



Being in another tongue

Martyna Śliwa

abstract

In this anniversary note, I reflect on the importance – in both personal and professional terms – of being, for many years, a member and then an affiliate of the ephemera collective. In these reflections I highlight how, to me, ephemera’s story has been interwoven with my own professional trajectory, and how belonging to ephemera has helped me navigate life and work as a foreign-born academic in the UK. I place a particular emphasis on my experience of living and working ‘in another tongue’, i.e. functioning in a language which, as is the case with many international academics, differs from the language of my upbringing.

Prelude

We live in a world of confounded languages, differing cultures and polarised worldviews; a world where we find it very hard to understand each other, not least because of the language differences between us and the language-related prejudices we sometimes are not even aware of. Whilst accepting this and navigating life in this world has not come easily to me, there has been one space in which I always felt that we shared the same ‘language’, the same universe of values and the same affective responses to what was happening around us. As cheesy as it sounds, to me *ephemera* – a collective valuing diversity and multiplicity, united around the common aim of curating, in a democratic way, an open-access journal dedicated to theory and politics in

organization – was that space. In this anniversary essay, let me take the opportunity to explain why.

The first misunderstanding

I will never forget that cold, January night in 1999. It was my first time in the United Kingdom. I arrived in Newcastle after a long journey: 26 hours by coach from Kraków to Victoria Coach Station in London, followed by seven hours of waiting, then nearly another seven hours on a National Express coach from Victoria to Newcastle. By the time we reached Newcastle, it was after 1am. Luckily, taxis were waiting at the bus station; the drivers knew that there would be a few arrivals from London, in need of a late-night ride. I was tired and could not wait to get myself – and my heavy green suitcase – into the student hall of residence which was to become my home for the next six months. Once I was sitting in the taxi, I told the driver the address we were going to: ‘Stoddart Street, Stevenson Building’. He had no idea what I was saying. He said something in response and I did not understand a word. After many years of learning English back in Kraków, I now had to make myself understood by showing the Geordie taxi driver a piece of paper with the address. My new life, also a life in a different tongue, had begun.

It has been more than 22 years since that first misunderstanding – a first-hand experience of a ‘language barrier’ (Harzing and Feely, 2008) that unexpectedly grew between me and my interlocutor and that gave me a real shock: how am I supposed to study in this country if I cannot communicate in English, even at a basic level? Little did I know that I would stay in the UK for much longer than the initial period of the student exchange – courtesy of student mobility arrangements enabled by the European Union – I was part of. Neither did I realise how much, over time, the experience of living and working ‘in another tongue’ would shape me. I did not expect the extent to which that experience of functioning in a different language, using syntax differently and speaking with an accent seen as ‘different’, would accompany the various spheres of my life, both literally and metaphorically. What I could not and did not know back then, either, was how important *ephemera* would

turn out to be to my academic becoming and to finding my place in the culturally and linguistically challenging world of anglophone academia.

Academic becoming in ‘another tongue’

Academia is a highly internationalised sector. Regardless of the changes in staff composition brought about by Brexit and notwithstanding the decrease in international mobility in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, the professional world I inhabit, that of UK business schools, employs many people who were not born in the UK. For many among these, English is not their first language. What is it like to live and work in ‘another tongue’? I was curious about what it is like for other non-native English speaking academics to work in English and more broadly, about issues related to language use in organizational contexts. Back in 1999, I had no idea that a body of scholarly work exploring these issues would emerge under the umbrella term of ‘language-sensitive IB research’, and that my own research, drawing on the experiences of UK business school academics, would contribute it. Neither did I know that *ephemera* – an open-access journal organized by a collective of volunteers was to be formed before long, and that a few years later, *ephemera*’s story would become, and remain, integral to my personal story.

Following the undergraduate student exchange programme I was part of in 1999, I enrolled on a master’s degree. Upon its completion, I began part-time PhD studies and secured my first UK academic position at Newcastle Business School. This was a period of intense linguistic immersion, filled with learning, making mistakes and a lot of hesitancy. I recall how everything that involved English language use would take a long time and how tiring it was. I used to over-prepare for lectures and assemble long PowerPoint presentations with numerous bullet points on each slide, to make sure that I would not run out of things to say. I used to spend a lot of time carefully familiarising myself with all the reading materials assigned to the students, in case any of them would ask me to explain the meaning of a specific word or expression. I also recall how slow the process of getting through the ever-lengthening bibliography of my PhD was. There were daily frustrations, such as those accompanying work-related meetings with colleagues during which I was not

