

**CODE SWITCHING AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AS A FREE-CULTURE MEDIUM: CASE STUDY
OF THE NOVEL *NECESSARY LIES* BY EVA STACHNIAK¹**

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to examine a situation that is both particular and common: the use of language in the case of the immigrant. Our study is based on the linguistic commentary of the novel *Necessary Lies* by Eva Stachniak (2000) and analyses the protagonist's linguistic evolution, which is clearly visible through the narrative text about her situation during the first phase of acculturation in Canada.

RESUMEN

El artículo propone una aproximación a una situación que es, a la vez, particular y frecuente: el uso de la lengua en la situación del inmigrante. El estudio consiste en el comentario lingüístico de la novela *Necessary Lies* de Ewa Stachniak (2000) y analiza, a través de la narrativa, la evolución lingüística de la protagonista durante sus primeros años de aculturación en Canadá.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article propose l'approche à une situation à la fois particulière et banale: l'usage de langue dans le cas de l'immigré. L'étude se concentre sur le commentaire linguistique du roman *Necessary Lies* d'Ewa Stachniak (2000) et analyse, à travers la narration, l'évolution linguistique de la protagoniste pendant les premières années de l'acculturation au Canada.

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¹ Eva Stachniak, *Necessary lies*, Simon & Pierre, Toronto-Oxford, 2000.

The didactics of modern languages frequently explore the interaction between language and culture. In recent approaches, culture is mainly presented as a conjunct of dynamic factors that interfere in and construct the act of linguistic communication. On the other hand culture is not usually “reduced” to its erudite variant, i.e. literary and artistic manifestations. Many authors underline the importance of the so-called everyday culture, which is also present in language *clichés*. Robert Galisson suggested the term shared cultural charge (*charge culturelle partagée*, Galisson, 1991, p. 139), mainly formed by the additional semantic value resulting from the cultural tradition in the lexicon.

As Galisson noted, the shared cultural charge therefore constitutes a kind of “*monnaie d’échange*” in day to day interactions. The author also observed that this aspect of the culture generally escapes the control mechanisms of the language users. On the other hand, as for language itself, the shared cultural charge may be considered as a discrete system in the sense that the constituent parts of a given culture are non-continuous and may be analysed individually. We know that language is simultaneously a vehicle, product and producer of one or of various cultures (Galisson, 1991, p 118). However, in the modern world, there are many situations where the use of language is almost independent of culture, that is to say, it is possible to realise speech acts that do not pass through any common cultural filter because they take place between people belonging to completely different traditions. Obviously, communicative situations of this kind are much more common in English, or in another *lingua franca*, than in the case of purely ethnic languages. Conversely, both in the native language and in the second or foreign language, common cultural behaviour is acquired through individual experiences.

In this article, we propose to examine a situation that is both particular and common: the use of language in the case of the immigrant. Our analysis is based on the linguistic commentary of the novel *Necessary Lies* by Eva Stachniak (2000). Literary criticism has noted the author’s courage in writing the novel in a language that is not her mother tongue. We could add that Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski wrote in the same situation, i.e. He wrote and published in English despite his native language being Polish. Eva Stachniak’s novel drew our attention due to its linguistic factors, namely, the elucidation of the protagonist’s linguistic evolution. On the one hand her linguistic context is manifest through a series of palimpsests arising from interference from the mother tongue, and on the other hand, through a continuous philological reflex.

The novel in question tells the story of Anna, a Polish immigrant in Canada. The character appears in Toronto at the beginning of the 1980's. As a graduate in English philology, she has a high degree of knowledge of erudite Anglo-Saxon culture. She is lacking in competence with respect to the shared cultural charge and a certain practical knowledge of Western, or more specifically, Canadian, reality. Contrary to expectations among those in the receiving environment, Anna does not in any way resemble *homo sovieticus*, although she has experienced communist indoctrination in Poland, with notable intensity especially at school and in the media. Despite Poland being a de facto "bicultural" country at that time, there already existed an almost schizophrenic dichotomy, consisting, on the one hand, of the political reality, and, on the other, of the experience of religious and bourgeois traditions. This political reality, in the case of Poland, was distinguished by the lack of any freedom of expression at a public level and manipulation of the mass media. In comparison with other socialist countries, the Polish case was distinguished by the relatively ample liberty at a personal level, visible, for example, in the tolerance of religious practices or respect for privacy. Nevertheless, the constant living in "two worlds" also gave rise to attitudes of distrust, or even depression.

