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Translation of Ambiguities in Literary Texts - an Attempt to Resolve the Problem on the Example of the Poem "The Unsaid" by Patrick Jones

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**TRANSLATION OF AMBIGUITIES IN LITERARY TEXTS
– AN ATTEMPT TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM
ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE POEM *THE UNSAID*
BY PATRICK JONES**

The problem a translator is often confronted with when translating literary texts, especially poetry, is the existence of various, often seemingly mutually exclusive, interpretations, especially those arising from ambiguities contained in the text. It seems that none of the renowned theories or models of translation has found a satisfying solution thus far. The aim of this paper is to present a case study of the process of translation of the poem *the unsaid* by a Welsh poet/playwright Patrick Jones into German and Polish. The theoretical basis used in the process of translation of the poem is constituted by the assumptions of Barańczak's (2004) Theory of Translational Maximalism and the cognitive approaches to literary analysis and to translation as presented by M. Freeman in her articles *Poetry and the scope of metaphor: Toward a cognitive theory of literature* (2000) and *Art, science, and Ste. Emilie's [Saint Emily's] sunsets: a Haj-inspired cognitive approach to translating an Emily Dickinson poem into Japanese* (2006)

* Magdalena Zyga – doktorantka na Uniwersytecie Szczecińskim (opiekun naukowy: prof. zw. dr hab. Ryszard Lipczuk, Instytut Filologii Germańskiej). Pod kierunkiem swojego obecnego opiekuna naukowego napisała i obroniła pracę magisterską pt. *Gelegenheitsbildungen im Roman „A Clockwork Orange” und in seinen deutschen und polnischen Übersetzungen* (Okazjonalizmy w powieści *A Clockwork Orange* oraz w jej niemieckich i polskich tłumaczeniach). W swojej rozprawie doktorskiej zajmuje się problemem tłumaczenia na język polski i angielski idiolektów w literaturze niemieckojęzycznej. W 2010 r. uzyskała dyplom magisterski w Katedrze Filologii Angielskiej Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego (promotor: dr Małgorzata Sokół) na podstawie pracy z zakresu wykorzystania analizy metafor konceptualnych do identyfikacji stylów indywidualnych na przykładzie tekstów piosenek walijskiego zespołu *Manic Street Preachers* (*The analysis of conceptual metaphors/blends and its role in identification of individual styles on the basis of selected lyrics by the Welsh band “Manic Street Preachers”*).

respectively. On this basis a model of translation shall be proposed which, easy to follow, allows for precision and at the same time does not limit translator's freedom and creativity.

1. Theoretical basis

1.1. The Theory of Translational Maximalism (Stanisław Barańczak)

In his book *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu* [*Saved in translation*] Barańczak presents a convincing enough theory of translation from the point of view of a practising translator. He postulates to reduce the number of principles to a minimum to reach maximum effectiveness, and, what is worth noticing, illustrates his proposals with thoroughly analysed examples. Thus, Barańczak formulates only two rules (actually bans): “Do not translate poetry into prose” [Nie tłumacz wiersza na prozę; my translation – M.Z.] and: “Do not translate high-quality poetry into bad-quality poetry”¹ [Nie tłumacz dobrej poezji na złą poezję; my translation – M.Z.]. As we can see, the author believes that the form of a text is of importance, contributes to the meaning of a text, which is compatible with the findings of cognitive linguists. As a result, he introduces the term semantic dominant (*dominanta semantyczna*), meaning the components of a text which play the key role in its understanding, and which have to be kept in its translation. To corroborate his claim that the form of a text can be such a component, that the meaning does not reside only at the level of lexis but also at the level of structure, he gives the example of a poem *Echo in a church* by Edward, Lord of Cherbury. In this poem the effect of an echo is necessary to understand the poem, to grasp its logic. Therefore, Barańczak maintains that endeavours of a translator to keep the form of the original (especially in case of poems) can help him/her translate it faithfully, can help render the semantic content accurately².

¹ S. Barańczak, *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu*, Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków 2004, p. 33.

