Voyeuristic interrupters: Interview with Jan Krótki

Conference interpreter, Paris-based member of AIIC, former semi-professional chess player, author of several original mathematical theorems, globetrotter. Canadian, Polish and British national, a Pole by choice.

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Monika: Jan, let’s first talk about your working languages and how you learnt them. Russian in Canada, French in Pakistan, English in Sudan …

Jan: I just happened to be born to a couple of Poles who left Poland during the war, under completely different circumstances, met in England and then lived and worked in many different countries, where I always went to English-language schools but Polish was always maintained at home, that was very important. And for me the Polish was something that remained a cultural constant. Moving from England to Sudan, to the States, to Pakistan, to Canada, to Morocco, to Canada, to France… Polish was always there, as a cultural constant. And it shaped my identity. I like to say that I have Polish in the guts, or the heart, or the soul and English in the head.

But French is also an interesting story. When we lived in Karachi – by then my parents had spent quite a lot of time in the so-called third world countries – and they decided that enough is enough. My father had read economics at Cambridge and then he became a demographer subsequently, and he directed the very first Sudanese census. He was an employee first of the British government in the Sudan, and then, for the last two years we were there, from 1956 to 1958, Sudan was independent, and he was an employee of the Sudanese government. He specialised in demography and later on, to move to the “first world”, he applied for a job at Statistics Canada, which at that time was called the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and was accepted. While we lived in Pakistan, he already knew that we would be moving to Canada, as a family. And for him, having already worked by then in Polish, English, German and Arabic (he learned Arabic in Khartoum), it was unthinkable to move to a bilingual country without knowing French. So he organised very intensive French lessons for the whole family and we all learned French. Up to a reasonable level. As a result, when we moved to Canada, I went into Grade 9, and all my colleagues in class had been taking French for eight years because it was an obligatory language from the first year of school in the province of Ontario. (The educational systems in Canada are run by the provinces.) And in Ontario French was taught from grade 1. So I was very much afraid of this French class, having studied French for only two years. After the first two classes, the teacher got in touch with my parents and said that I was bored to tears and he would like to put me into grade 11 for French instead. So I was in grade 9 and taking French in grade 11, and when I was in high school for the last year, I was already taking a university course in French in the evenings so as to keep it up. When it comes to learning languages, motivation is crucial.
MK: And English in Sudan …

JK: Yes, in a British kindergarten, or nursery school, if you prefer. And then in Canada I became enamoured with chess and I learnt Russian so that I could read Russian chess books and magazines. When I started reading Russian, I immediately subscribed to “64”, which was a weekly supplement to a daily called “Soviet Sport”. In the Soviet Union they considered chess to be a sport. I read it cover to cover every week so my Russian improved very quickly. Once again, motivation.

Jan with his parents, brothers and dog in their family home in Karachi

MK: Tell us the story about Karpov.

JK: In 1969 I won the Canadian junior chess championship and was Canada’s representative at the world junior chess championship in Stockholm in August of ’69. And the Soviet representative was Anatoly Karpov, who won the tournament and subsequently became the world chess champion. It turned out that although there was an East German and a Pole and a Hungarian and a Czechoslovak, apart from Karpov, the one who spoke Russian the best was me. There was also a Bulgarian who spoke fairly good Russian. He and I and Karpov spent a lot of time together because Karpov spoke nothing but Russian. And he had his trainer with him but his trainer was of course too old to be of interest to a teenager. We were teenagers, we were 18-19 years old! And so he was delighted to have someone to speak Russian to. So I spoke Russian.

And then about 30 years later he was interviewed on French television and I was recruited for that by a colleague who knew that I had been a serious chess player. Before the interview I went to the make-up room and introduced myself as the Canadian of Polish extraction who played for Canada in Stockholm in ’69 and that I would be translating him. He of course remembered me, as we had spent three weeks together.
MK: You lived in seven countries …

JK: On four continents.

MK: And your languages are Polish, English, Russian, French. Polish is your mother tongue.

JK: … but English is my language of education. For someone who has moved around a lot that takes priority. And it takes even more priority when you live in the same place. You must know any number of Brits of Polish origin who were born in the British Isles, like me, but never left the British Isles and often do not speak Polish quite fluently.

