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Role of the Bible in the development of languages and linguistics : an outline of the issue

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An outline of the issue[*]

The Christian Church has spoken many languages in its missionary work. The issue of the language of the proselytizing message arose when Christianization moved beyond the areas settled by the Roman peoples. In Roman Italy, Gaul, and on the Iberian Peninsula, Latin, which was the language of the Western Christianity, was fairly comprehensible for the faithful for a relatively long period of time. Nevertheless, each century brought more differences between Latin and the living Roman languages. Latin was, however, treated as a written, literary counterpart of the spoken Roman dialects. It was considered "better" (which reflected its proselytizing character) and at the same time "just the same" (as Dante put it already in the 13th century).

The situation differed greatly in the Slavic and Germanic lands. Neither Latin nor Greek, which was the language of the Eastern Church, were comprehensible or familiar and therefore they could not be used for the purpose of evangelization. The missionaries had to speak the mother tongues of the converted pagans. And although the Liturgy and the essentials of the Church writing remained Latin and Greek, though to a lesser extent, the national languages were naturally gaining the status of auxiliary Church languages in the area of Roman jurisdiction. Thus, translation of the most significant religious texts into these languages became a priority. That is why the *Bible* appears at the threshold of the literate era and the history of literature of each language of the Christian world. The Slavic languages provide a classic example of this thesis.

The first Slavic language, now most commonly referred to as the Old Church Slavonic, emerged due to Saint Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius' mission in the Great Moravia. The most important religious texts were translated into this language (based primarily on the dialect spoken in the Province of Thessalonica, gradually enriched by elements of other Slavic dialects), including the *Bible*, and especially the fragments used in the Liturgy and evangelization. Those fragments were translated as first. It is known that Constantine and Methodius had translated the *Psalter,* the *Gospel,* and a selection of other books of the *New Testament* before they arrived in Great Moravia. Later on, Methodius translated the remaining books (except for the *Books of the Maccabees*) together with his apprentices. The survived copies of the *Psalter* and the *Gospel* translated by Cyril and Methodius constitute

the oldest relic of the Old Church Slavonic (e.g. *Codex Zographensis*, *Codex Marianus*, and *Codex Assemanius* from the late 10th century or early 11th century, *Psalterium Sinaiticum* and the *Sava's book* from the 11th century). And though the Old Church Slavonic (spoken in various national recensions, i.e. variants, among the East Slavs, some South Slavs, and temporarily among some West Slavs, and even among the ancestors of the inhabitants of today's Romania) had other functions apart from being the liturgical and evangelical language (i.e. being the language of the literature, culture, the national language, etc.), the *Bible* translations undoubtedly were the underlying reasons for its emergence.

The Old East Slavic writing (i.e. writing in the Rusian recension of the Old Church Slavonic) begins with the *Ostromir Gospel* from the mid-11th century. Old Serbian, on the other hand, starts with the *Miroslav Gospel* from the 12th century, while Old Macedonian originates with *Dobromir Gospel* from the early 12th century, and the Old Bulgarian – with *Pogodinski Psalter* and *Grigorovic Parimejnik* (a lectionary with a collection of Old Testament readings) from the 12th century. When it comes to Slavs who adopted Christianity from Rome and writing in the Latin alphabet, the situation was similar. Although Czech and Polish writing begins with religious songs, sermons, and other short texts, the first relics from the highest literary class[1] are the translations of the *Psalter* (the *Clementine Psalter* from the first half of the 14th century in the Czech Republic, and the *Saint Florian Psalter* from the turn of the 14th and 15th century in Poland) and the later translations of the complete Bible (the *Bible of Dresden* from the late 14th century in the Czech Republic, and the *Bible of Queen Sophia* from mid-15th century in Poland). Apart from a few minor relics from the 15th century, the Lower Sorbian writing begins with the *New Testament* translated by Miklawus Jakubica, whereas the Upper Sorbian with the translation of the *Catechism* by Wjaclaw Warichius, both from the 16th century. The starting point of the Slovenian literary language developing in the 16th century is the *Damatin Bible*.[2]

The same situation refers to Baltic peoples in the Christianization of whom Poland played a vital role. The writing developed there in the sphere of influence of the Polish culture. The most important, biggest, and the most valuable Old Lithuanian language relics include *The Simple Words of Catechism* by Mažvydas, which is the first printed book in the Lithuanian language, *Postilla*, a Polish collection of Wujek's sermons translated into Lithuanian by Daukša, and Chyliński's *Bible* translation from the 17th century. The Latvian writing also begins with translations of two *Catechisms* (a Catholic one published in Vilnius and a Protestant one published in Królewiec), whereas the relic which is the most significant when it comes to its artistic values is *Perykop na niedziele i święte* [*The Pericope for Sundays and Church Holidays* – trans. K.G.] (a selection of the fragments of the *Bible* read during the church service) from the 17th century, written by the Jesuit priest Georg Elger.