² Ibidem, p. 16–32.

1.2. Understanding of literary texts (Margaret H. Freeman)

In order to translate a text one has to understand it first. The article of M. Freeman (2000) about the role of cognitive linguistics in interpreting literary texts begins with a statement that: “[...] the defining characteristics of literature is its ability to generate multiple meanings and interpretations”³. These various – often equally legitimate – readings of one text pose a problem not only for literary scholars but also for a translator, who has to first arrive at as many readings as possible and subsequently choose one of them. According to Freeman, however, for each text there exists a meaning at the highest level of schematicity abstracting away from details which makes various meanings possible⁴.

In literary analysis there exist generally three approaches to literary texts: the author centred, the text centred and the reader centred approach⁵. The first (traditional) one postulates to see a text through the prism of extrinsic factors, being author’s biography and times when he lived (historical context). According to the second one, which emerged in the 20th century (The New Criticism), in contrast, the work per se should be analysed regardless of historical and biographical context⁶. The third, most recent, approach focuses on the process of reception and the reader’s role in creating the meaning of the text. Supporters of this way of critical thinking also reject the traditional assumption that there is one correct meaning of a text, namely the one intended by the author, and notice that no interpretation is fully adequate⁷.

³ M.H. Freeman, *Poetry and the scope of metaphor: Toward a cognitive theory of literature*, in: *Metaphor and Metonymy at the crossroads*, ed. A. Barcelona, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin–New York 2000, p. 253.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

⁵ W. Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 15ff.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15f.

⁷ M. Coyle, J. Peck, *Literary terms and criticism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2002, p. 156f.

1.3. Faithfulness of translation – which of possible readings to choose?

(M. Freeman)

The three approaches in literary criticism correspond with those towards the issue of faithfulness to the author, the text and the recipient in translation studies. Freeman points out an interesting solution to this dilemma (or rather trilemma). She posits that “literary texts are the products of cognizing minds and their interpretations the products of other cognizing minds”⁸. Moreover, the cognitive processes employed in understanding a text are the same as those involved in its creation. Thus, the reader/translator does not have to study the biography, the mindset of the author thoroughly as our human “cognitive principles of embodied understanding” are the same⁹. That is to say, we base our abstract reasoning on what we experience with our physical body, through our senses. If we accept this assumption, we can eliminate many readings that can be conceived of by focusing on the text alone. For those that remain, however, we should find ‘a common denominator’, i.e. the reading on the highest abstract system level which sanctions various lower level interpretations¹⁰. Should it be impossible to recreate what Freeman (2006) calls “an emergent structure of meaning”¹¹ in translation, the translation should select one of the possible internally coherent sub-schemas¹². This should be done bearing in mind what is more compatible with our experiential knowledge and our knowledge about other literary works by a given author, especially the conceptual metaphors he/she typically used and how the conceptual universe of his/her texts was construed¹³.

⁸ M.H. Freeman, *op.cit.*, s. 253.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

¹¹ M.H. Freeman, *Art, science, and Ste. Emilie’s sunsets: a Haj-inspired cognitive approach to translating an Emily Dickinson poem into Japanese*, “Style” 2006, Spring-Summer, Published quarterly by Northern Illinois University, available at: (date of access: 18 Jan. 2009) http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_12_40/ai_n27095698?tag=content;coll.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

2. The method

Considering the above-presented theoretical basis, following steps have been taken in the process of translation of the poem *the unsaid* by Patrick Jones:

- 1) The analysis of the formal structure of the text i.e. sound and rhythm patterns, rhymes, punctuation, word forms (especially anomalous) such as occasional neologisms, deliberately incorrect grammatical forms;
- 2) The analysis of syntactic and semantic structure of the poem to identify places of ambiguity and possible readings of the poem;
- 3) The search for emergent image-schematic frame(s) of the poem sanctioning various possible interpretations, which is done by the method of induction;
- 4) The choice of one frame and other formal features to be kept in translation, using abductive reasoning with the application of inference to the best explanation¹⁴, i.e. defining the semantic dominant (dominanta semantyczna) of the poem;
- 5) The translation – taking possible sub-frames and limitations of the target language into consideration.