On the other hand, one could put forward the hypothesis that perhaps the character's adaptation to American reality was facilitated by having already lived a double reality in her country of origin. There, the "game" consisted of the clear distinction between the Catholic principles taught at home and in the church, and the official propaganda that was omnipresent in public life and the education system. As a consequence, the young girl was constantly experiencing a culture shock within her own country. She left enriched by this partially unconscious internalisation of the rules of cultural relativism and prepared to encounter future shocks. It is worth noting that at the beginning of her stay in Canada, it was in fact the traditional Polish part of the culture that constituted an obstacle in the adaptation process within the host country. Analysing the protagonist's linguistic evolution which is clearly visible through the narrative text, her situation during the first phase of acculturation in Canada could be classified as "*bilinguisme d'intellection et d'expression*"² (cf. Boukus, 1985, p. 42). Her situation subsequently tends more towards "*bilinguisme de remplacement*", that is, a

² "Le bilinguisme est dit 'd'intellection et d'expression' lorsque les deux langues sont à la fois comprises et performées" (Boukus, 1985, p. 42).

situation in which the second language gradually takes on all communicative needs (*idem*). At the end of the story, which spans a period of ten years, we can observe the situation close to that of “dormant bilinguals”³ because the knowledge of Polish is not practically updated except by rare family contacts and via correspondence or telephone.

On the other hand, and to re-adopt the classification of Fishman (1972, cit. in Boukus, 1985, p. 42) in the situations described in the book, there are practically no cases of diglossia, considered to be the differentiated use of the two languages in the communicative situation. The protagonist uses the two languages in every kind of situation, motivated solely by pragmatic factors, such as, for example, the language of the interlocutor or of the written document.

The elements of communist Newspeak that percolate the memories of the country of origin can be considered as possible vestiges of diglossia. The term Newspeak, of course, comes from George Orwell’s catastrophic novel *1984* (1949) where it refers to the most perverse forms of political language. Orwellian Newspeak was opposed to Old English and progressively replaced it. Unlike Old English and any other natural language, the lexicon of Newspeak was immune to any polysemy and aimed to become ever more diminished.

It is emblematic that in the communist countries, George Orwell’s novel was banned by the political powers until the end of the system in 1989. In the case of the communist dictatorship, Newspeak was characterised by the curious symbiosis (Głowinski, 1991, p. 8) of pragmatic and ritual elements. It was pragmatic because it aimed to be a policy instrument of the “revolutionary” establishment and create some new reality. It was also ritual because it could not “breach” the frontiers of certain canonical forms and was completely incapable of by-passing the linguistic taboo. One could also add that it was particularly productive in the semantic fields covered by the taboo. This “productivity” was mainly evident in the derivation of euphemisms and dysphemisms relating to phenomena of internal or international policy.

The apparently paradoxical amalgam between the pragmatic and ritual functions was cemented by the magical thinking that consisted in presenting desired situations as reality. Linguistic “witchcraft” aimed to contribute to the revolutionary work of the communists by blotting out

³ “dormant bilinguals– not use the language at all for many years” (Crystal, 1997, p. 364).

unwanted phenomena and actualising situations according to official doctrine, even though they had never existed. As M. Glowinski observed (1991, p. 21), Newspeak mutilated interpersonal communication in the case of the communist language in Poland; it contributed towards a proliferation of distrust towards linguistic messages, not only those of an informative nature, but of any propensity.

In the case of *Necessary Lies* certain transfers of Polish Newspeak can be observed appearing as palimpsests in the memories of the main protagonist. For example:

- “new and just Poland” (p. 13) – (*Nowa i Sprawiedliwa Polska*) a slogan referring to the country subjugated to communist power. The added semantic value lies in the negation of the importance of the monarchical or bourgeois past of the country and of the declaration of the supposed equivalence between “new and just” and “socialist”;
- “foreign element” (p. 21) – (*obcy element*) refers to elements outside the working class. Here we may add that all of the Indo-European languages share the polysemy of the grammatical category of the 1st person plural, which may refer equally to inclusion (I + you, and possibly someone else) or exclusion (I + someone else, but not you). Newspeak appeared to be attempting to modify the grammatical structure to operate almost entirely at the level of the inclusive we. As a consequence, to be a *foreign element* was considered to be a kind of original sin. In this context, it refers to a cosmopolitan attitude whose name and concept were highly suspect.
- “Committee of National Salvation” (p. 29) – (*Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego*). In reality, it was the Military Committee of National Salvation, this title of almost mystic connotation was the name given to the military junta lead by general Wojciech Jaruzelski. We can add that it was an organism that was created *ad hoc* with no respect for the country’s legislation.