MK: You sound like a Pole. And yet, you’ve never lived in Poland.

JK: No. Well … I love language, I love Poland, I love Polish. It’s just something that’s important to me. Since it’s tied into my identity, I would feel lost if I weren’t able to express myself fully in Polish. And when I AM unable to express myself fully in Polish, which often happens, I feel that there’s something that I want to say and I can’t quite find the right way to say it, then I feel lost and angry with myself.

MK: Is that why you chose to have Polish as a B rather than an A?

JK: Of course. I feel that I can’t say everything as elegantly as I would like to say it. And I also feel that I have certain gaps in that I never studied sciences in Polish. If someone says – this is an example that I actually ran into in the booth – if someone says “tlen” to me, I immediately know that it’s “oxygen”. But if I’m in the booth and it’s coming fast, thick and furious, and someone says “oxygen”, it’s a nanosecond-more-effort to find the word “tlen” than it is to find the word “oxygen” in the other direction.

Language is an identity. They are so intertwined. I like untranslatable jokes because I think they say something about what you can express in a given language and what you can’t. For example, there’s the story about John the mathematician whose wife tells him to go the corner store because they ran out of milk – and buy a litre of milk, and if they have eggs, get six. Now John being a mathematician of course interprets without context. You know, when you prove a theorem, everything has to be self-contained, you can’t rely on context. It has to be A therefore B therefore C. So obviously he comes home with six litres of milk since the store had eggs, quite right. That’s what the request said. And you can do it in Polish but you can’t do it in French. Impossible. You try to translate that into French and it doesn’t work. The second sentence has to have some pronoun before the verb that would refer to the eggs. S’il y a des oeufs, tu en prends six. You can’t avoid that. It’s bad French. I mean you could, but it wouldn’t be good French. If you want to speak good French,
MK: You’ve worked for many celebrities, heads of state …

JK: There have been some extraordinary people to interpret in the course of my career. Marek Edelmann, one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising – a great humanist. Or Nelson Mandela – that was an honour. This man, who spent 27 years in jail, and then shook the hand of the leader of the regime that put him there… Extraordinary. They really stick in my mind as great moments in interpreting. I have also interpreted all the French, Polish, Russian and US presidents of the last two or three decades, but powerful decision-makers are not necessarily all that interesting. Sometimes a good thinker can challenge you more. In a long career like mine you have these moments which stick in your mind and won’t go away. For instance, I was once in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, for the EBRD. They had invited as an outside speaker the director of the Hermitage, a man with any number of PhDs, very well read, very well written, and so on. And he was going to give a guest lecture on relations among religious groups in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union over history. Because they have Muslims, they have Buddhists, Orthodox Christians, they have Catholics, atheists, you name it. And he wrote a 40-page paper on the subject, which I was given the day before. And of course, I read it. And then I sat in the booth and suddenly I realised that this man had no intention of reading his paper, he was speaking to his paper. So I was ideally prepared, I knew in advance more or less what he was going to say, but he was speaking, he was not reading.

MK: The best possible combination.

JK: The best possible combination. Some of us interpreters think that meeting rooms should be provided with paper shredders. Anybody who comes to the lectern or the podium with a text gets it taken away and put in the paper shredder. Speak! Communicate! Don’t read! And especially, if you are going to read, make sure the interpreters – or interrupters, I like to call us interrupters – have a copy, otherwise it’s completely ridiculous if we don’t have the text.

MK: Interrupters? In consecutive?

Yes, I’ve done a lot of consecutive. So perhaps it comes from that. When you have three active languages, you tend to do a lot of consecutive. And so this was really a red letter moment in the booth, because he spoke good Russian, he spoke, he didn’t read, it wasn’t sentences running for ten lines but the kind of sentences that one constructs when one really is communicating, when one has a will to transmit a message. When you have a brilliant speaker like that, it sticks in your mind,
especially if you’re well prepared for it. I really enjoyed it. It ended up lasting 40 minutes but I did the whole thing with pleasure.

