

The Role of Literary Translation in Establishing Cross-cultural Dialogue. Untranslatability and the Desire to Transplant Foreign Concepts

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Abstract. The article discusses the question of untranslatability in contemporary literary translation thorough the analysis of examples chosen from novels currently translated from English into Polish. It argues that the age of globalization makes the translator's task at the same time easier and more difficult. Following issues are discussed: translating concepts represented in the source and target languages with the use of different ideas and images, translating concepts involving significant differences in the language structure, and translating idiomatic expressions carrying additional meaning. The analysis is followed with the recommendation of the techniques to be adopted in each respective case. This is offered as an answer to the question how to transplant a foreign concept into the native context, making it at the same time seem familiar and foreign.

Today, in times shaken by violent outbursts of national and religious hatred, the most spectacular manifestation of it being the drama of 11 September, 2001, what is needed more than ever before is understanding and subsequent dialogue between foreign cultures. This can be achieved through various means, none of which should be overlooked or remain unappreciated. An obvious voice in the discussion can be offered by translators, among them literary translators. The significance of a translation of a literary work of art brought into the context of another language and another culture should not be underestimated. A work of foreign literature immerses one in a new world, making the reader first of all aware of its existence, then appreciate or even fall in love with it. This is where the translator's dilemma comes in – the desire to transplant a foreign concept into the native context, making it at the same time seem both familiar and foreign.

The *aim* of the article is to present this question, structuring it around the following issues: how to translate concepts that are represented in source and target languages with the use of different ideas and images; how to reflect in the target language concepts of which faithful rendering seems impossible due to significant differences in the construction of both languages, and finally; how to translate idiomatic expressions of which particular elements carry extra meaning relevant to the story.

The following analysis deals with the literary translation from English into Polish. The cultural proximity of the two languages – both cultures having the same western European origin – as well as any differences becoming smaller thanks to recent economic and political changes, increasing equal access to Internet and information, and increased mobility of people, result in a significant transparency of both cultures. In consequence, what arises nowadays as the most prominent difficulty in translating English literature into Polish is choosing the right images to express analogous concepts present in both languages.

Let us consider for a while the medium of expression and of the literary work of art called language. For centuries people have used language to communicate. It is a system created by a community in order to get a specific meaning

across, be understood and consequently to achieve a certain desired action from other members of the group. As such, it reflects the way in which its users perceive the reality around them and the reality itself. In Britain where the climate is milder than in Poland and temperatures rarely fall below zero, which would normally cause water to freeze, all comparisons relating to the coldness of, for example, feelings, contain the word “stone”, not “ice” – *lód*, as is the case in Polish. Therefore we usually hear that something or somebody is “cold as stone”, while in Poland the corresponding phrase is, *zimny jak lód*, which means “cold as ice”. Such differences may lead to significant difficulties in translation. Let us consider the following example.

In the novel *A Light in the Window* by Jan Karon, Chapter Six is entitled, “Water like a stone”. The phrase is at the same time a verse in a Christmas hymn appearing in the same chapter:

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone...*

With the concept of “ice” used for comparison and necessary adjustments made to incorporate the meaning and structure of the verse quoted in the hymn, the title is rendered as, *Woda skuta lodem*, and the two verses of the hymn:

*W środku ponurej zimy przeszzywający jęczał wiatr
Ziemię mróz obrócił w kamień, a wodę skuł lód...*

Another issue to be discussed is how to reflect in the target language concepts of which faithful rendering seems inappropriate due to significant difference in the construction of both languages. Let us consider an example of the title of a novel by a modern British author, Barbara Trapido – *The Travelling Hornplayer*. The figure of a hornplayer plays a crucial role in the original text and the instrument itself – the horn – is equally important. It appears, among others, in the title of the book by one of the novel's characters, Jonathan: *Have Horn; Will Travel*. However, an attempt to translate the title into Polish will soon uncover an awkwardness hard to avoid if one wants to keep the name of the musical instrument in the Polish title of the novel. *Wędrowni grajek na rogu* renders all the meanings but sounds unnatural in Polish. One

solution is to omit the name of the instrument in Polish – *róg* – and give the book a title which does not mention it explicitly, but which presents a figure of a traveling musician – *grajek* – which is a familiar concept in both the Polish language and culture. The resulting translation of the title of the book is *Wędrowni grajek*.