Not only did the translations of biblical texts constitute the beginning of the written and literary variants of many languages, but they also played a vital role in but establish-

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[1] The concept of the literary classes of the medieval language relics was introduced by S. Urbań-czyk (1950).

[2] There is a lot of literature on the subject; however, only two pieces will be mentioned here (Kowalenka et al., eds. 1961–1991; Moszyński 1984).

ing the norm, achieving artistic perfection and development of these variants. These may be well observed on the example of the Polish language.

Bible translations and the translations of the *Biblical apocrypha* serve as the beginnings of the Polish writing. There are few older texts and they are rather short, e.g. the oldest sermons, the so called *Holy Cross Sermons*, which are, *nota bene*, also based on the biblical stories. The listeners of the sermons became acquainted with the biblical characters and the actions of Abraham, Moses, Salomon, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and fragments of the *Gospel*. The biggest and the most important language relics both in terms of cultural as well as linguistic and stylistic values include: the *Saint Florian Psalter*, the *Bible of Queen Sophia*, the *Puławy Psalter*, and *Rozmyślanie o żywocie Pana Jezusa* [*The contemplation of the life of Jesus Christ* – trans. K.G.] also called *Rozmyślanie przemyskie* [*The Przemyśl Contemplation* – trans. K.G.]. In the course of translating the *Bible*, the Polish literary language was born, which differed significantly from the everyday colloquial medieval Polish, the evidence of which may be found in the language relics of the more quotidian, practical character.

The translations of *Psalters* and *Bible* presented various challenges and raised many questions with regard to the language of our ancestors. The problems resulted from the necessity to render complex content which had never been expressed in the Polish language. *Bible* translations undoubtedly extended Polish lexis and phraseology. The *Bible* is a difficult text, and the then-underdeveloped Polish language could not provide the proper means to express many abstract concepts, terms referring to the nature, law, etc., especially those which referred to the Palestinian reality. The translators had to deal with many problems in order "to give each thing a proper name!" [3] (as Norwid puts it) with the utmost effort.

Next *Bible* translations display great progress (the text of the *Psalter* allows to make such comparative observations starting from the 15th century). It can be easily observed that the Polish language was enriched during the translation process and expanded its lexical, phraseological resources. The changes in the synonymy are the most noticeable. The beginnings were difficult: whenever Latin revealed a wide range of synonyms, the Polish language could more often than not provide only one equivalent, e.g. *laudare, gloriari, adorare, benedicere – chwalić* [to praise]; *facere, agere, operari, gerere – czynić* [to do]; *cancere, cantare, psallere, iubilare – piać, gąść* [to sing the prasises]; *gratia, dilectio, benignitas, misericordia – miłość* [love]; *mulier, uxor, femina, coniunx – żona* [wife], *ira, furor, iracundia, zelus – gniew* [rage]. However, over the course of time one could observe the effort put into the attempts to render all the stylistic and semantic shades of the Latin source text, for example the Latin pair of synonyms *gloria* and *laus* was rendered quite early with the use of two different words, i.e. *chwała* [glory] and *sława* [renown], though their functions did not correspond with the Latin source text in the very beginning.[4]

Simply speaking, "the fight for a beautiful *Psalter* word" [trans. KG] as described by E. Ostrowska (1953) was of great importance in the development of the Polish artistic language, and therefore had a considerable impact on the general development of the cultural Polish language. Our language owes the increase both in the quality and the quantity of

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[3] Translation by Michael Mikoś (2002).

[4] One may mention two examples of a very abundant literature on the subject: Rospond 1962 and Kossowska 1969.

vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions to the *Bible*. The *Bible* is the most prominent source of the phraseology both in the Polish language, and in other European languages.[5]

The increase in the quality and the quantity of vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions, the development of synonymy, etc. contribute to the general growth in the linguistic competence. According to Tadeusz Lewaszkiewicz, this general growth of the "lexical-syntactic-semantic" competence decides whether a dialect evolves into a literary language. In the early history of all literary languages, developing and perfecting linguistic competence was " … often the only or the major feature which allowed to differentiate an emerging literary language from folk speech"[6] (Lewaszkiewicz 1994). This competence is achieved by the emerging literary language through language contact with the higher culture languages, called by Lewaszkiewicz "the high-prestige languages" (at a scale encompassing the medieval Europe, we may list the following high-prestige languages: Latin, Greek, Old Church Slavonic; however at a regional, i.e. local, scale, we may say that Czech was superior to Polish, while the Ruthenian languages and Lithuanian were inferior to Polish). Lewaszkiewicz claims:

