

Agata Szepe

”A terrible structuralist wisdom”: How language affects the identity of an emigrant. Case study based on the autobiography “Lost in translation” by Eva Hoffman

Studia Humanistyczne AGH 12/2, 59-64

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

Agata Szepe*

“A TERRIBLE STRUCTURALIST WISDOM”: HOW LANGUAGE AFFECTS THE IDENTITY OF AN EMIGRANT. CASE STUDY BASED ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY “LOST IN TRANSLATION” BY EVA HOFFMAN

This essay is a case study about linguistic mechanisms that affect an emigrant's life. The research is based on the autobiography *Lost in Translation* by the Polish emigrant Eva Hoffman, analyzed with the use of theories of the structural linguistic school. According to the research, some linguistic rules influence her life very deeply. She communicates poorly because the *expression* of new language corresponds with different *content* from the native language, creating another *form*. Eva starts to treat daily communication like a written *text*, in the meaning used by Roland Barthes, which results in alienation. However, some linguistic principles such as *the arbitrary nature of a sign* or inseparability of *signifiant* and *signifie* do not affect her at all. She deepens her understanding of both her mother tongue and the new one by linguistic terms such as translation describing, defining and finding synonyms and tries to find her own identities using expressions such as *I, you, here, near, and far*, belonging to *linguistic universals*. Her identity is an *identity-in-progress* because she replaces her old home with a new *center of the world*. The old home remains a *heterotopia* while an emigrant changes her onceptions connected with the words *here, there, near, and far*.

Key words: emigrant, identity, language, text, structuralism

Cultural clash is a vivid question of our times. When thinking about it, we usually compare customs, beliefs, fashions and opinions existing in different cultures. Sometimes we take into consideration two languages, dividing people into cultural groups and creating bipolar relations. But only after we look at language as a whole system can we notice more universal dissimilarities. Existing through language, our human understanding will never go further than our words. Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”. Accordingly, the language map of a person who emigrated from one cultural circle to another will never be the same as that of an autochthon. Eva's Hoffman autobiography *Lost in Translation* is a perfect example of identity problems resulting from the absolute power of language. Born in Poland, Eva emigrated as a teenager to Canada and then to the United States. Living on the border of cultures, she describes how much the language determined her life, caused existential angst, and became an obsession, but also deepened her understanding

* University of Warsaw; agata.szepe@student.uw.edu.pl

of the world. The emigrant's identity exists more as an identity-in-progress than a constant set of features. Therefore, it is changeable and full of contradictions and extremes. *Lost in Translation* shows the compound imagination of a person uprooted from her language world and planted into a new, more complicated reality.

Being over-conscious of linguistic mechanisms, Eva cannot discard the structuralist adage "words are just themselves" (Hoffmann 1998: 107). Describing structuralism, Tventan Todorov says that it is a kind of *science of literature* that avoids its paraphrasing, commenting and talking about mental, emotional and social aspects of a text. Most important are: *the structure and operation* of language (Tzvetan 2001). Treating language structures not only as scientific terms but also as rules inevitably determining life leads to several consequences. Being conscious that language is only *a system of signs* ruling communication (Saussure 1959: 65–99), Hoffman feels deprived of the freedom of speech. Deprived of freedom of speech, she is not able to express her emotions. Unable to voice her feelings, the newcomer loses naturalness of communication. Hoffman says that *structuralist wisdom* does not bring any hope or comfort (Hoffmann 1998: 107). Suffering is the final result of treating daily communication only as expressed structures of language. *Lost in Translation* shows several linguistic mechanisms which deeply affected Hoffman's life.

Many of these mechanisms are connected with a classification created by Louis Trolle Hjelmslev. He divided language into *expression* and *content*. The former term means all the thoughts man could ever have, the latter, all words created by human beings. In a language only a part of the *expression* corresponds with the *content*, creating *form* of a language (Hjelmslev 1953: 29–38). Each language has a slightly different form; not all thoughts can be expressed in every language. As a result of the feeling that not every idea can be communicated in the new language, Hoffman wants to preserve her native language. She dreams and expresses her strong emotions in Polish. In her inner English-Polish dialogue, the vocabulary of childhood represents important values and beliefs. On the other hand, in the new reality few of the Polish words correspond with the ideas expressed in English. It results in forgetting part of the mother tongue. Eva remembers this process as a trauma, resulting in symbolic *great fear*. The dream becomes a nightmare: Eva imagines that she sinks in an ocean of the unknown (Hoffmann 1998: 104). Chaos has reigned in her life even more because of another linguistic mechanism, in this case connected more with written text than with speech.