Another example is that of translating a set phrase which, because of a play on words, should be preserved as close to the original as possible, the more so, as later on it is exploited by the author once again. In *These High Green Hills* by Jan Karon the proprietor of the Main Street Grill wishes to advertise his bar and decides to put up a banner. However the company which prints the banner makes a mistake and omits one word. They offer a discount, so the proprietor eventually decides to put up the banner which reads:

“Eat Here Once, And You’ll Be Regular”

The omitted word, the reader guesses, is the indefinite article “a” in front of “Regular”. “A regular” is a noun meaning a regular customer, while “regular” becomes an adjective, having several different meanings, among others: symmetrical or having equal sides and angles. The mistake unfortunately changes the intended meaning of the banner, producing an undesired effect and making it at the same time appear funny. As could be expected one of the regular customers mentions later on:

“I bin eatin’ here thirty years,” he said, “an’ I ain’t regular yet.”

To preserve the effect intended by the author and an idea of an omitted word, as well as to maintain the adequacy of the comment proffered later on by one of the customers, a Polish expression is employed, used to describe the feeling of utmost pleasure, (*poczuć się*) *jak w niebie* and another expression including the word *niebo* – “heaven”, used to describe in a figurative way the moment of death, *pójść do nieba* – “go to heaven”. What follows is that the banner in the Polish translation has the following wording:

Zjedz u nas raz, a będziesz w niebie

Here the supposed omitted word is, *jak*, and the supposed lost meaning is, “eating here will make you feel as if you are in heaven”. The resulting change of meaning is, “eating here will make you go to heaven”, in other words, “die”.

The comment by one of the regular customers in the Polish translation is:

Jem tu od trzydziestu lat i jeszcze nie poszedłem do nieba.

In English it should be understood as, “I have been eating here for thirty years and I have not gone to heaven yet”.

The translation involved several constraints; an idea of an omitted word, a concept of a highly positive image of the bar replaced by a negative one due to a slight change in meaning of the advertising slogan, as well as the fact that this change came from the omission of the indefinite article in the English language, having no equivalent in Polish grammar. Yet, the solution preserved the effect intended by the author, drawing on the resources of the target language, which offered in its vocabulary a substitute concept of both the heavenly pleasure and the heavenly end.

Let us now move on to an example by another translator of English literature into Polish and the issue of rendering idiomatic expressions.

One of the central figures in the plot of *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* by Douglas Adams is that of an Electric Monk, which comes into our world rejected by its own. Electric Monks are labour-saving devices and their task is to believe in things in which men can no longer believe. Unfortunately this particular Monk develops a fault when, one day, it is given too much to believe in:

“It was, by mistake, cross-connected to a video recorder that was watching eleven TV channels simultaneously, and this caused it to blow a bank of illogic circuits. The video recorder only had to watch them, of course. It didn’t have to believe them as well.”

The man at the Monk shop explains that the Monk needs a whole new motherboard, but adds that new Monk Plus models are available, which are less expensive than the whole cost of replacing the motherboard and at the same time much more modern and powerful. In consequence the faulty Monk is rejected into the desert. It is from here that it comes into our world, arriving at one of the colleges in Cambridge. From the story we learn that it tries to warm itself up on a cold November night by the fire at the porter’s lodge. This is how the porter later relates to his colleague his conversation with the Monk, crucial to the ensuing events of the story:

“I had a chap in here earlier. Sort of strange foreign priest. Couldn’t understand a word he said at first. But he seemed happy just to stand by the fire and listen to the news on the radio.”

“Foreigners, eh.”

“In the end I told him *to shoot off*. Standing in front of my fire like that. Suddenly he says is that really what he must do? *Shoot off*? I said, in my best Bogart voice, ‘You better believe it, buddy.’”

The porter finishes his story:

“He just said he did believe me.”

As the story develops we learn that the Monk hides in the car boot of a certain Gordon Way and following the instructions and also believing it is doing what it should do, *shoots* him dead with a gun:

“As he (Gordon Way) went to the boot, it opened, a figure rose out of it, shot him through the chest with both barrels of a shotgun and then went about its business.”

