

Just A Linguistic Misunderstanding

Scenery: a small coastal Irish town at dawn, winter, cold wind. An ambulance brings to the hospital a girl blue from cold, shivering, dripping with water. She barely managed to get out of the icy water she had fallen into. But how did it happen?

I drove into water - says the girl. In her mother tongue, Polish, it was supposed to be: I got (or fell?) into water. Polish: Wjechałam do wody. People - except for truly bilingual people - usually think in their own language. They translate from it, being abroad, to the local foreign language. And in this case it even seems quite correct: in "Google Translate" as the English equivalent of Polish verb "jechać" appears: drive. Past tense - drove.

Only that in this case it's a trap. Because in the reverse translation, from English to Polish, Google Translate gives another equivalent of the verb "to drive" - Polish „prowadzić” (literally: to lead).

For people, who have no experience with translations, it may seem that every word has in a foreign language its own equivalent. Polish „ulica” – English – „street”. Książka - book. Drzwi - door. If an immigrant hesitates how to say something in English, it is because he probably just thinks slowly. Or – even worse – he tries to cheat.

However, in reality many words, especially popular verbs with many different meanings and uses, do not have exact equivalents in other languages. The choice of a word often depends on the context. In English "to drive" (a car) can only the driver . In Polish “jechać” can both the driver and the passenger (also a passenger i.e. on the train). Also a boy who was sledging downhill and landed on the road in front of a speeding car - although he certainly did not want to. Polish equivalent, „jechać” means simply moving with a vehicle, or some equipment, or on horseback. Just not running or walking. „jechać” can also i.e. poultry transported in a cage, or milk on a lorry, or coal in a freight wagon.

So "jechać" and "drive" have a slightly different scope of meaning. As a result it may happen, that a Pole and an Irishman, hearing seemingly the same sentence, will receive a completely different message. This is probably what happened in the Irish Arklow in the hospital, to which the ambulance brought in the winter of 2013 the freezing Polish girl, Marta Herda, dripping with icy water.

In hospital the nurse on duty asks the shivering girl, blue in the face, gasping for breath, what happened, and hears the answer "I drove into water".

And now, suddenly, the health condition of the Polish woman seems no longer important, because the nurse feels a detective thrill. Immediately, excited, she informs the police about her discovery: this Polish woman admits that **she deliberately** drove her car in the harbour into water! She was there with a man and he drowned!

Later Marta repeats the same to the police. They also hear: „I drove”... Intentionally – how else?

Also for the prosecution and for the jury during the trial the words sound like a clear confession of the accused woman.

In Poland from the statement “wjechałam do wody” nobody would conclude, that this action was intentional. For a person listening it would be obvious that there must have been some kind of accident. The road was slippery, or the driver was blinded, or the child sitting behind the driver suddenly choked on a candy...

But such was probably the beginning of the judicial drama, which after two years of absurd investigations led to an absurd judgment. Just because the meaning scope of the two words "jechać" and "drive", treated in the translation as exact equivalents, turned out to be slightly different. There was a narrow gap between them – and into this gap unfortunately fell (no, not „drove”!) the accused, and now sentenced Marta Herda.