Language influences Hoffman's life so much that not only does she more deeply experience principles ruling language, but also starts to apply rules of reading to daily communication. Eva treats the world like a *text* in a very narrow, structuralist meaning. Roland Barthes in his article *From Work to Text* divides two different approaches to a written source. It can be treated as the *work*, like in traditional literary criticism. This kind of approach shows literature as a set of books, stored in libraries (Barthes 2001: 1470–1475). For structuralists it can be defined as immaterial text, carried by language. Eva sees the whole world as a collection of words. Each of the specific rules of reading a *text* leads to interesting consequences in her daily communication. Firstly, in contrast to *work* in which the author is extremely important, being able to interpret it in the best way, in reading a *text* nobody is privileged. Indeed, the author is treated not as a person, but as one of many figures presented in the *text*. Eva perceives herself and other people not as the authors "creating" personal feeling, but as a medium through which

the language speaks. The consequences are catastrophic: “reading” other persons’ voices, she is not interested in the authors and their emotions. She only tries to learn some new vocabulary and expressions thanks to the spoken *texts*. She has difficulties in expressing her own feelings as well. Furthermore, *works* are arranged into the order of priority, while every text has the same importance. Hoffman describes herself as written in many languages (Hoffmann 1998: 275). Eva’s relativistic world-view results from treating life in the same way. Eva says: “*Only exiles are truly irreligious*”, a contemporary philosopher has said (Hoffmann 1998: 275), meaning that having experienced many cultures through different languages, she is not able to perceive them from a personal point of view. Finally, although Barthes assumes that commuting with a *text* pleases the reader (Barthes 1975), Eva suffers. It is due to the fact that the specific *pleasure* is reserved for the reader, leaving the author without any right to it. Unlike in literature, in life everybody needs to identify strongly with their own words and enjoy expressing their own language. Therefore, treating daily communication like a written text leads to alienation, not to pleasure. Leading the life of an emigrant, Eva feels even more bewildered. Surprisingly, it seems that some of the language principles do not function in her life in the way described by linguists.

For a linguist it is obvious that there are main principles determining our language. However, some of them stop working in the life of a person uprooted from the world of their native language. Ferdinand de Saussure describes that a *sign* consists of *signifier* (“a sound image”) and *signified* (“a concept”) that can never be divided (Saussure 1959: 65–66). True in many cases, this principle is inadequate to the situation of an emigrant. Eva describes that new language terms such as *envious*, *happy*, *disappointed* are not linked to any image or feeling, remaining as vague as the platonic world of ideas (Hoffmann 1998: 106–107). Knowing only the *signifier* of English words, Hoffman is not sure whether she can describe the people as *dull*, *kindly*, or perhaps *silly* (Hoffmann 1998: 106–107). That is because she connects the sound of English words with *signified* of its Polish counterparts. They often have little to do with the *signifier* which is a part of the English sign. For example, for Eva *dark forest* is the most accurate symbol of love, while for her Canadian friend, Penny, love is associated with a *sunny meadow* (Hoffmann 1998: 174).

Another linguistic rule “broken” by Eva Hoffman is The First Principle described by de Saussure as *The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign* (Saussure 1959: 65–99). It assumes that a language user does not ask why a *signified* is linked with this concrete *signifier* and does not judge whether these two parts of a sign match together or not. As can be seen in the example of Hoffman, for an emigrant this is not so obvious. She questions the adequacy of the sound image (*signifier*) to the meaning of a word (*signified*). For instance, she feels that the *signified* of the conventional expression “you are welcome” does not match its *signifier*. According to Eva, the shapes of the words *you*, *are* and *welcome*, imply condescension instead of politeness.

Finally, the problem of emotions remains in question. Roman Jakobson, the great representative of structural linguistics, claims that feelings are non-linguistic elements closely connected with the language’s mechanisms. Even structural “scientists” should take it into account (Jakobson 2001: 1260). Having difficulties with expressing her feelings, Eva is virtually unable to link language expressions with emotions. Although some people may claim that Hoffman’s situation is only an insignificant exception, it shows that rules, regarded as

permanent language principles, do not always work in the same way. People who learn how to live in an unfamiliar linguistic reality can be more deeply influenced by certain linguistic mechanisms, yet some of them do not affect them at all. Other differences between an emigrant's identity and a native speaker of a language are connected with a different scope of their vocabulary and language sources.

