

ACADEMIA

To Intervene, or Not?

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The more heavy-handed a government is, the more eagerly it interprets even the most delicate of criticisms as an unauthorized attempt to intervene in its internal affairs.

Interventions may be good or bad. A medical intervention may save a life, “divine intervention” may be seen as guiding human affairs, and a military intervention may wreak havoc. In English, an unplanned circumstance, for instance, might also “intervene” and prevent us from attaining our objective.

In the Polish language, alongside the verb *interweniować* “to intervene” there is also another, somewhat similar verb, *ingerować*, which is particularly interesting in its usage and connotations, and so I want to focus on it here. It basically also means “to intervene,” but suggests heavy-handed methods and moreover hints at a lack of authorization or acting on dubious grounds (leaning more towards English “to interfere,” “to meddle,” or “to muck about in someone else’s business”). As such, it is never really used in the first person and present tense. It does appear in the first person and *past* tense, but generally only with respect to completed actions that are in some way laudable: *ingerowałem w coś, bo nie mogłem postąpić inaczej* (“I intervened, because I could not do otherwise”). I came across two dumb teenagers slugging it out in an alleyway, say, and I was afraid they would end up seriously hurting themselves, so I did what had to be done and *ingerowałem* (“I intervened”). By stepping in, I did something perhaps unauthorized but morally commendable, staving off a potentially bad outcome.

In the language of politics, too, the verb *ingerować* and also the related noun *ingerencja* (“intervention,” but also “interference, meddling”) are also rarely used in the first person present. Only an absolute monarch or ruthless dictator could really declare *ingeruję* (“I hereby intervene!”) in Polish, as a lofty pronouncement itself effecting the corresponding speech-act (in J.L. Austin’s sense). However, I suspect that even a ruler capable of making single-handed decisions would still shy away from ever wording such pronouncements in this way: in politics the word *ingerencja* simply does not have positive connotations; here it somehow does not in any way ennoble the actions it describes. It is most often used with respect to the actions of others. When state censorship office in Poland ceased to exist after communism fell, there was talk of what had been its *ingerencje* (“interventions”) in published texts – this

was of course the talk of those who did not approve and had often themselves been victims.

Indeed, in politics the word *ingerencja* is often reserved for the reprehensible actions of others, not laudable acts of our own. My generation still recalls a particularly memorable case of this from the past: when the Warsaw Pact forces cracked down on reformers in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the invaders of course did not describe this as an *ingerencja* or *interwencja* (“intervention”), but rather proclaimed to the world that they were simply bringing much-needed fraternal assistance to the workers of the cities and villages. That practice can be seen to be alive and well today: such words are still avoided when discussing actions by our own associates, being replaced instead with various euphemisms. But when describing the actions of one’s opponents, the words *ingerencje* and *ingerować* are now used with particular gusto. When someone tries to intervene in our actions and decisions, although we feel they have no grounds for doing so – politically, morally, or otherwise, when someone usurps the right to muck about in our affairs, sticks their nose in where it does not belong: all this often gets decried in Polish as *ingerencje*.

Interestingly, the more heavy-handed the government, the more eagerly various actions on the part of other countries or their representatives, indeed even the most delicate of criticisms, get portrayed and denounced as unmotivated *ingerencje* (“meddling”) in its internal affairs. The term may be used to sum up any criticism of a particular decision made by a ruling party, etc., serving as means of rejecting and deflecting critical opinions being expressed in the wider world. Such a formulaic rejection can be invoked at any opportunity, however trivial. Disqualifying criticism as *ingerencja* rules out any process of dialog, any possibility for the free exchange of views, any real search for compromise, the message being: “I will not discuss things with those who meddle in the affairs of others without any authorization. They can say what they want, we know what is right and we will keep doing our own thing.” This is a way of staking claim to the moral high ground, rejecting the mindless chatter of critics out of hand, relegating it to what one bloody dictator called the dust-bin of history. For better or worse – that always remains to be seen. ■