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THE SEQUENCE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH IN CLAUDE LANZMANN'S *SHOAH*: SOME COMMENTS FROM A LINGUIST*

Abstract

Based on an analysis of phonetic, lexical and pragmatic (linguistic politeness) aspects of the symbolic sequence outside the church in Chełmno-on-Ner in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, this article offers insights into the communicative situation portrayed in the film, which has not been discussed in existing interpretations. It addresses the relations between the participants of the exchange (the film director, Szymon Srebrnik, the interpreter, the inhabitants of Chełmno), the time and space (a religious service taking place in the church), and historical context: Poland under communist rule, where the Holocaust was not spoken about and/or was subject to manipulation.

Keywords: dialects of central Poland, communicative situation, code-switching, lexis, pragmalinguistics

It does not come easy to comment on the difficult and astonishing communicative situation in the sequence filmed outside the church in Chełmno on Ner, on 8th or 9th September 1979, as the USHMM records seem to suggest,

or on 8th or 11th September 1983 (Kubiak 1985: 5).[1] If "astonishing" seems an odd word choice here, an explanation is in order.

We do not know (and it would seem worthwhile to find out) how it came to pass that during the devotion, or perhaps in between particular segments of parish celebrations, a group of locals were selected for an interview with Claude Lanzmann and Szymon Srebrnik, the survivor brought back to Chełmno by the film crew. The foreign director's unceremonious behaviour came up in a debate that ensued in the Polish state-controlled press following the release of *Shoah*. A local, Łódź-based weekly reminisced with reproach:

> A grey church rises on an embankment. Outside the entrance, the French set up their cameras. It was Our Lady of Sowing; a church fair for the whole area. A procession was coming out of the church. Girls in their white holy communion dresses, throwing flower petals from their little baskets. On the flower-strewn path, the priest followed, carrying the Corpus Christi. The parishioners duly kneeled down, humbly bowing their heads. Only Mr Lanzmann and the cameramen stood upright. They didn't even bother to take their hats off. And for this people will remember them (Kubiak 1985: 5).

Even though this account was made some time after the events, and published in a censorship-controlled, propaganda newspaper, it confirms that the circumstances of filming lead to a clash between questions about the war and the Shoah, and current gestures important and traumatic for the local community (albeit of course incommensurable with the mass killings): appropriation, desacralization, and profanation of the church. In this untypical situation, the interview relied on the local informants' readiness to cooperate.

At that time, some forty years after the war, the Polish language was undergoing a process of integration. Apart from being an actual phenomenon, "language integration" functioned as a slogan. Linguistic differences were diminishing, dialects and all regional variances were disappearing; indeed, they were supposed to disappear, as they were seen as post-feudal relics, unnecessary for creating a uniform socialist society. Tradition became little but a folk staffage, used in a senseless and unscrupulous manner, like the grotesque Cracovians in Stanisław Bareja's 1980 comedy *Miś* (*Teddy*

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[1] In the Catholic Church, the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known in the Polish tradition as the day of "Our Lady of Sowing", is celebrated on 8th September. Sometimes, if this date falls on a weekday, church celebrations are moved to the next Sunday. Uncertainty as to the exact date of the event can be interpreted as suggesting lack of respect for the Chełmno community.

Bear). Post-war transformations in the Polish language – resulting, among other factors, from "changes in the type of language contact", which is an "objective" caption for the death or exile of the Jews, the evacuation or forced displacement of the Germans, and the removal of the voices of other minorities from the public sphere – have yet to be comprehensively described by linguists.

Regarded as traditional – and often treated by representatives of the social group dominant in terms of cultural capital, i.e. the intelligentsia, as homogenous collectives (like *gromada* [coll. noun: "people", "mass"] in *Forefathers' Eve* [*Dziady*] by the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz) – rural communities were nevertheless internally differentiated. Even if the church sequence in *Shoah* can be fruitfully discussed without a detailed analysis of particular idiolects (although, arguably, Ockham's razor is not the best utensil for truth seeking), it would definitely be advisable to acknowledge individual speaking subjects, or *homines loquentes*. Referring to those people collectively as *chłopi* [the plural form of the masculine noun *chłop*, "peasant"], as in Bikont 1997, obliterates the distinction between women and men, and indeed removes female members of the group from the picture. In fact, individuals comprising the group have varying language competencies. This not only bears on how their utterances are understood by Polish-speaking viewers of Lanzmann's film, but also affects its translations, and thus the way the interviewees are perceived by non-Polish audiences.