able to contribute much because by the time I had worked out how to say what I wanted to say, the discussion had moved on to a different topic. Finally, I vividly remember trying to write in English and discovering, to my dismay, that I was no longer a person for whom writing used to come easily and was a satisfying endeavour, but someone who struggled to formulate sentences and was often uncertain or embarrassed about the outcome. Years earlier, a school teacher in Kraków once teased me: ‘it seems that for you, the process of writing is like opening a tap: the water flows out of the tap, the words come out of your pen’. But now I was trying to open my ‘words tap’ in vain, as hardly any word-drops were coming out. It felt sad and scary, and I was ashamed of myself.

Studies reporting on the effects of the introduction of a corporate language policy – whereby employees find themselves in a situation of having to carry out their daily work tasks in a different language to their native language and the language they have always worked in – tell us about the ‘status loss’ (e.g. Neeley, 2013) experienced by people who suddenly have to function professionally in a language in which they are not fluent. By choosing to become an academic in a country and an education system whose language I was not very competent in, inadvertently, I put myself in the position of someone with a lower status compared to native English-speaking academics. Not being able to express myself as fluently in spoken and written English as I would have wished also undermined my newly forming and still fragile self-esteem as an academic.

We know from the language-sensitive international business literature that members of organizations adopt various strategies in relation to any ‘shortcomings’ in their competence in the official language of the organization. Some embrace the opportunity to improve their language competence, some resist the demand to use it, and many apply their agency to come up with individual, ad hoc solutions, depending on what is required of them and their own circumstances and ambitions (Lønsmann, 2017; Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018). My personal ‘strategy’ mainly involved spending time and effort on making friends with the English language. To get to know my not-yet-friend better, I was reading a lot in English: academic texts, newspapers, magazines, short stories and novels. My attempts at

writing continued in the hope that one day, the new ‘friend’ would approve of me as an author of texts in English. Obviously, with all these efforts, I was trying to compensate for what I perceived as a deficiency on my part, and I wanted very much to be accepted and to belong, and not to feel alien and foreign. I cannot overestimate how much of that finally achieved sense of belonging came from becoming part of the *ephemera* collective which I joined in 2006. On a practical, language-related level, there were co-authors and co-editors from whom I was able to learn, and who did not mind correcting my mistakes and smoothing out clumsy expressions. Importantly, the *ephemera* collective was very international, even if predominantly European and white. Others were in a similar situation to me, working in a non-native language and encountering the same challenges. They did not judge me. Somewhere in between self-frustration and determination to find my own, anglophone, voice, progress was being made and my feeling of deficiency, thanks to *ephemera*, was dissipating. It was ok to be ‘from elsewhere’; indeed, I was learning, through the first Special Issue of *ephemera* I co-edited, that marginality – *ephemera*’s ‘core business’ (Śliwa et al., 2007: 499) – was a value to be nurtured.

Speaking with a different accent

The experience of arriving in the UK and not being able to communicate was the prelude to other unexpected situations connected to anglophone working and living. Throughout all those years of learning English in Poland, I was unaware of the importance of the accent with which a person speaks, the information it carries about the speaker, and its implications for how the speaker is perceived by others. The initial realisation that there was something significant about accent came in 2002. I was teaching a group of around 25 third year undergraduate students at Newcastle Business School. It was an interactive session, with the discussion of a case study illustrating certain strategic management concepts. As the session took place well into the teaching term, the students and I had already developed a friendly rapport with each other. Yet, they knew very little about me. At some point – perhaps weary of the strategic management rhetoric we were practising – one student, Ben, asked: ‘Where are you from?’. In the spirit of the ‘Socratic method’ I

usually applied in my classes, I asked back: ‘Where do you think I am from?’. Taking up the hypothesis elimination challenge, Ben replied: ‘We can hear from your accent that you aren’t from here. We think you must be from Germany, Gateshead or Sunderland’.