As we can see, this variant of the language operated mainly in attributing linguistic “*labels*” that classified reality according to official doctrine, eliminating at the same time any reflection on problematic and, usually, multifaceted matters.

Another class of linguistic situations present in the novel could be considered as *Imago Mundi* (world representation) in the lexical elements that are difficult to translate due to the particular value they have

acquired within the system. Here, we employ the concept of value as opposed to meaning, and while meaning refers to the relation existing between the sign and the extra-linguistic reality, the value places the sign in opposition to signs of the same linguistic system. We can add that in translation practice it is much easier to establish the relations of semantic equivalence, limited to componential analysis, than it is to accomplish equivalent value pairs. This fact could serve to partially confirm the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which stipulated, contrary to the position of structuralism, that languages not only split up reality in a different way, but are also a decisive factor in forming the world vision. In the works of Sapir and Whorf, resulting from the analysis of North American Indian languages, the conclusion was drawn that the “real world” is unconsciously constituted via the linguistic models of the group (ethnic or social) to which one belongs. In the case of the novel under analysis, we found some direct quotations of Polish and German words or also a number of transfers, that are relatively distinct in the English textual substance. For example:

- “babies with mothers’ milk smeared over their faces” (p. 13) – in Polish *dzieci z matczynym mlekiem pod nosem*, an expression that simply means ‘baby faces’ and that is often used metaphorically to underline immaturity.
- “Is that so, Mr. Student?” (p. 18) – in Polish the form *Panie Student* functions as a very particular vocative, reserved for the “dialogues” between the representatives of the establishment and youths whose activities were classified as being sympathetic to the political underground. It was generally used by police officers during interrogations, registration of rooms in university halls of residence, or simply during street searches. The irony of the police officers was partly motivated by social complexes, since most of them had never followed a university career. On the other hand, the unusual juxtaposition of Mr. and Student only apparently denoted respect, essentially, it was the introduction to the doctrinal *sermo* propounding that all protest demonstrations on the part of university members were, first and foremost, an act of ingratitude given that education was free and should therefore be received with gratitude. We could add that within university circles nobody used the formula “Mr. Student”.
- “Moscow lackeys” (p. 19) – in Polish *pacholki Moskwy*, a dysphemism used by the opposition and public opinion for the

representatives of communist power. Ultimately, the expression was meant to remind people that in this case there had never been any communist revolution, and those who called themselves “revolutionary leaders” were simply put in power by soviet intervention;

- “There would be tears at Christmas Eve supper, and an empty plate at the table where she would have sat” (p. 53). In the case of this fragment, we can underline the symbolic value of the empty plate in Polish tradition, and, consequently, in the language. Traditionally, an extra place was laid at Christmas dinner for an unexpected table companion who could be some faraway and longed-for friend or family member or a passing stranger. The *vox populi* and tradition decree that on Christmas Eve nobody should be alone. The weight of the linguistic symbol consists in the opening of a series of valences related on one hand with the feeling of family union, and, on the other hand, with the sacred laws of traditional hospitality.
- “Winter may be yours, but spring will be ours” (p. 57), a literal translation of the slogan *Zima wasza, wiosna nasza*, employed by the opposition to the communist regime in the winter of Martial Law in 1981/1982. In this way the wave of strikes, demonstrations and other protest actions planned for the Spring of 1982, were announced. The choice of the seasons of the year was linked with climatic conditions, since the communists used power cuts and water cuts (that consequently also affected heating) as a means of putting pressure on society and principally on striking companies.