Thus, it needs to be pointed out that the untypical communicative situation of the sequence outside the church was influenced by the following factors: 1) a surprising choice of time and setting of the group interview; 2) the (awkward) presence of the video camera; 3) the interlingual barrier; 4) the social and intralingual barrier between the people of Chełmno and Lanzmann's interpreter.

As the time and place of filming are discussed in the present volume by Magda Heydel, Karolina Kwaśna, and Joanna Sobesto, let us address the presence of the camera and the film crew. It goes without saying that the video camera had a "freezing" effect on the interviewees. In the Polish People's Republic of the 1970s, the society's main experience of reporters involved the propaganda machine: carefully directed "spontaneous" statements from happy citizens of a socialist state. Attempts at reaching the truth, by authors of features or short films representing "the cinema of moral concern", were few and far between, and unnoticeable for the society at large. Had they been shown Lanzmann's film (there is no evidence

that this happened) or been told that their utterances were used to serve "anti-Polish actions by the hostile propaganda machine of imperialist, anti-socialist powers" (to attempt an imitation of PPR's official newspeak), the people of Chełmno would have certainly noticed their awkwardness and embarrassment. Assuming the role of a quasi-folk narrator, the author of the above-quoted *Odgłosy* article explains: "Faced with a camera, you talk different. You're afraid that if you don't know something, or if you just don't open your mouth, the French will think that we don't know our own history. Either way, shame on you" (Kubiak 1985: 5). Let us also bear in mind that living under an economics of shortage, people would have been aware that the supply of video tape, and even magnetic tape, was limited, so one should respond quickly and fluently.

As the translation aspect of the sequence has been analyzed by Magda Heydel, Karolina Kwaśna and Joanna Sobesto, there is no need to discuss interlingual barriers here. That said, I would like to add some suggestions for further research. First of all, it would be interesting to establish which languages Szymon Srebrnik knew, how well and at what stages of his life. Was Yiddish his first language, the language of his home, or was it Polish? At one point, contributing to the exchange, he used the evidently local verb form *lekwidowali* (instead of *likwidowali*, "they liquidated")[2], which makes his variety of Polish closest to the one used by the inhabitants of Chełmno, rather than to standard Polish (as taught in schools) or the working-class Polish of the Łódź region. A hypothesis which might not be so easy to verify is that during the second world war, some Poles living in Chełmno knew German quite well and could communicate in this language, as the surrounding towns and villages used to have a relatively sizable German minority. Further research along these lines, as well as a description of the language competence of German soldiers stationed in Chełmno, would give us a better insight into how communication functioned there. Thus, it would help us understand how much people knew, and how and in what languages they described the unimaginable crime when they wanted to capture it in words.

"Intralingual translation or rewording" is a term popularized by Roman Jakobson, who defined it as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of

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[2] The Dictionary of Polish Dialects (*Słownik gwar polskich*) developed by the Institute of Polish, Polish Academy of Sciences, confirms the use of *lekwidować* and *zlekwidować* (perfective form), with the untypical *e* sound, in Kramsk (Konin County), ca. 30 kilometres from Chełmno.

other signs of the same language" (Jakobson 1959: 233). It seems that this brief definition still remains under-interpreted. Here, I would like to look at the communicative situation recorded in the film and at the problem of intraligual translation from the perspective of linguistics, dialectology, and sociolinguistics. First of all, one must bear in mind that the concept of the national language, different from other languages, is a naive, pre-scientific one. It made translation possible, allowing for the fact that the language cannot be "fully" known, not even by the translator. The question of dialects, defined as regional varieties of a given language, remained marginal. Their definitions often indicated the aspect of subordination. The phrase "a dialect of language X" entails the variant's subordination, and potentially also its younger age, in relation to the national language; the latter is seen as fully developed, with a written tradition and permanent presence in state administration, science, and religion. In the case of Polish, however, it is worth remembering that "our dialects are not derived from the all-Polish [nationwide] language, but partly the reverse is true: the national language elevated certain characteristics of particular dialects to the level of biding norms" (Dejna 1993: 26). Within the structuralist paradigm, every dialect can be legitimately treated as a separate code. From this point of view, one could expect the translator's competence to include understanding such codes.