The death of Gordon Way is a central event of the story and in order to understand how it was brought about and in what way it is possible to reverse it using a time machine, it is essential to understand the conversation between the porter and the Monk at the college fire.

Shoot off is an idiomatic expression in English which means: to remove (something) with gunfire, to leave quickly, to fire (a weapon or fireworks) into the air without aiming. What the porter means is, “get lost, go away”. However, as the readers will see the Monk decides to shoot off a gun which it finds in Gordon Way’s car boot. It shoots it off at the first person which it encounters, who is the unfortunate Gordon Way.

A translator of the novel into Polish had to deal with the difficulty of rendering this idiomatic expression into Polish, maintaining its essential meanings of both an impatient order to go away and an association with the murderous action of shooting at somebody. The conversation by the fire is rendered in the following way:

“W końcu kazałem mu stąd *strzelać*. Kiedy tak stał przy tym grzejniku. A nagle on pyta, czy to właśnie powinien zrobić. A ja na to moim najlepszym Bogartem: ‘Lepiej daj temu wiarę, chłopie’”.

And this is what happens at the car:

“Kiedy podszedł do bagażnika, ten nagle się otworzył, ze środka wyskoczyła jakaś postać i z obu łuf strzelby *przestrzeliła* mu pierś, a następnie udała się gdzieś we własnych sprawach”.

The translator uses expressions carrying the meaning of a shooting action: *strzelać*, *przestrzeliła*. However, *strzelaj stąd* is a phrase which does not exist in Polish. It does have connotations though with another Polish idiomatic expression, *spadaj stąd*, which means: get lost, go away, and at the same time presents to the reader the general intended idea, without an impression of an incorrect word. What is more, it forms a needed bridge to the shooting and killing action exercised by the innocent Monk later on.

Conclusions

In summary, although the Polish language did not offer an idiomatic expression equivalent to the English expression, the translator, aware of available related Polish idiomatic expressions and the general language environment, was able to devise a phrase which carried the most essential meanings and at the same time sounded familiar and was understandable in the reader's native context.

The search for a solution to the translator's dilemma has been defined as the desire to transplant a foreign concept into the native context, making it at the same time seem familiar and foreign; and specifically to seek an answer to the questions, viz. how to translate concepts

- a) represented in the source and target languages with the use of different ideas and images,
- b) involving significant differences in the language structure, and
- c) idiomatic expressions carrying extra meaning.

This leads to the following recommendations of the techniques to be adopted by a translator: the preservation of the source language's stylistic figure, yet with the use of the target language concept; the preservation of the target language construction, but with the use of the concept present in both source and target languages, or a substitute concept present in the target language only, and finally the use of the related target language idiomatic expression with the consideration for the target language environment.

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Literatūrinio vertimo vaidmuo kuriant tarpkultūrinį dialogą. Neverstinumas ir užsienietiškų sąvokų perkėlimas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje, analizuojant neseniai iš anglų į lenkų kalbą išverstų romanų pavyzdžius, aptariamas šiuolaikinės literatūros neverstinumo klausimas. Darbe teigiama, kad globalizacijos amžius ir palengvina, ir pasunkina vertėjo užduotį. Autorė aptaria šiuos aspektus: verčiamas sąvokas, kurios yra pateiktos šaltinyje ir tikslinėse kalbose, vartojant įvairias idėjas ir vaizdinius; verčiamas sąvokas, kurios apima svarbius kalbos struktūros skirtumus; ir verčiamus idiomaticinius posakius, turinčius papildomą reikšmę. Po analizės yra pateiktos rekomendacijos, metodikos, kurios gali būti taikomos tam tikru atveju. Nurodytas rekomendacijas siūloma taikyti perkeltant užsienietiškas sąvokas į gimtosios kalbos kontekstą taip, kad kontekstas tuo pačiu metu būtų ir savas, ir svetimas.

Straipsnis įteiktas 2004 04

Parengtas spaudai 2005 01

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DOI: 10.5755/j01.sal.1.7.43217