Another linguistic peculiarity of the novel under analysis is a very particular cohabitation between the Polish and German languages. This cohabitation can be classified as code switching. As David Crystal noted (1997, p. 365) “A sentence may begin in one language and finish in another. [...] The switch between languages can signal the speaker’s attitude towards the listener: friendly, distant, ironic”. In the case of the novel *Necessary Lies* the German language forms a type of linguistic and cultural palimpsest. In the case of William, the child of German emigrants to Canada, it is transferred in his memories of his childhood in Europe. In the case of Anna, the German language also arises in childhood memories, although in a completely different and more fragmented context. We can note that both have been born in the same city

of Central Europe. William in 1940, during the time of the III Reich, and Anna after the frontier changes and the allocation of Silesia to Poland by the allies. Obviously, after the war the residents of the *regained territories* lived with many vestiges of the recent German presence, such as, for example, books in the libraries and private collections, German signs in public places, gravestones in the cemeteries and, finally, the presence of a German-speaking minority. In that part of Europe, where states were frequently changing, the frontier often passed through the family⁴, since national identity varied from one generation to another, or even between brothers and sisters. After the Second World War, the linguistic policy of the Polish People's Republic had the objective of eradicating German place names. It could even be said that this task took on hysterical dimensions that created a specific linguistic taboo which wiped out all German place names in the regained territories. Nevertheless, German names could still be used for the cities in other regions of Poland, which did not raise any objection, for example, *Krakau*, or *Warsau* in German. Texts written in German were obliged to use Polish nomenclature. The "game" was accepted by the linguistic policy of the German Democratic Republic, which gave rise to texts full of errors, not to speak of German mangling in the pronunciation of Slavic names. The use of German nomenclature that was frequent in western publications, was interpreted as a manifestation of revisionist and almost pro-fascist attitudes.

The first meeting between Anna and William and the use of the two names for the same city (*Wroclaw* in Polish, and *Breslau* in German) is a good reflection of this linguistic taboo:

- "A girl from Breslau!" That was William's voice, raised in amazement. "Where are you from in Poland?" he had asked, and she said "Wroclaw", prepared for the need to explain once again the shifting borders of post-war Europe, the story of the territories gained and lost in which in which a German city became part of Poland. But he did not ask her for explanations.
- "A girl from Breslau!" he repeated. "What a coincidence!"
- "Wroclaw, her mother would protest, each syllable a distinct, resonant beat" (pp. 31-32). The oddity of the meeting resides in the paradox of the two having been born in the same city

⁴ Situations of this type are, for example, portrayed in the novels of Gunther Grass.

with an interval of ten years, but already in completely different epochs.

To return to the concept of the shared cultural charge, we can consider the start of the conversation between William and Anna as a speech act where despite the common semantic referent, the shared cultural charge is almost nil, although both of them could have thought of Baroque houses, the Gothic Town Hall, in the Old Market Square, or the Cathedral on the Oder Islands (cf. p. 33) or other elements of the same city. English is their language of communication, although, in William's case, it had replaced his mother tongue in early childhood (first years at school). His case is therefore a classic case of "*bilinguisme de remplacement*", that is to say, a situation where the second language gradually takes on all communicative needs. The contact with the German language was greatly reduced and, in practice, limited to the familiar context. The German language appears in the context of certain childhood memories, such as, for example, *Hauptbahnhof* (Central Station) at the moment of departure, or *Oma* (grandmother). Like the majority of the children of immigrants, William does not share the nostalgia of the old *Breslauers*. Besides this, his connection to the German language is minimal. English is even the language in which he communicates with his Berlin lover. In the case of Anna, the German language, known in an extremely fragmentary manner during her childhood spent in the "regained territories", is updated once during a visit to Berlin in 1991 and in the conversation with William's mother. At those times, Anna is confronted with the German exodus of 45 years ago. Once again, German place names such as *Schlesien*, *Pommern*, *Osterode*, *Katowitz* appear. This time, they appear in the *Muttersprache* of the old inhabitants. This time, once again the linguistic taboo of the expression *Volksdeutsch list* appears, the document which the Germans made the Poles sign during the occupation as recognition of their citizenship of the III Reich. It should be remembered that in spite of strong pressure and certain privileges (for example, better employment, better ration cards) the number of signatories was not large, and, on the other hand, those who signed were automatically subject to strong ostracism by their Polish compatriots. The taboo also remained in force after the war, and in a sense, is still present today. In Eva Stachniak's novel, *Volksdeutsch* is juxtaposed with *Volkswagendeutsche*, an agglutinated creation used in the 70's and 80's to refer ironically to Polish economic emigrants who requested naturalisation in the German Federal Republic. Another

Germanism that appears in the novel and which is practically untranslatable, is the dichotomy *Osti* and *Westi*, that ironically marked the distinction between East and West Germans.

