

# PRAEKŁADANIEC

## WHEN IN ROME DO AS THE ROMANS DO - OR - HOW TO INTERPRET THE LANGUAGE THAT DOES NOT EXIST

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When I boarded a Polish Airlines Boeing 767 in Warsaw nearly three years ago and set off for the United States, I already had a few years of translation experience. I had worked as an in-house translator and interpreter for a Polish newspaper, and had also done quite a bit of freelance work for a number of translation companies in Poland. In Chicago I soon started working as an interpreter in a Polish community with which I was somewhat familiar from previous short visits. I expected this to be a challenge, as all new things are, but I was quite confident that I would manage easily. However, when one of the first clients I interpreted for at a meeting with an American attorney confessed that he had a problem with a "mister-meaner" (but, thanks God! no felonies) – I realized I would be in for a surprise more often than I had originally thought.

It is well-known that the language of the Polish-American community has its own unique flavor. In a new linguistic environment people inevitably acquire certain phrases or words they come across on a daily basis. The tricky part of it is, however, that in the course of it these words are often altered to the point of distortion and fixed in that form. This is done either in an attempt to simplify the pronunciation of English phrases or in the firm conviction that the new usage is, in fact, how given phrases or words are pronounced and/or function in the original. Whatever the reasons for these strange borrowings, an interpreter is often forced to convey the meaning of words that exist in neither the source nor the target language. He or she has to restore the words to their original shapes in order to uncover the true meaning. In the process, the interpreter discovers some general tendencies governing the speech of the Polish-American community and gains experience that makes the decoding process easier.

In short, Poles attempt to make the English words look and sound as Polish as possible. They pick up a word in its basic form and apply to it the grammatical rules governing Polish. This tendency is common for both nouns and verbs. That is, nouns decline and verbs conjugate, just as they do in Polish. And as a result, a weird register is formed, which may be relatively easily understood by those who have been here for a while, but which leaves relatives in Poland (or first-time visitors from Poland) confused. And so, a Pole *keszuje* his check in a bank, *orderuje* his pizza for lunch, and calls airlines in order to *zabukować* (to book) his ticket to go on a vacation. Should it turn out that his plans have changed, he has the right to *skanselować* (to cancel) his reservation within a certain period of time. Otherwise, he may assume that the deal is clinched and can make a note of it in his calendar or *zasejwować* (to save) it in his electronic organizer.

Construction industry terms are handled in a similar manner. You need to *sandować* (to sand) the floors to make them look smooth and *zapeintować* (to paint) over a smudge on the wall. The latter may be done either in a traditional way, or you can choose to *posprejować* (to spray the paint) here and there if it just needs a cosmetic touch-up.

Nouns are just as much fun. A woman once explained to her attorney that she was caught crossing the Canadian border *na fałszywych plejtach* (on false plates). No wonder she ended up being stopped by *kapy* (caps), and eventually had to appear *w korcie* (in court) of the Circuit Court of Cook County (pronounced *country*, which gives a new exciting meaning to the term *country music*).

Fortunately, not all people come into conflict with law-enforcement agencies and they are generally involved in more mundane tasks. They work hard *w ofisach* (in offices) or *w szapach* (in shops). They go shopping in their spare time and, just like all of us, feel fortunate if they find a real bargain *na sejl* (on sale). They don't want to be placed in a position of having to spend weeks or months *na lejoście* (on layoff) and they worry whether or not their *inśiura* (insurance) will cover all the medical expenses incurred as a result of a car accident.

The field of construction, again, has made a significant contribution to the speech of Polish immigrants with words like *kantertapy* (countertops), *karpety* (carpets), *flory* (floors) and *tubajfory* (two-by-fours). In order to do a job properly, a contractor needs *tulce* (tools). But first and foremost, he should get his *lajznes* (license), otherwise he may have a brush with the law. The word *lajznes* comes in handy in a variety of other contexts, too. For example, you are definitely required to have a *drajwer lajznes* or, better still, *lajznes drajwer*, in order to drive a vehicle. Which reminds me of another commonly used word, which, I have to confess, beat me for days. That word is ... *TAJLO*. *Tajlo* is nothing more than a title, a document evidencing ownership. Interestingly, its usage in that particular form is so common that even if you translate it into Polish, you will most likely hear a client double check: "You mean *tajlo*, right?"

This type of new-speak is a well-known phenomenon in the Polish-American community in Chicago and an easy target for criticism, mockery and jokes. However, for us, the interpreters, it is first of all a significant communication problem. It requires the interpreter to respond quickly to the most unexpected and unusual phrases uttered by Polish speakers. There is no time or place for laughter and amusement when you interpret in a courtroom and you don't understand what your client is telling you in what is supposed to be your native language.

On the other hand, I am quite sure that this is not something confined to the Polish-American environment and that translators and interpreters serving other communities here in the United States have similar stories to share. In fact, this is what makes our work exciting and each assignment unpredictable. Before you experience this phenomenon first-hand, you don't fully realize why it is easier to interpret for someone who has had no contact whatsoever with English. But maybe I should just take the rough with the smooth, as an old saying has it. Or, as my Polish friends suggested to me, why don't I just *kikirizi*. That is "take it easy" (in case you haven't guessed).