MK: How important is the interpreter’s voice?

JK: Put yourself in the shoes of a delegate who is dependent on interpretation. And so he’s listening to the same voice – even though there may be seven different speakers in the room – for 30 minutes. And if it’s an unpleasant voice, a squeaky voice, that’s going to get very tiring. So of course it makes a difference. And I actually find it rather surprising – as someone who never went to any interpreting school – that interpreting schools don’t offer voice training.

MK: Some do

JK: Perhaps some do. But I have run into schools where it’s not offered.

MK: London used to, before it was closed down.

JK: I don’t think ESIT or ISIT do, either of them, the two schools in Paris. And I think it’s important and I’m convinced that people who have voices that are not pleasant to listen to can actually change them, so as to convince listeners they really have something to say. Mine just happens to be pleasant to listen to – partly because it is very low – babies like my voice, for instance. I can calm babies down much more easily than someone with a high-pitched voice, which makes children afraid – whereas mine is very calming and soothing, pleasant to listen to and it works. But that’s not something that I worked on, I just happen to have it.

MK: This is how you ended up on French television – because you had a good voice.

JK: I happen to have a voice that is telegenic. There was this shortage of male voices on the Paris market with French A and Russian C, and at the time television producers were very insistent that the interpreter be of the same sex as the speaker. When the wall came down, there were lots of contacts with Russian artists and generals and politicians on French television, and I would often get hired for that. For lack of other people to do it.
MK: How did you start out as an interpreter?

JK: Interpretation found me. I was a maths student, I was already married, I had children and a scholarship that was not enough… So I was working as a translator for the Canadian government, from Russian, French and Polish into English. And one day they needed an interpreter in the Polish booth and they scrambled to find someone and found one person from New York, two people from Montreal to work in the English booth from Polish but who did not have active Polish, daughters of Renia Romer, one of the founding members of AIIC, who went to Cambridge with my parents in the 40s. The world is small. But they couldn’t find the second Polish booth. They wanted to do it in two different booths. It was a five-day meeting on the renegotiation of a consular convention between the so-called People’s Republic of Poland and Canada. Very complicated. You know, mutual recognition of divorces, adoptions, inheritances, especially with Canada being federalised and the laws being provincial rather than federal, and Poland being centralised and totalitarian… Not easy. And so the interpretation service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called of course Secretary of State in Canada, called me on the Thursday and they asked me if I could work for them the whole of the next week. And I said: doing what? And they said: simultaneous interpretation. And I said:
what’s that? And they said: you sit in the booth and you listen to something said in English and you say the same thing in Polish. And then they told me how much money I would make. So I did a quick calculation and realised that in five days I would make about three months’ worth of my scholarship. So I cancelled some of my seminars and went. That was baptism by fire.

MK: And you liked it?

JK: Yes, I liked it. I was still very interested in doing mathematics and proving original theorems, so for a few years I only interpreted occasionally. But finally I got attracted into the profession. And I liked it initially because I was a real bridge. These delegations coming from communist Poland were totalitarian, communist, at least nominally atheist, even if they had their children baptised in churches in neighbouring towns, whereas the Canadians were usually religious or if atheists they didn’t make a big deal of it, tolerant, in any event, federalist and democrats. And they spoke English. These guys spoke Polish, maybe Russian, but not English. And I knew both worlds. I was a bridge between the two. In fact, there were obvious attempts on both sides to recruit me. When a big black limousine drove up to my modest student home on the outskirts of Ottawa from the Polish Embassy and the driver wanted to give me a case of vodka, this was an obvious attempt to recruit me. I of course refused. The Canadians did similar things and I of course refused. The Canadian RCMP once told me that if I didn’t tell them what I had overheard in a private conversation, I would never work for them again. I of course refused. The chief interpreter of the Canadian government about it and she was furious with them. She told me that I was quite right to refuse to divulge anything and of course I continued to work for them. So to come back to my gradual entry into the world of interpreting… It was also an opportunity to be a voyeur, which I am anyway, being stateless, essentially. I mean I’m Polish but I’ve never lived in Poland so what does it mean to be Polish? So I’m a voyeur, I go through life observing, watching. And this was an opportunity to see people interacting. People whom I could understand on either side, because I knew the Polish reality, I had been there many times, and I knew the Canadian reality. So finally when I decided that I didn’t want to be a research mathematician for the rest of my life, I applied to the Canadian government to be accredited as a French B and Russian C, and started working more and more for them. In fact, I was getting huge amounts of work in the last few years I was in Canada, as much as I wanted. But the work was mostly English-French, which was a statutory requirement in Canada for meetings at a certain level, and often with all of the delegates understanding English very well and often speaking English very well. Sometimes the only people listening to us were Anglophones who wanted to learn French. So that was less fascinating than the bridge-building that I had been doing previously. And that is when I decided that if I want to be an interpreter for the rest of my life, I have to move.