This was a joyful and friendly exchange, but it made me very aware of being an outsider in that classroom, and of the fact that the way I spoke signalled this outsider status to others. It seemed significant and I wanted to know more about it, and therefore developed an interest in language attitudes research, an interdisciplinary study – with roots in social psychology – of the social meanings we attribute to language and its users (Dragojevic et al., 2021). It turns out that researchers have known since the 1930s that listeners make judgements about speakers based on their voice and accent, both with regard to the latter’s social category (e.g. sex and social class) and personality, and that personality-related judgements are largely inaccurate and yet consistent with the prevailing social stereotypes (Allport and Cantril, 1934; Pear, 1931). Language attitude research also tells us that speaking with a foreign accent activates stereotypes associated with specific nationalities and that the socioeconomic status assigned to a nationality becomes transposed onto a speaker (e.g. Lindemann, 2003). I learned that some accents carry a ‘low prestige’ and others a ‘high prestige’, and that speakers with different accents are treated accordingly. I was worried about what treatment I was likely to receive as a woman speaking English with a Polish accent. I was certainly concerned when I found out that students tend to evaluate the teaching quality and effectiveness of non-native accented educators less favourably than that of native-accented educators (e.g. Subtirelu, 2015), even if the students themselves are non-native speakers of the language which is the medium of their education (Hendriks et al., 2018).

Over the years of my living and working in English there have been, of course, many instances where my accent drew someone’s attention. Some were amusing, others less so. On reflection, most of the time I did not consider, and still do not consider, it as a positive thing when someone pays attention to my accent. On the contrary, it tends to make me uncomfortable and I’d rather they did not mention it. When I have to ring a call centre to find solutions to mundane problems, such as a home insurance policy renewal, I wonder about

the judgements people will make about me and the service I am going to receive as a result of the accent I speak with. At the same time, I am aware that the call centre worker who answers my call might be having similar concerns: after all, we know that call centre workers are a group of service workers who tend to suffer because of the prejudiced and discriminatory reactions of customers to their accents (Taylor and Bain, 2005). In my everyday working life, I remain conscious that as soon as I open my mouth, assumptions about me will be activated in my students, colleagues, the conferences audiences I am presenting to, or members of an interview panel I am attending. This awareness, in many instances, has made me over-cautious in interactions in the professional context. In this regard, as in many others, being part of the *ephemera* community has been a blessing as it helped me greatly in realising the kindness of people who listen to what one says and not the accent with which one says it.

The sheltering tower of *ephemera*

In a metaphorical sense, the past two decades of my professional and, to an extent, personal life have been spent dealing with my private version of the aftermath of the punishment that the human race supposedly had to face following the construction of the *Tower of Babel* on the land of Shinar. The relocation to the UK made me experience for myself the implications of the fact that people, scattered around the world, speak different languages and they find it difficult to understand each other when they finally meet in one place. I have been striving for that state of unity with others through learning to live and work in English and through researching what individual and organizational-level consequences result from functioning in a non-native language, and what can be done about them for the benefit of the individual, organization and society. I am still searching for answers – an endeavour that is at once satisfying and frustrating, but always close to the heart – and taking any opportunities that present themselves to me to tell others about it.

Becoming part of the editorial collective of *ephemera* back in 2006 was like arriving home. Soon after I joined, it occurred to me that I never thought it possible to meet so many like-minded people in one place. It was a space

where I belonged, where no one asked ‘where are you from?’ as soon as I spoke – an often well-intended question that strangers tend to ask and that I came to dread – where we shared a particular mindset even though we were brought up in different countries and families. Central to that mindset has always been an understanding that we are a multitude, that we are different in many ways but all committed to the *ephemera* project. Unsurprisingly, I stayed in *ephemera* for a long time, perhaps even for too long, since the project of *ephemera* was supposed to be about change and, well, ephemerality. Paradoxically though, over all those years, *ephemera* has been a constant in my life, and I am still an affiliate. Whatever else happened: turbulences in the workplace and socio-political turbulences, *ephemera* was there, with people who I knew would understand, with friends who could be trusted, with scholars interested not in fashions but in ideas and in what these ideas might do towards creating a more just, more sustainable and happier world of organization.

ephemera was to me our alternative to the *Tower of Babel*. It did not aspire to a ‘top in the heavens’ and never competed for attention in journal ranking positions (Butler, 2018; Butler et al., 2017; Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). By contrast, it felt safe and certain in its desire to pursue original scholarship, addressing issues that genuinely matter to society and organization; to support the development of early career academics, not in a patronising ‘look at me and follow me’ manner, but through providing a forum for generating and debating ideas; and in bringing together people who accepted, liked and cared for each other. No matter how busy and stressful my daily working life might have been, an *ephemera* conference was never too far away, and it was guaranteed to be a thought-provoking academic event and a heart-warming meeting with old friends and a chance to make new ones: a much-needed reminder of why I became an academic. I used to see the annual *ephemera* conferences as obligatory for recharging my internal batteries: for intellectual inspiration, for engaging conversations, for opening up, trusting, listening and laughing in the company of others. These ‘others’ would come from different national and linguistic backgrounds, speak with different accents, and bring a multiplicity of ideas to the table.