3. The analysis

3.1. The form

The first step of my analysis is to study the form of the text, as it also carries meaning and can belong to semantic dominant. Although I consider Barańczak's warning not to change the genre of the text in translation important (it is implied by his rule "Do not translate poetry into prose"), I shall not delve into deliberations on whether *the unsaid* (Text 1 in the appendix) is a true poem. While it is true that Jones's writing: "fuses poetry and drama [...] and continues to make connections between drama, poetry and the song lyrics of Welsh pop bands"¹⁵, I shall believe the author's opinion that the text in question is a poem.

¹⁴ A. Grobler, *Metodologia nauk*, Wydawnictwo Aureus – Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2006, p. 102.

¹⁵ P. Clark, *Patrick Jones – A Ranter for the 21st Century*, in: *Fuse*, ed. P. Jones, Parthian, Cardigan 2007, p. 132.

First of all, what strikes the reader at first glance is the lack of punctuation (except for one colon), which shall be one of the factors creating ambiguities. The poem is written as free verse, so the translator cannot use syllabic regularity or rhyme pattern as “scaffolding” for the translation. The graphic layout, however, is something on which the translation can (and should) be modeled. As for the sound patterns, the verses:

“rain an leaf

l e a v i n g

left/gone/severed/sentenced/sold”

contain two instances of consonance (l-l-l and s-s-s-) and constitute a play of words/sounds, just as:

“(…) viagraed verses

versus

versus:

verse us

us

u s-“.

Moreover, there are at least two occasional neologisms: ‘autumned’ (x2) and ‘viagraed’. The word ‘undercovers’ can be interpreted as either an occasional neologism – a morphologically motivated verb with quite unclear meaning – or as a product of fusion of the words ‘under’ + ‘covers’.

3.2. Syntactic and semantic structure, places of ambiguities

The analysis of the poem reveals an abundance of ambiguities from the very first lines. In the lines 1–4: “autumned nights/know/of the/torn wrist” it can be the nights that know (personification). Alternatively, “know” can be understood as an exclamation addressed to the nights from line 1 or to the reader. Line 4 could be interpreted as finished with a period with subsequent “bleeding” (as gerund) attached to “undercovers” as a noun phrase (after which we could place a period). However, we could also posit “bleeding” (as participle) to be attached to the “torn wrist” or to “undercovers” a transitive verb (occasional neologism) which takes ‘the bloodshot eye’ as its direct object. Yet, it is also possible that “undercover” as a noun phrase refers to “the bloodshot eye” which is “staring/ at the orangelit glow”, which phrase could be read as an elliptical version of

'I'm staring'. Another place of ambiguity is connected with the word "leaving", which as its subject could take "leaf" or "glow" (the glow is leaving) or "glow of" (the glow of leaving) or even the speaker of the poem (another rather unlikely elliptical version of 'I'm leaving'). A similar problem occurs with respect to "of autumnednights", which could refer back to the "glow" or be only attached to the following "of viagraed verses". The fragment "of viagraed verses" in turn can take the "glow" as its subject or "autumnednights".

Taking the above-described possibilities into consideration, following variants can be listed:

- (1a) autumned nights know
- (1b, c) autumned nights. know [...]! (addressed to "autumnednights" or the reader)
- (2a) torn wrist./bleeding
- (2b) torn wrist/bleeding
- (3a) bleeding undercovers (transitive verb)
- (3b) bleeding undercovers. (noun phrase)
- (3c) bleeding./undercovers (noun phrase)
- (4a) undercovers (verb) the bloodshot eye
- (4b) undercovers. the bloodshot eye
- (4c) undercovers (noun phrase) the bloodshot eye
- (5a) the bloodshot eye staring
- (5b) the bloodshot eye. [I'm] staring
- (6a) glow [...] leaving
- (6b) glow of [...] leaving
- (6c) leaf leaving
- (6d) [I'm] leaving
- (7a) glow [...] of autumnednights
- (7b) of autumnednights
- (8a) of autumnednights of viagraed verses
- (8b) of autumnednights, of viagraed verses

