

This article was published in *Language International* vol. 7 # 3. 12-14 (1995). It is, as far as I know, the first interview after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the words of an outsider, it provides information about the language situation at the time. It also honours the memory of two pioneers of Russian Translation Studies, the late Professor Vilen Komissarov and the late Professor Ghelly Chernov.

THE MOSCOW LINGUISTIC UNIVERSITY

During a recent visit to Russia, I visited the Moscow Linguistic University. This prestigious institution is housed in an old mansion which in 1812 made out the headquarters of Emperor Napoleon when he was in Moscow. I had a meeting with Ghelly Chernov and Vilen Komissarov. Professor Vilen Komissarov, head of the Department of Theory, History, and Criticism of Translation at the University told about the institution.

Cay Dollerup

Vilen Komissarov: The Institution which is today the Moscow Linguistic University was founded in 1930. Over the years its name has changed, and even today many remember that of ‘Maurice Thorez Institute’. Originally it focussed on only the major Western languages, notably English, French, German, but it diversified and about 15 years ago minor languages such as Swedish and Finnish were added. In recent years the original institute has become a university in its own right. This change has been marked in three ways. Firstly, the number of languages has been increased enormously, so that we have taken in, for instance, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, to mention only a few. This process is going on and right now we are discussing the possibility of including Hebrew. Secondly, there has been diversification in the departments so that we now include economics, politics, law, mathematics, applied linguistics and machine translation. Thirdly, subjects have been made to include the history of culture and history of religion. Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of chairs; this covers all subjects.

CD: *You did not include Chinese until 15 years ago?*

VK: Previously western and oriental languages were taught at different institutions.

CD: *What is your student enrolment?*

VK: Our student enrolment is above 5,000, and in this figure I exclude additional courses. We are cramped for space, and teaching takes place in three shifts, so that we have classes from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. midnight. The student body includes foreign students from a fairly large number of institutions abroad with which we have exchange agreements.

The staff comprises more than 1,000 people, including, part-time teachers.

CD: *Do you have a division of labour between translation and interpreting at your department?*

VK: No. The department covers both, but with an emphasis on translation.

Ghelly Chernov, expanding: The type of interpreting training we give is guide interpreting, that is interpreting of the type which is necessary for tourist guides. Our consecutive at this institution is not consecutive in the professional sense. However, we do cover consecutive interpreting up to a professional level in postgraduate refresher courses.

CD: *Could you give a general outline of your programme?*

VK: There are several programmes: The programme is module-oriented, although we issue no certificates after the first module. They comprise applied linguistics, economics, politics, pedagogics, and translation studies. The common denominator is an intensive study of two languages. The first two years are actually basic studies of the two languages, as well as theoretical subjects. In the translation department, for instance, I deliver lectures in Russian on the general theory of translation. The next two years are devoted to extensive training in practical translation and interpreting and in the bilingual theory of translation, which, as you know, is a basic tenet of our translation theory. My colleague, professor Chernov, delivers his lectures on the theory of simultaneous interpreting in English, using Russian-English examples. However, we do not otherwise include transmission modes used in the mass media such as subtitling, synchronisation, voice-over and the like.

CD: *Was there any instruction in translation into and out of minority languages in the former Soviet Union?*

GC: Not at this institution. ‘Minority languages’ never was an issue with us. Outsiders might think that Russian was the lingua franca within the Soviet Union, but you must understand that given the multiplicity of ‘minority languages’ spoken by different groups, the Russian language served as a means of communication for and between all groups. It went beyond what is commonly understood by a ‘lingua franca’: it was the common language used for instruction, education, and administration and accepted as such.

Russian has, however, functioned as a lingua franca in international contexts, and this institution formerly trained the interpreters and translators for the United Nations. We had an enrolment of 5 to 7 interpreters and 25 or more translators a year. They would normally be trained to work into Russian from two foreign languages, that is to say, normally English, French or German, and in one exceptional case, Arabic. I’m proud to say that this particular interpreter was the preferred pivot from Arabic in the allotted rotation period of five years.

CD: *What is the relationship between technical, scientific, and literary translation at this institution?*

VK: In principle we do no literary translation, because it is the job of the literary academics and similar bodies. We start with so-called sociopolitical texts, that is newspaper texts, which require no special knowledge on the students' part. From then we move on to scientific and specialist texts. Occasionally we include literary translations for theoretical or pedagogical reasons.

VK: No. Unlike international organisations such as the European Union and the United Nations, we must work out of Russian as well into (and with) the students' two foreign languages.

GC: This also applies to interpreting. At present it is Russian, English and German which dominate the market. There is not a significant market for French.

CD: *What do you see as the major problem for Russian Translation Studies?*

VK: That we read all your stuff - and you don't read ours because you don't read Russian. It is not fair to us and makes for a lopsided exchange in terms of research where we come out as the underdogs.