to the field within which the interpreter functions, and is thus associated with symbolic capital.

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