Other elements appear in the conversations with William's acquaintances, old *Breslauers*. Here once again there arise forms that for Anna are a kind of palimpsest of the reality and history of Wrocław-Breslau. We consequently find *Dorotheenkirche* (Church of Saint Dorothy), *Mit Gott für König und Vaterland* 'With God for King and Fatherland', *Stadttheater* 'municipal theatre' (p. 228).

Also at that moment, pet names are perfectly updated, words that are perfectly translatable, but whose translation implies a loss of the subjective meaning. That is to say, the language use in question is motivated by individual and emotional factors and not semantic ones.

"Do you know this? Frau Strauss breaks into a song, a joyful, vivid rhyme, from which Anna can only understand one word, *Liebe*" (p. 228).

From the psycholinguistic point of view, pet names are a very particular semantic category due to the influences of the strong emotional filter that can at times make translation difficult, and in some cases, the mere use of one language instead of the possible use of another is capable of unleashing strong emotions that influence the speech act. In the case of the novel under analysis, the foreign pet names constitute a kind of stylistic ornament that aims to introduce the atmosphere of the other language. We find, for example, German words such as: *Vati* 'papa' (p. 229), *Oma* 'grandmother' (p. 40) or Polish words such as *Dziadek* 'grand father' (p. 141), *Mama* 'mother' (p. 140), *malenka* 'baby' (p. 15), *Tata* 'father' (p. 160), *Babcia* 'grand mother' (p. 137), *Ciocia* 'aunt' (p. 177). Certain phatic formulae linked to national customs are very close to pet names. As an example of this, it suffices to cite the formula *poczestuj nas* (p. 144), an imperative related to traditional Polish hospitality and table rituals at the hour for drinking tea with poppyseed cake or cheesecake.

The linguistic richness of the novel is also evident in the sporadic use of other languages besides Polish and German. French forms are frequent, mainly in place names, such as, for example Rue de la Montagne (p. 40) and there is even a phrase in Russian: *davai suda* 'come here' (p. 236) that appears "engraved" in the war memories of a German. At times, language also serves to attribute a kind of semantic "labelling"

to the object denominated. By using one word or another, or having recourse to code switching, we increase the social force of the communication (cf. Vez, 2001, p. 227). The problem is very clearly visible in the case of a pair of denominations for the same referent: emigré writers *vs* immigrant scribblers (p. 42). The first one using the French word (that functions almost as a touch of class) adopts an outside perspective, that of someone who views the writers mentioned as artists who had to emigrate in order to be able to express themselves freely as artists. The second assumes the attitude of a representative of a dominant culture, who has his/her aesthetic principles very clearly delimited, and who therefore does not deign to consider artists coming from outside and, supposedly, being obsessed with their provincial hang-ups and a certain *démodé* aesthetic.

On the other hand, we can hypothesise that the openness to linguistic variety and code switching in the book under analysis allows for a better understanding of the social and linguistic reality of Canada, a country that is principally made up of the descendants of immigrants from all over the world. It can also be said that diversity forms a part of the national identity in Canada.

In the case of foreign language teaching, the reading and commentary of this novel could be useful in meeting objectives related with the development of attitudes of intercultural competence, and also, as stated by José Manuel Vez (Vez, 2001, p. 215) in approaching "*La lengua como comportamiento intercultural como compromiso en la acción intercultural*". In all probability, the situation of the emigrant, as in the case of the protagonist of the novel, sharpens the possible linguistic stress. Nevertheless, I believe that in the modern world, pupils must be made aware that possible tensions resulting from intercultural communication must be looked on as almost normal, and managed with some care. The apollonian and harmonious vision of intercultural communication is a utopia that is even dangerous, since it creates impossible expectations. We must make students understand that problems should never lead to them abandoning the effort to comprehend and that lack of communication in situations of tension can lead to sinister consequences. We could also stress that resorting to foreign expressions, so long as this is done consciously, leads to the formal enrichment of the text, thereby offering the reader one more element in constructing the literary puzzle. The comparison of semantic and lexical fields can also lead us to surprising discoveries because languages do not break up reality in transparent or parallel ways.

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