At which point do these issues manifest themselves in our sequence from *Shoah*? Almost at the very beginning, following awkward replies to the conversation-initiating question about the weather, an admonishment is heard: "Ładnie odpowiadaj, bo…" [Answer nicely, or else…]. The adverb *ładnie* is not only a linguistic aesthetic category, suggesting that the local language is ugly, although of course this sense must not be ignored. After all, there are quite a few metaphors drawing on the contradistinction between "pure" language and linguistic "impurities", i.e. dirt. For purists, language "contamination" is caused by foreign elements, provincialisms, and jargon.

For the sake of discipline, let us now situate Chełmno on the map of the Polish language area. It turns out to be located in a borderland, not only in terms of regional divisions introduced by the state and church administration, but also in terms of language divisions, in which the vernacular stratum is superimposed with influences from changing centres of impact. The Koło County belongs to the region of eastern Greater Poland [Wielkopolska] (Osowski undated; see also his description of the characteristics of local

subdialects and reference literature), although some scholars have also situated its linguistic varieties at the edge of Kuyavia [Kujawy]. The classification of these dialects as part of the Łęczyca group does not help much by way of explanation, since Łęczyca dialects, in turn, are treated as belonging to the large linguistic complexes of Lesser Poland [Małopolska] or Greater Poland, or even postulated to form a separate set: a dialect, perhaps, or a linguistic complex of a different kind, which formed in the pre-state period of Polish history and was strengthened in medieval times. This unclear picture also has to do with the wide and thus highly imprecise notion of "central Poland". Let us add that two Catholic parishes in Dąbie Commune belong to two different deaneries: Dąbie to Kłodawa Deanery, and Chełmno to Koło, in the Diocese of Włocławek, roughly corresponding to the historical Diocese of Kuyavia; its seat is now part of a different voivodeship than before. The remaining segment of the county belongs to the Diocese of Łowicz. Even without advocating theories of an adverse impact of changes in voivodeship affiliation on regional identity (N.B., from 1919 to 1938, Koło County was part of Łódź Voivodeship, then Greater Poland), one can safely assume that this uncertain administrative status (a fate not shared e.g. by the Lachy [Lachs] or the Podhalan [Podhaleans] people in Lesser Poland) increased the Chełmno community's insecurity in contacts with interlocutors enjoying a higher social prestige.

"Answer nicely" is a call to switch the communication code into the one known to the people of Chełmno from school, official situations, and the media. It is a warning, a call for caution, at the same time signalling a change of circumstance, eliminating the speakers' spontaneity, which was expressed in the opening lines in the regional form *u̯otpust* (instead of *odpust*, "[church] fair"), with the initial labialization. In Greater Poland, "to speak nicely" is a metalinguistic quasi-term signifying the use of standard Polish, or at least a variety of Polish free from vernacular elements that the speaker is aware of, which have a lower prestige. The effect of stiffness is additionally strengthened by the interpreter's hyper-official polite form of address, with the unnecessarily repeated *państwo* ["you", plural]: "Czy państwo są zadowoleni, że spotkali się państwo znowu z panem Srebrnikiem?" ("Are you glad that you met Mr. Srebrnik again"?). What happens here is an "intralingual" clash of two worlds and two types of communication. The interpreter's politeness may be her way of seeking reassurance in an untypical and uncomfortable situation, but it also sets the exchange up on the official plane, with the director having the final say, and indeed

disabling a potential interaction between the Chełmno locals, who say that it is *fajnie* (great)[3] and that they are glad *ze*[4] *życia pana Szymka* (at Mr Szymek [diminutive/affectionate version of his first name] being alive), and Szymon Srebrnik himself.[5] Due to the code change, the communication lost much of its potential spontaneity, sparked by joy at meeting the long unseen Szymon Srebrnik, of whom the people of Chełmno had good memories and whose presence did not make them feel linguistically embarrassed.