3.3. The emergent image-schematic frames

If examined closely, I believe that all the variants can be sorted and divided into two main internally coherent abstract image-schematic frames: 1) personifying frame and 2) non-personifying frame with human as agentive figure. Both frames seem to be sanctioned by the existence of one superordinate ‘versus-frame’ in which the images from the first part of the poem (the said) are contrasted with the request of the unsaid from the second part (the last 5 verses) to be put into verse. Both frames also contain sub-frames within which the translator still has to choose between multiple variants (some of which are common to both frames), preferably on the basis of his/her embodied experience and/or his background knowledge about other texts by the same author.

I. The personifying frame (possible variants; variant a is the more typical one for this frame):

- (1a) autumned nights know
- (1b) autumned nights. know [...]! (addressed to “autumnednights”)
- (2a) torn wrist./bleeding
- (2b) torn wrist/bleeding
- (3a) bleeding undercovers (transitive verb)
- (3b) bleeding undercovers. (noun phrase)
- (4a) undercovers (verb) the bloodshot eye
- (4b) undercovers. the bloodshot eye
- (5a) the bloodshot eye staring
- (6a) glow [...] leaving
- (6b) glow of [...] leaving
- (6c) leaf leaving
- (7a) glow [...] of autumnednights
- (8a) of autumnednights of viagraed verses
- (8b) of autumnednights, of viagraed verses

II. The non-personifying frame (possible variants)

- (1c) autumned nights. know [...]! (addressed to the reader)
- (2b) torn wrist/bleeding
- (3b) bleeding undercovers. (noun phrase)
- (3c) bleeding./undercovers (noun phrase)
- (4b) undercovers. the bloodshot eye

- (4c) undercovers (noun phrase) the bloodshot eye
- (5a)* the bloodshot eye staring (possible because highly conventionalised)
- (5b) the bloodshot eye. [I'm] staring
- (6a)* glow [...] leaving (possible because moderately conventionalised)
- (6d) [I'm] leaving
- (7b) of autumnednights
- (8a) of autumnednights of viagraed verses
- (8b) of autumnednights, of viagraed verses

3.4. The choice of semantic dominant

After a closer examination of the poem itself and on the basis of my (limited) knowledge of other works by Patrick Jones I decide to choose the personifying frame for the purposes of translation. I read the last five verses of the poem: “versus/versus:/verse us/us/u s-” as a request to the reader to write a poem about something that is not talked about in “the unsaid”, about the unsaid, the other frame. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge Jones, more often than not, uses stark imagery to convey emotions, which protagonists of his plays and speakers of his poems find difficult to verbalise, to talk about *expressis verbis* – hence, the personifying frame seems more plausible to me. If this frame is chosen, the images of “autumned nights”, “bleeding”, “orangelit glow” and “viagraed verses” elaborated on in the first part are contrasted with the cry of people in the poet’s mind to “verse us”, to put their emotions into a poem.

Having chosen the frame, I believe that some of the variants can be eliminated if a cognitive analysis is conducted i.e. if we reject the variants which we assume – on the basis of our experience – to be (rather) unlikely to occur in reality. Hence, I reject the variants (3a), (4a), (6c) and consider (2a) rather ‘clumsy’. I personally find it difficult to imagine how bleeding from a torn wrist could undercover (hide? make invisible?) the bloodshot eye, and how then the eye would be able to stare (variants (3a) and (4a)), although I find my colleague’s remark concerning these lines interesting. She notices that if we assume that the speaker of the poem decided to hit his forehead with his hands, to hold his head in his hands or to have his hands with the torn wrist near his face (e.g. in despair), the bleeding could affect his eyes – which would also enrich the meaning of the phrase “the bloodshot eye”. With further respect to the issue of bleed-