More than once, *ephemera* was a sanity saver to me. I recall how on the date of the Brexit referendum in June 2016, I was spending the evening with an *ephemera* friend and a fellow European working in UK academia, and then staying over at her place before returning to my London home in the morning. We spoke until late at night – no language or other ‘barriers’ and obstacles to communication, just a pure joy of connection and dialogue, being together and sharing a meal. The next morning brought a shock. It felt like there was nothing that could possibly be said. This time, we had silence between us – the most intimate common language at that moment – and in that silence, we had each other’s compassion and grief. Because she was there, hope had not been lost, regardless of all the other losses and destruction that Brexit was threatening us with.

Accentuate the positive

I was honoured to be invited to contribute to the 20th anniversary issue of *ephemera* through sharing these reflections on what it has been like to work and live ‘in another tongue’, set in the context of being part of the *ephemera* community: a community characterised by diversity and multiplicity. This community has greatly influenced my scholarship and my academic career, and has given me the opportunity to build friendships with wonderful people. *ephemera* has been a space of mutual encouragement and support, respect and trust, and learning and growth. It has been delightful to be able to express how lucky I feel to belong to this community.

Am I romanticising it? For sure. Was it always perfect? No. Could we have found ways to include more, or better, those who were outside *ephemera*? Quite possibly. Constructive criticisms are welcome and justified, and reflexivity is needed because without it we rigidify, regress and cannot flourish. Personally, being part of the *ephemera* community has helped me enormously in the lifelong project of ‘being in another tongue’. No wonder I continue to speak with the *ephemera* accent.

references

- Allport, G.W. and H. Cantril (1934) 'Judging personality from voice', *Journal of Social Psychology*, 5: 37-55.
- Butler, N. (2018) 'Publish and perish', *ephemera*, 18(2): 411-416.
- Butler, N., H. Delaney and M. Śliwa (2017) 'The labour of academia', *ephemera*, 17(3): 467-480.
- Butler, N. and S. Spoelstra (2012) 'Your excellency', *Organization*, 19(6): 891-903.
- Dragojevic, M., F. Fasoli, J. Cramer and T. Rakić (2021) 'Toward a century of language attitudes research: Looking back and moving forward', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 40(1): 60-79.
- Harzing, A.-W. and A.J. Feely (2008) 'The language barrier and its implications for HQ-subsidiary relationships', *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 15(1): 49-61.
- Hendriks, B., F. van Meurs and A.K. Reimer (2018) 'The evaluation of lecturers' nonnative- accented English: Dutch and German students' evaluations of different degrees of Dutch- accented and German-accented English of lecturers in higher education', *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 34: 28-45.
- Lindemann, S. (2003) 'Koreans, Chinese or Indians? Attitudes and ideologies about non- native English speakers in the United States', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(3): 348-364.
- Lønsmann, D. (2017) 'Embrace it or resist it? Employees' reception of corporate language policies', *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 17(1): 101-123.
- Neeley, T.B. (2013) 'Status loss and achieved status distinctions in global organizations', *Organization Science*, 24(2): 476-497.
- Pear, T.H. (1931) *Voice and personality*. New York: Wiley.
- Sanden, G.R. and D. Lønsmann (2018) 'Discretionary power on the front line: A bottom-up perspective on corporate language management', *European Journal of International Management*, 12(1/2): 111-137.

Subtirelu, N.C. (2015) “‘She does have an accent. . .but’”: Race and language ideology in students’ evaluations of mathematics instructors on RateMyProfessors.com’, *Language in Society*, 44(1): 35-62.

Śliwa, M., A. Spicer and P. Svensson (2007) ‘Writing in the margins is being elsewhere. Always’, *ephemera*, 7(4): 499-504.

Taylor, P. and P. Bain (2005) “‘India calling to the far away towns’”: The call centre labour process and globalization’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(2): 261-282.

the author

Martyna Śliwa was a member of the *ephemera* editorial collective between 2006 and 2018. She is now an affiliate of *ephemera*.

Email: martyna.sliwa@durham.ac.uk