A similar approach, taking into account intralinguistic factors that are usually ignored, should be adopted with respect to impersonal verb forms, depersonalizing the victims, but also the perpetrators, e.g. *było wożone* ("there were transports", meaning "they were transported", but literally "it was transported", with dummy *it*). Since we do not have a representative corpus of Polish dialect texts, nor even "friendly", digitalized collections of vernacular texts, the example presented below should only be treated as an illustration of the communication between "the intelligentsia" and "the people". It is generally accepted that impersonal verb forms ending in -*no* or -*to*, alongside the passive voice, are rather rare in vernacular Polish; these elements are more characteristic of written language, while the regional varieties are primarily spoken. Let us look at an excerpt from an exchange between the dialectologist Zenon Sobierajski and his "informants" from central Greater Poland:

– Jak to **się odbywało kopanie** perek na jesieni?
– Nu winc tak: to albo łopatóm **kopoł**, albo tyż haczkóm (…)
– A gdy **były wykopane**, to co się robiło potem?
– Jak ón **kopoł** łopatóm, panie, to ón tak tóm łopatóm przewrocoł te zimie (…)
(Sobierajski 1995: 54; spelling modified by AC)

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[3] Often condemned in schools (Ochmann 2014), that is during "linguistic training" exerted on dialect users by the state, this word testifies to the fact that the parishioners gathered outside the Chełmno church have not subdued their own linguistic code.

[4] The preposition *ze* before a single consonant exemplifies a regional feature: "replacing prepositions/suffixes *v*, *z* with *ve*, *ze* (…) *ze sṷölöm* [*ze solą* – AC, "with salt"] (…) in order to prevent their assimilation and blending with similarly articulated fricatives at the start of the next word/morpheme" (Dejna 1993: 250).

[5] These observations are confirmed by interviews conducted by Bartosz Cemborowski: "Nieroz człowiek sie zapumni i godo po naszymu, jak powiniyn mówić ładnie… znaczy jak to pan godoł – literacko" ("Sometimes you forget yourself and talk as you do when you supposed to speak nicely… that is, as you said, in a literary way" [non-standard Polish pronunciation and vocabulary]); Cemborowski 2014: 89; spelling modified by AC).

[– How **was** the autumn spud **digging going**?
– Yeah so: **I dug** with a spade, or with a hoe …
– And once **they were dug out**, what would you do next?
– When **he dug** with a spade, he turned the soil with that spade like this …
(non-standard Polish pronunciation [spelling] and vocabulary [translator's note].

The dialect user, an elderly man, conceptualizes a digger; he does not use the passive voice or the impersonal form, which would separate the agent from the activity. Although the above example does not prove anything, it suggests an interpretive direction: the locals' grammatical clumsiness might have resulted from difficulties in interpreter-mediated communication, carried out in a code in which the speakers were not fluent, although of course they had good passive knowledge of it.

Finally, I would like to briefly comment on the passage containing the word *Żydki* [plural of *Żydek*, the diminutive form of *Żyd*, "Jew"]. When the conversation turns to the ways of hiding valuable items and to whether the Chełmno Poles knew about Jewish valuables or not, we hear the following utterance: "Już niektórzy wiedzieli… Abo nam Żydki podały, jak im jeść dali" ("Some people knew alright… Or the Jews [dim.] passed [the valuables] to us, when they were given food"). Today, this word is unacceptable in polite Polish; its appearance can be seen as exposing the speaker as an anti-Semite. Since my remarks here are only a Polish linguist's gloss, rather than a sociological paper or a defence speech, I will only point out several contexts.

In the Dictionary of Polish published from 1900 to 1927 (commonly called the "Warsaw Dictionary"), the entry *Żydek* refers the reader to the entry *Żyd*, which has the following definition: "wyznawca Mojżesza, izraelita, starozakonny" ("believer in Moses, Israelite, member of the Old Order [i.e. old law/Testament]; vol. 8, p. 732).[6] The editors did not reach for any dictionary qualifier from their rich repertoire, for example to indicate that *Żydek* is a colloquial or dialect form, used by a particular group or carrying negative overtones. This could be interpreted as expressing the lexicographers' view that *Żydek* is a noun form equivalent to *Żyd*, and thus not offensive. However, it seems more justified to see this as an example

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[6] Let us leave aside the substantial difference between the faith in Moses and the faith in God, and not deliberate on whether this is an example of a post-positivistic, reductionist approach to religion as such, or of typically Christian negation of the Jewish religion, here by linguistic means.

of a certain linguistic carelessness or indifference on the part of ethnically Polish users of the Polish language, an attitude very recently pointed out by the philosopher and columnist Jan Hartman:

> My blue-eyed grandpa, married to a Hasidic girl, used to say *starozakonni* [plural of *starozakonny*], for he was afraid of *Żyd*. And anyway, in his provincial Galician world you wouldn't say *Żyd*. Poles almost always used to say *Żydek*, *Żydki*. I can't count the times when I heard old Jews from Israel, speaking Polish with a Yiddish accent, who thought that this was the regular Polish word: *Żydek*. Because they somehow never came across *Żyd* (Hartman 2019).