MK: That’s when you decided to move to Paris?

JK: Yes. It was a choice between Geneva, Paris and Brussels. At the time Polish and Russian would not have been very useful in Brussels, that was in 1984, Polish in Geneva would not have been very useful, Polish was not useful anywhere in fact, because it was right after the imposition of martial law in 1981… And Paris is beautiful. So finally I opted for Paris. In 1984 I moved there from Ottawa with my wife, four children, two cats and a dog, counting on being able to find work as a freelance interpreter and translator. It worked out after a while, but the first six months were pretty tight.
MK: Even as a member of AIIC?

JK: Yes, I had joined AIIC before leaving Ottawa. But in Paris at that time – and this may still be true today – AIIC membership meant less than a diploma from ESIT or ISIT, the two interpretation schools in Paris. It just took some time. If you go to a school for two years, you are taught by freelancers and then more freelancers hear you at the final examination as jury members. So if you are good, word gets around. In my case I had to wait for those first contracts to be heard by colleagues, and I only got them when everyone else was working. Furthermore, this was soon after the imposition of martial law in Poland, so there was no market for my Polish. For the first few years in Paris I only worked in the bi-active English-French booth and from Russian.

MK: Why not choose the UK?

JK: Interpretation is not as highly regarded by the UK government as by the French government. French was an international diplomatic language for decades. In the League of Nations it was language no. 1, I think. In the United Nations, it was language no. 2. Now it’s very much going by the wayside. There is now a fund in France for the subsidisation of interpretation in international meetings. If a scientific congress is being organised, the organisers can apply to this fund to subsidise the cost of interpretation. And I’ve talked to the people who work for this fund, who
decide who gets what, I mean they don’t have unlimited resources, of course. And basically what they’re interested in is not interpretation into French because they understand that the scientists, programmers, medical researchers, etc. have to understand English. But they want them to be able to speak French. So they are even prepared to subsidise interpretation only from French into English, with just two interpreters working only one way.

MK: In France people are actively encouraged to speak French in international meetings?

JK: But the French themselves feel that they ought to speak English, if it’s an international conference. For instance, about 10-15 years ago, the ISI, the International Statistics Institute, was celebrating its 100th anniversary. And they had been founded in Paris and claimed to be the oldest scientific international organisation in the world. I don’t know if that’s true but that was their claim. The colleague who was recruiting a team of interpreters for them put me on the team, knowing that I had a mathematical background, so he thought that would be useful. My father, who being a demographer was also a statistician, was one of the Canadian delegates. That led to two interesting moments in my career. The first was that I got to interpret my father’s speech from English into French. (I also interpreted my older brother once in Ottawa, but from French into English, that’s another story.) And the other interesting moment was that they had invited as a guest speaker a French mathematician who was the founder of fractal theory. His name was Mandelbrot. He initially studied in France, worked in France, and then got a job in California, in Berkeley, I think, as a top-notch, one of the best mathematicians in the world, extraordinary. But also not one of the world’s best speakers. And he was invited as someone who could tell statisticians about something that had nothing to do with statistics directly but was still in the general field of mathematics. Every time they organised a congress, they invited someone like that. And so they invited this expert on fractal theory and I had studied fractal theory when I was working on my PhD in Canada and so I knew something about fractal theory. And the head of team said: you do it. I said: of course, I’d love to do it. And I said: is he going to speak English or French? He said: I don’t know, I’ll try to find out. And he tried to find out, and he tried to get a text, and he got absolutely nothing. So there I was when he was given the floor, sitting in a booth on the fourth or fifth floor above this huge auditorium, full of statisticians from all over the world. And below in the middle there was a row of Canadian statisticians, including my father, whose bald head I could recognise. And this professor started and he said: “Ladies and gentlemen. [strong French accent] I was wondering whezzer I speak Franch orh English. Finally I decide that even in France for interhnational congrrhess betterh to speak English.” And he continued in that vein for the next 30 minutes. It was atrocious, it was abominable. But since I knew fractal theory, I was able to do it. And in fact, it was one of those rare occasions where the interpretation was better than the original, frankly. Because his English was so horrible. Much worse than my French. And while I was doing this, I could see my father putting on his headset, just out of curiosity, because he knew that I was in the booth, and he listened for a minute, and then he nudged his neighbour, and by the time it was finished, the whole row of Canadian statisticians, most of whom were Anglophone but could understand French, were listening to my interpretation instead of his English. Another golden moment in my career.