ing, accepting (2a) would mean separating (to certain extent) “torn wrist” from “bleeding”, consequently contradicting the cause-effect sequence. As for (6c), it is rather unlikely not to attach “leaving” to “glow” (but to “leaf” instead) and then to assume “glow” to be related to the verse “of autumnednights of viagraed verses” later in the poem. The choice within other variants shall be made at the stage of translation proper, if ambiguity cannot be kept, and would depend on the properties of a given target language. Furthermore, the variants from the non-personifying frame shall also be borne in mind and the solutions favouring rendering all/most of the variants from both frames (in other words: from the superordinate versus-frame) into the target language shall be chosen over those rendering only one.

With regard to other formal features to be rendered into German/Polish, I believe that lack of punctuation should be kept to help retain (at least some of the) ambiguities, which constitute the core of the poem. The instances of consonance and word/sound plays, as well as the layout of the text should also be considered components of the semantic dominant of the poem. In my opinion the words “leaf/leaving/left”, “severed/sentenced sold” and the last lines of the poem were chosen by the poet not because of their lexical meaning but because of their formal qualities. As for occasional neologisms, they should be – if possible – translated into morphologically motivated occasional neologisms. What is most important, however, is that their “semantic filling”¹⁶ [semantische Auffüllung; my translation – M.Z.] is kept. Moreover, although it is not visible in “the unsaid”, Patrick Jones seldom uses capital letters (often not even for proper names), so I decide not to apply capitalization either, even for nouns in German.

3.5. The translations

The translations into German (Text 2) and into Polish (Text 3) both retain the emergent meaning structure of the personifying frame and some of the variants from the non-personifying frame. In both translations the “bleeding” is seemingly unpersonified. The fact, however, that the wrist is bleeding “verdeckt” or “wukryciu” and not “unterderdecke” or “podprzykryciem” should

¹⁶ G. Michel, *Okkasionalismen und Textstruktur*, in: *Nominationsforschung im Deutschen. Festschrift für Wolfgang Fleischer zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. I. Barz, M. Schröder, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 342.

make the cognizing mind of the reader search for the agent in accordance with the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS conceptual metaphor. Thus, it is possible that the bleeding wrist was either covered/hidden by someone, or that it covered/hid itself (personification).

In the German translation the occasional neologism from the phrase “autumned nights” in the first line was rendered as “verherbst” rather than “geherbst” to emphasise the perfective aspect of the original word. The same phrase later in the poem was, however, translated as “herbstnachtlicht” not to make the verse too long, not to distort its structure. As the original phrase can be interpreted as referring to “glow”, I believe that the semantic filling of the original was kept to the highest degree possible (considering the limitations of the target language). The word “severed” was translated as “verbannt” rather than “abgetrennt” to retain the sound pattern of the whole verse. The version “fass uns versfuß” was chosen over “pack uns in verse” for the same reason, to keep the play of words/sounds.

In the Polish translation the variant “ojesienione” was used rather than “zjesienione” or “jesienione” analogous to e.g. “ozłocony” to emphasise the perfective aspect and to sound similar to vocative phrase “O, jesienione noce!”. The word “stracony” for “severed”, similarly to the German variant, helps maintain the sound pattern of the verse.

4. Conclusion

The analysis presented above and its results suggest that the 5-step model of translation process proposed in this paper is an effective one, especially with respect to literary texts containing ambiguities. As it is grounded in cognitive linguistics and one of the modern theories of translation it cannot be said to have unstable foundations. The model does not deprive the translator of his/her freedom and creativity but helps him/her make informed choices. It is, moreover, simple but not simplistic, easy to follow and can potentially be applied to various literary text of various degree of complexity – not only to poems. Yet, finding an emergent image-schematic frame(s) sanctioning various possible interpretations (step 3) of a longer text can turn out to be more problematic than of a poem. Therefore, I believe that the 5-step model presented here is worth further research to verify its usefulness and effectiveness.

