

## **A non-academic view of Peter Newmark**

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Peter Newmark and I were fellow members of the Council of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) for over twenty years. We had little in common. He was a distinguished, internationally respected linguist and polymath. My background is in the health and legal sectors and I don't know a phoneme from a ferret but, since 1983, I have been involved in the development of language skills for the public services sector.

### **As a scholar engaged with reality**

Best progress often arises from combinations of insights, such as those on the Institute's Council. I know from experience the risks and difficulties inherent in being faced with non-English speakers in courts and Accident and Emergency Departments. Peter had the imagination to recognise them, at a time when non-Western European languages were described as 'exotic' and public service interpreting and translation viewed as worthy but *déclassé*. He also recognised, and grasped, the then uncomfortable thought that much of the future of language practice was to involve not only communication between those who did not share a common language at an international level but also, with equally rigorous standards of excellence, at a national level in increasingly multilingual societies. His support was explicit, public and invaluable.

It is still an uncomfortable thought for many. Despite European and domestic legislation requiring the equal provision of public services, irrespective of language and culture, policy makers still mutter St Augustine's prayer to make them virtuous but not today. There are few votes to be had in supporting the acquisition or provision of language skills here in the UK and in many other countries. The counter prayer that the apathetic may be arrested or taken ill in a country where they do not speak the language is tempting, but not really helpful. State UK support for language faculties and for teaching English as a second language is being cut and can no longer be relied upon.

There is, however, a burgeoning alternative reality emerging. A significant amount of the potential skills and interest are there, albeit in informal ways. For example, almost 30% of children in London schools speak at home, in addition to English, one of the 300 languages spoken in the capital. Similar language profiles are replicated in other towns and cities across Europe.

Front-line public service staff, many of them with some second language skills, are becoming aware of the level and amount of language assistance they need. They are not slow to point out that expecting them, by law, to provide an equal service to a multi-lingual population, without that assistance, is tantamount to sending out ambulances without enough petrol. In that reality, it is recognised that the maternal and infant mortality rates in non-English speaking groups in the UK are still higher than in English speaking ones. Evidence suggests that a large proportion of those involved in international crime possess fluency in two or more languages (not a recommended career path). There is a recognition of the dangers to the national social infrastructure if, in many towns, a significant proportion of schoolchildren and adults have inadequate access to healthcare, social care and legal process.

So both demand and supply exist outside regulated forms. The next question is how to formalise and harness them.

### **As a strategist**

There are two main interdependent arms to any professional activity. The first is the academic, where individuals are selected, trained and assessed in the necessary skills; and where research is conducted to evaluate and inform practice. The second is the creation and maintenance of a professional framework, within which qualified practitioners are accredited, registered, maintain their skills, practice according to clear codes of conduct and receive support. One cannot do without the other. There is little point, for example, to training and nurturing interpreters and translators unless they have a sound structure to work in afterwards—and vice versa.

Responsible members of any profession involve themselves in both arms. Peter's academic work is well known: his commitment to the practicalities of the language professional framework perhaps less so.

Among his many other activities, Peter served as a member of CIOl Council, its editorial board and any number of working groups for over forty years, including a term as President. Long meetings to reach consensual progress require endless patience, and dealing with such matters as setting out a code of conduct requires a depth of experience. Peter's occasional explosions of exasperation were succinct and used verbs in the right places.

One outcome is that, in the public sector, we now have formal nationally recognised qualifying examinations ([www.iol.org.uk](http://www.iol.org.uk)), a national register for public service interpreters ([www.nrpsi.co.uk](http://www.nrpsi.co.uk)) and national membership organisations. The CIOl has participated in seven EU funded projects to establish equivalent standards of legal interpreting and translation in criminal matters in all member states, which informed an EU Directive in

October 2010 requiring those standards in 36 months. Project meetings in any member state involve carrying back warm greetings to Peter from an eclectic mix of people of all ages.

### **As a communicator**

Part of professional responsibility is the ability to communicate, not only within the profession but about the profession to outsiders. Lord Denning's judgements served the legal profession to this end. He set out the human stories, law and legal argument involved in often complex cases in a way that was clear to the legal profession and also accessible to the general public to whom he knew he was accountable. Peter wrote in the same way, with clarity and elegance. Even I have learned much from his regular notes in the *Linguist*

Linguists, interestingly, are not always good at communication and they need to pay attention to informing the rest of the world about who they really are and what they do and why. There have been series of medical conferences on 'Communication' and only recently, after some terse comment, were doctors even aware that there was a whole discipline called Applied Linguistics. It may not be surprising therefore that those same doctors, and their colleagues in other professions, expect complex translations by yesterday for a five pound fee and ask interpreters to just 'do it word for word.' Even the BBC does not know the difference between 'interpreting' and 'translation.'

What have you been doing, people? Most of the customers down at the Slug and Lettuce pub can tell you the difference between a paediatrician and a neurosurgeon, and one of them is a longer word. Although, I would concede that it took me some time to work out that the term used in Scottish pubs, which sounds like 'percolator-physical,' means 'procurator fiscal.'

On the other hand, it is understandable that linguists, writing for each other, use a restricted code which is not easily comprehended by most outsiders. They should, however, be aware that additional layers of global English and international academic English can hide their pearls of wisdom in a triple lock, which makes the Enigma Code look easy. I gather that, in some universities, students are actually taught to write English like this in order to be taken seriously.

As a non-linguist, I can go about saying how important linguists are, what responsibilities they carry, what would the world do without them and your secretary with school French will not be able to interpret for you. But linguists should be able to convey all that in better ways, that conceal their frustration and are attractive, drawing people in to the interest and excitement of language use.

### **As an innovator**

The time has probably come when linguists should collectively (if that is possible) use their power wisely to show the world what they are made of by seizing the opportunities of the state-created vacuum. I suspect that there was a part of Peter that would have enjoyed a successful, significant and elegantly executed velvet revolution for languages.

He was older than I am but we both experienced—and enjoyed—the post war period of significant and creative change with even fewer resources than there are today. So we know it is possible.