The author of *Lost in Translation* suggests that the linguistic world of an emigrant can be larger than a native's one. Understanding deeper and more consciously the meaning of words, she notices complex cultural nuances and is able to explain them. But still, this metaphorical "translation" can be reached only by a literal translation thanks to language sources such as defining, finding synonyms and describing. For Eva Hoffman *teşknota* and *polot* become two important symbols, showing her Polish mentality. With "'Teşknota' – a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing" (Hoffmann 1998: 4) she gives a nearly encyclopedic definition of a specific Polish feeling. Elsewhere in the narrative she adds to the descriptive adjective *discomforting* (Hoffmann 1998: 91); on another occasion she looks for synonyms such as *melancholia* (Hoffmann 1998: 115). The motif of *polot* appears three times. According to the writer, it is a unique Polish feature "combining the meanings of 'dash', 'inspiration' and 'flying'" (Hoffmann 1998: 71). When her music teacher, Ostropov, tells her an anecdote about a girl who is able to attract everyone's attention Eva knows that it is a sign of *polot* (Hoffmann 1998: 154). It also becomes a synonym of willfulness when Hoffman gets a place at Harvard University thanks to *polot* (Hoffmann 1998: 201). In other words, Eva Hoffman, as an emigrant, starts to know more about her own culture by translating its terms into another language.

Eva does not only more deeply understand her mother tongue but also the new language. Hoffman does it by translating English into English, using language sources as well. For instance, she combines three contrasting definitions of communism: an encyclopedic one proposed by a teacher, a short students' statement saying that communism is evil, and her own complicated personal experiences (Hoffmann 1998: 131). All this depicts English words as full of meaning and hidden messages. Another example is a discussion with her Polish friends. She explains the complexity of complicated, typically American relationships between an adult child and her mother. She pays attention to such terms as *distant*, *oppressive*, and *over-loving*, which do not only describe different personal features, but also show a specific, American mentality (Hoffmann 1998: 265). In brief, Hoffman pays attention to conspicuous words existing in a new language, realizing various aspects of the new culture. Becoming an expert in defining new reality, Hoffman still has difficulties in defining her own, changeable identity.

Eva's identity is presented as an identity-in-progress. She organizes her life around such existential questions as: *Who am I?* and *Where am I?* It can be paraphrased into another problem: What are the relations between the designates of words *I-you* and *here-near-far*. According to Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 2006), a Polish-Australian linguist, the expressions mentioned above belong to the *linguistic universals*, i.e. they exist in every language. As opposed to a native speaker's perspective, in the life of the emigrant answers to fundamental questions about identity are violently changing. This psychological change is reflected in a grammatical one. Emigrated, Eva still perceives her Polish identity as the only real one

by connecting it with the expression *I*. It changes symbolically when her Polish name *Ewa* is involuntary changed into the English counterpart *Eva* (Hoffmann 1998: 105). In interior dialogue her Polish and English *egos* conduct a conversation on existential issues (Hoffmann 1998: 120). At the beginning, Hoffman identifies herself with the Polish *Ewa*, while *Eva* is for her an unfamiliar *you*. It changes when her American “*I*” ends the discussion shouting: *I’m the real one* (Hoffmann 1998: 231). Based on the most fundamental language expressions – *I- you*, the identity process is complete.

Looking for the meaning of linguistic universals *here-near-far*, *Eva* inquires about the center of her world. A representative of humanistic geography, Yi-Fu Tuan describes the home as a human’s *center of the universe*. Home is the point thanks to which a person finds what is near and far or identifies the four points of the compass (Tuan 2001). Thinking about her childhood, *Eva* sees Cracow, her old hometown, in exactly the same way: “I only know that I’m in my room, which to me is an everywhere (...). I repeat to myself that I’m in Krakow, Cracow, which to me is both home and the universe” (Hoffmann 1998: 5). After emigration the relations *here-near-far* are disturbed. Cracow starts to be a concept described by Michael Foucault as *Heterotopia* (Foucault 1967). Possessing features of ideal *Utopia*, *Heterotopia* doesn’t stop being a *real place*. Cracow is for *Eva* a symbol of lost paradise, a happy childhood and a real home. On the other hand, it is still a real place where people she knows live. If she is determined enough, she can visit her old city. According to Foucault, to enter *Heterotopia* one has to satisfy certain conditions. Time spent in *Heterotopia* is unusual and significant: it either shows the most real present or all the past, collected in one place. *Eva* experiences both. After many attempts Hoffman visits Cracow. Looking at buildings, meeting people, observing their customs, she discovers that very little has changed. She returns to her past: her childhood and dreamed Cracow. Nevertheless, this “travel in time” released her to live in the present, instead of the past. She is now able to look at the past with detachment. In accordance with Yi-Fu Tuan, the thing perceived by people as a home is not *place-centric*, but *anthropocentric*. The emigrant’s identity-in-progress is able to find a new “here”. Living in America for a long time, *Eva* ponders with astonishment why she could not accept her new place for so long since it seems now to be so familiar and natural.