Appendix

Text 1:

(reprinted here by kind permission of the author, Patrick Jones)
*the unsaid*¹⁷

autumned nights
 know
 of the
 torn wrist
 b
 l
 e
 e
 d
 ing
 undercovers
 the bloodshot eye
 staring
 at the orangelit glow of
 3 am
 of
 rain an leaf
 l e a v i n g
 left/gone/severed/sentenced/sold/
 of autumnednights of viagraed verses
 versus
 versus:
 verse us
 us
 u s-

¹⁷ P. Jones, *Fuse*, Parthian, Cardigan 2007, p. 75 f.

Text 2:

„das ungesagte“¹⁸

verherbste nächte

wisst

von der

aufgerissenen pulsader

d

i

e

b

l

u

t

et

verdeckt

das blutunterlaufene auge

starrt

 auf den orangeglühenden schein von

3 uhr morgens

von

regen und blatt

b l a s s

verblasst/weg/verbannt/verurteilt/verkauft

von herbstnachtlicht von viagragetränkten versen

versus

versus:

fass uns versfuß

von uns

u n s-

¹⁸ I thank Prof. Dr. Laurenz Volkmann and Dr. phil. Uwe Zagratzki for their helpful remarks concerning my German translation of the poem.

Text 3:

„niewypowiedziane”

ojesienione noce

wiedzcie

o tych

przerwanych żyłach

k

r

w

a

w

i

ą

cyh

wukryciu

przekrwione oko

patrzące

na pomarańczowy blask

trzeciej nad ranem

od deszczu i lisci

i ś ć i

odejść/odszedł/stracony/skazany/sprzedany

od ojesienionychnocy zviagrowanych wersów

wersja

versus:

wersyfikuj

nas

n a s

Keywords: *cognitive linguistics, translation studies, poetry*

**TRANSLATION OF AMBIGUITIES IN LITERARY TEXTS
– AN ATTEMPT TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM ON THE EXAMPLE
OF THE POEM *THE UNSAID* BY PATRICK JONES**

Summary

This paper is a case study of the poem *the unsaid* by a Welsh poet/playwright Patrick Jones in an attempt to propose a solution to the problem of ambiguities in translation. The theoretical framework to be used here is constituted by the Theory of Translational Maximalism (Teoria Maksymalizmu Translatorskiego) advocated by Stanisław Barańczak, as well as cognitive poetics and cognitive approach to translation as postulated by Margaret H. Freeman. On this basis a 5-step model is formulated and applied to render a highly ambiguous and opaque poem *the unsaid* into German and Polish. In conclusion I posit that the model, which appears to be an effective one with quite stable theoretical foundations, is put under further examination to check its applicability to different types of literary texts of various degree of complexity.

Translated by Magdalena Zyga

**TŁUMACZENIE WIELOZNACZNOŚCI W TEKSTACH LITERACKICH
– PROPOZYCJA ROZWIĄZANIA PROBLEMU
NA PRZYKŁADZIE WIERSZA *THE UNSAID* (NIEWYPOWIEDZIANE)
PATRICKA JONESA**

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie propozycji rozwiązania problemu tłumaczenia wieloznaczności. Propozycja ta została zaprezentowana na przykładzie analizy wiersza walijskiego pisarza i dramaturga Patricka Jonesa pt. *the unsaid*. Za bazę teoretyczną swoich rozważań autorka przyjęła Teorię Maksymalizmu Translatorskiego Stanisława Barańczaka oraz poetykę kognitywną wraz z kognitywistycznym podejściem do tłumaczenia postulowane przez Margaret H. Freeman. Na tej podstawie powstał pięciofazowy model, według którego wysoce wieloznaczny wiersz *the unsaid* został przetłumaczony na język niemiecki i polski. Autorka proponuje wykorzystanie

przedstawionego modelu w procesie tłumaczenia innych tekstów literackich o różnym stopniu złożoności, gdyż model ten wydaje się być efektywny i opiera się na stabilnych podstawach teoretycznych.