Despite Hartman's indignation, one is tempted to say that the "old Jews'" impression of the commonness of the name *Żydek* points to an undisputable fact. In the sequence under discussion, Lanzmann's interviewees focused on the sensitive, shameful, threatening and disturbing problem of the alleged Jewish valuables, of being a bystander, talking to the Jews going to death. They were not able to use the noun *Żyd*, which was rarely heard in Polish after the events of March 1968.[7] Reliving situations from the past, the people of Chełmno used the lexical unit that was the most typical for them back then.

Let us also note that in Polish, many names of nationalities and other groups of people contain a negative or misinforming component: *Niemiec* [German, from *niemy*, dumb, not speaking], Łemko [Lemko, referring to members of this ethnicity pronouncing the Slovak borrowing *len*, "but/yet/though", as *łem*,], *Eskimos* [Eskimo], *Indianin* [Indian], *Rus*(*in*) [Rusyn, from "red-haired"]. Even *Polak* (Pole) has the suffix -*ak*, which carries a certain dose of negative expression, even if we do not think about this in our everyday use of the word. The form *Żydek* should also be placed alongside other derivate nouns that are formally diminutives yet have a patronizing rather than affectionate load: *Francuzik* [dim. Frenchman], *Niemiaszek* [dim. German], *Rusek* [dim. Russian]. The first two names rather belong to the literary register of Polish, but *Rusek*, juxtaposed with *Żydek*, suggests the sphere of informal contacts between nations. Anti-Semitic literature, kept fresh by hateful comments in social media, offers examples of names other than *Żydek*, explicitly derogatory ones.

At this point, one should also attempt an evaluation of the interpreter's reaction to the word *Żydek*. The following passage from Anna Bikont's article

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[7] My personal, subjective memory of this language-scape is the dominant narrative of "six million Poles" murdered by Nazi perpetrators.

exemplifies interpretive intricacies which are not necessarily grounded in the communicative situation observable in Lanzmann's film:

> I read to Barbara Janicka an excerpt from Lanzmann's interview „L'Amour de la haine" [The Love of Hatred], published in 1986 in *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*: "The interpreter didn't want to translate what she was hearing. For example, they … said *Żydki*. She, as a good Catholic, rendered this as *Żydzi*" (Bikont 1997).

The "belittling" semantic component of the word in question is indisputable. But is there a French equivalent that would reflect the stratification outlined above, that would be condescending towards a member of the local community and compatriot who nevertheless is felt to be "not of our kind"? I am not familiar with the derivational capacity of French, probably structurally different and smaller than in the Polish language, which is highly nuanced in this respect, nor am I aware of the possible French "lexical anti-Semitisms" which, if used by the interpreter, could be classified as inadequate equivalents of the rather "gentle" *Żydek*. Given the sociolinguistic context of the exchange, the claim that this "non-translation" resulted from the interpreter being a "good Polish Catholic" is completely misguided. It seems more accurate to assume that it was the overflow of the speakers' words, combined with the formal difficulty in rendering a non-neutral name, unusual for a user of educated Polish, that hampered her fluency. Interpreting the interpreter's work cannot be carried out *ad hoc*, solely on the basis of one's impressions and ideas.

The above considerations must not be taken as purporting to present a linguistic description of the speakers appearing in the film sequence. An invaluable source of information to this end would be field research, aimed at lending an unbiased ear to the present generation of Chełmno inhabitants, and letting them contribute additional information concerning the wartime crime, as well as accounts of the recording itself and the repercussions of the film (reactions of the authorities, the Church, neighbouring towns). Last but not least, it would be worthwhile to try to identify Lanzmann's Polish interviewees.

Translated by Zofia Ziemann

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