Examples included in the case study of Hoffman’s autobiography suggest that a native’s way of thinking differs from an emigrant’s identity. It is a consequence of another language perspective; the former’s *Weltanschauung* is limited by knowing only one language, whereas the latter’s is widened by his/her multilingual perspective. In my case study I interpreted the identity of an emigrant according to various language theories. Firstly, basic rules of classical structural linguistics determine the emigrant’s life more deeply than that of the native. On the other hand some of them do not refer to an emigrant at all. Furthermore, the emigrant feels bewildered in her new country, because she subconsciously applies in practice structuralistic literary theories to the daily spoken communication. But then, using techniques of applied linguistics, the emigrant deepens her understanding of both her native language and the new one. Finally, particular philosophical theories, deepening the understanding of the message of *Eva’s Hoffman autobiography*, can be expressed in terms of linguistics. Each of these mechanisms shows that the emigrant’s experiences result from the nature of language. At the end of the book we receive a convincing praise for language translation. Having faced

many difficulties, Eva Hoffman states that the foreign English language finally became her own. This is the most uncertain moment in the whole text. Hoffman's biography will never tell us exactly what was *Lost in Translation*, because what was lost evidently cannot be expressed by the language. Although language is a unique, universal human system of communication, it is limited. This is the last, but not least important truth about the nature of the language, shown through the American, all too happy ending.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, Roland. 2001. *From Work to Text*, in: Vincent, B. Leitch (ed), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co, pp. 1470–1475.
- Foucault, Michel. 1967. *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> [01.04.2012].
- Hjelmslev Louis, Trolle. 1953. *Expression and Content*, in: *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Baltimore: Waverly Press, pp. 29–38.
- Hoffmann, Eva. 1998. *Lost in Translation*, London: Vintage.
- Jakobson, Roman. 2001. *Linguistic and Poetics*, in: Vincent, B. Leitch (ed), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co, pp. 1260.
- Kłoczowski, J. Andrzej. 2005. *Ja-Ty-My, Filozofia dialogu*, Poznań: W Drodze, pp. 44–53.
- Saussure, Ferdinand. 1959. *Course in General Linguistic*, New York: Philosophical Library, pp. 65–99.
- Tzvetan, Todorov. 2001. *Structural Analysis of Narrative*, in: Vincent, B. Leitch (ed), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York; London: Norton & Co.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 2001. *Space and Place. The perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2006. *Semantyka. Jednostki elementarne i uniwersalne*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.

„STRASZNA MĄDROŚĆ STRUKTURALISTY” – O JĘZYKOWEJ TOŻSAMOŚCI EMIGRANTA

Artykuł, opierając się na autobiografii *Zagubione w przekładzie* polskiej emigrantki, Eve Hoffman, analizuje mechanizmy językowe, które mają wpływ na życie emigranta. Eve trudniej się porozumiewać, ponieważ *forma wyrażania* nowego języka nie odpowiada *formie treści* języka rodzimego. Zaczyna traktować codzienną komunikację, jako tekst, w znaczeniu, używanym przez Rolanda Barthesa, co prowadzi do poczucia wyobcowania. Z drugiej strony, niektóre zasady językowe przestają ją obowiązywać. Jest to na przykład arbitralny związek znaczącego i znaczonego oraz zasada, mówiąca, że nie da się ich od siebie rozdzielić. Równocześnie, Hoffman pogłębia zrozumienie swojego i obcego języka przez posługiwanie się tłumaczeniem, definiowaniem i synonimami. Określa na nowo swoją tożsamość, używając wyrażeń, należących do *uniwersaliów językowych*. Tożsamość Eve jest niestabilna, ponieważ idea domu zostaje zastąpiony nowym, subiektywnym *centrum świata*. Poprzednie miejsce zamieszkania pozostaje *heterotopią*, a emigrant zmienia sposób widzenia świata, poprzez nadanie nowego znaczenia wyrażeniom: *tutaj, tam, blisko, daleko*.

Słowa kluczowe: emigrant, tożsamość, mechanizmy językowe, tekst, strukturalizm.