MK: What would you say to someone who is thinking of a career in interpreting? Do you have any tips for young colleagues?

JK: Always be professional! Which means at least two things. First, prepare for your meetings. This is not just a question of terminology. Delegates generally know something about the subject they are discussing, so we need to have at least a superficial understanding. Second, never accept working conditions that could endanger quality of interpretation, such as long working hours with an insufficient number of interpreters. Clients are under pressure to reduce costs, and sometimes we can meet them halfway, but there are limits. Why is this so important? Well, it turns out that bad interpretation is very visible, and can quickly undermine our credibility, whereas good interpretation
generally passes unnoticed, so it can be difficult to regain that credibility. To illustrate what I mean, let me tell you about the nicest compliment I ever received. I was working from Polish into English for a delegate who had given me the article that was the basis for his talk, but he was not reading. The ideal circumstances, much like the Hermitage Director story. When it was over, there was a coffee break, during which an Anglophone delegate told me that something extraordinary had happened: while listening to the talk, he suddenly wondered why he was wearing those uncomfortable headphones, given that the speaker was speaking English. Only when he removed them did he realise that it was the interpreter who was speaking English.

I would also encourage young colleagues not to shun translation. For some that may even be a financial necessity, but I think it also contributes to quality of interpretation, by forcing you to think more carefully about language than is possible in the booth.

MK: Is AIIC worth joining?

JK: It has certainly been worth it for me. For someone with a different language combination and professional domicile, there may not be any personal advantage to AIIC membership, but I think colleagues should all join nevertheless. If only out of a sense of solidarity. After all, the good working conditions we have in international organisations that have signed AIIC agreements are very much to AIIC’s credit, and the more members we have, the better our chance of preserving those conditions in future negotiations. I would even encourage staff interpreters to join, for the same reason: if our conditions deteriorate, that will inevitably happen to staff as well. Furthermore, I find it somewhat reprehensible when a staff interpreter refuses to join throughout her or his career, and then quickly signs up upon retirement, so as to continue working as a freelance.

MK: What’s the best thing about being an interpreter?

You get to be a voyeur, observing interactions among people with different cultural and professional backgrounds. It is quite fascinating, especially for someone “of no fixed cultural abode”. And very rewarding, when you see that you have contributed to better understanding among people of different stripes.

MK: Eddie Izzard once said: “Two languages in one brain? No one can live at that speed!” How do you live at that speed?

JK: Very well, thank you. My different languages dance around on the neurons in my brain, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in threes, and enjoy themselves no end. It may seem puerile, but I actually find it very amusing to say, for example, “I have other cats to whip” or “it goes of silk”, from the French “j’ai d’autres chats à fouetter” and “ça va de soie”. Or to call the Paris suburb “Saint-Maur” (pronounced like “mort”) “Saint Death” in English and “Święta Śmierć” in Polish. At a more profound level, every language has its own unique way of describing and therefore perceiving the world around us, and especially human relationships. So the more languages you play with, the more multifaceted your perception, which is enriching.
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