> I think that the contact between the dialects and the languages of higher culture (e.g. Latin) was the main causative factor in the improvement of the linguistic competence in the early period of the development of the literary European languages. … The folk dialects were becoming more sophisticated due to contact with the high-prestige languages, i.e. new vocabulary items were added (especially the abstract terms), new meanings emerged, new idioms, foreign affixes, word formation patterns, and syntactic structures appeared. Language contact contributed to the specialization of the linking words (especially the ones introducing subordinate clauses), the ability to use compound sentences, dependent clauses, and various compound-complex sentences and language means having impact on the cohesion of the text. They also shaped the stylistic variants of the languages[7].
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> (Lewaszkiewicz 1994: 216–217)

In a word, contact between the folk dialects and the languages of higher culture resulted *tout court* in the emergence of literary languages, and since the *Bible* translations (first of the selected books, then of the *Bible* as a whole) served as a plane for this contact,[8] in Lewaszkiewicz's concept, the *Bible* constitutes a source for the literary languages in the European culture.[9]

Lewaszkiewicz's views on the genesis of the European literary languages seems onesided. It rightly underlines the role played by the improvement of the general linguistic competence, but the role of the development of standard language and linguistic norms is diminished in this concept. Engaging in a polemic with Lewaszkiewicz, I tried to prove that language standardization was equally important in the process of the development of literary languages, using the Polish language as an example (Walczak 1996). It has to

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[5] Relatively most complete material on that matter is presented in my article (Walczak 1985).

[6] Trans. Katarzyna Gaweł.

[7] Trans. Katarzyna Gaweł.

[8] The theory was presented as a general model before (Lewaszkiewicz 1992a).

[9] Which is in fact stated by the author of this concept *expressis verbis* (Lewaszkiewicz 1992b).

be stated clearly, however, that it does not affect the appraisal of the role played by the *Bible* in the origins of the Polish literary language. In my view, the process of developing a linguistic norm referred to the written Polish and was greatly influenced by the linguistic relics of the highest literary class, i.e. mostly the translations of the *Psalter* and the whole *Bible* (WALCZAK 1990; WALCZAK 1992). Thus, ultimately, both components of the development of the Polish literary language, i.e. increased language competence and normalization, which I consider equal, prove that *Bible* translations constituted the basis of the literary Polish language.

Bible translations established some phraseological and poetic stereotypes (Wujek's role as a translator is especially noteworthy) and served as the foundation for the so-called biblical style, used later on not only in relation to the *Bible*, in order to linguistically and stylistically express the category of solemnity, especially in relation to religious and patriotic themes. Polish literary masterpieces of the biblical style include *The Books of the Polish People and of the Polish Pilgrimage* by Adam Mickiewicz and *Anhelli* by Juliusz Słowacki.

What has been said about the role of *Bible* in the development of the Polish language applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to many other languages, as it has been mentioned before, while formulating general statements and theses. The Czech language serves as an even more accurate example supporting those claims. The Czech Middle Ages and Renaissance produced numerous translations of the *Bible* and the *Psalter*. What is more, the norm of the modern Czech language established in the Renaissance was based on the *Kralice Bible*. The Sorbian languages should be mentioned here as well, since their modern literary variants date back to the *Bible* translation by Fabricius and Fritz into Lower Sorbian (the 18th century) and Frencel's translation into Upper Sorbian (the end of the 17th century).[10] We may also turn to examples from beyond the Slavic languages, as the role of Luther's translation of the *Bible* in the genesis and history of the general German language is commonly known.

Newer *Bible* translations (and it should be remembered that the *Holy Scripture* has been translated into 1500 languages so far) originated the written tradition and therefore the literary standard of languages of many aboriginal peoples, especially in America, Africa, and Oceania. The translations of the *Bible* prepared by the missionaries of various Christian faiths were the first written texts in hundreds of languages all over the world. It means that as the translators had to establish a linguistic norm for a given language; they often took the responsibilities of professional linguists and carried out in-depth linguistic research aiming at describing the grammar and the lexis, codifying the super-dialectal lexical and grammatical norm, and designing the alphabet and spelling. All these works were carried out long before the actual translation took place, and the translators were not reimbursed for their time devoted to researching the background as professional linguists would. We may, therefore, say that these situations involved creating the literary language from the ground up, which owed its emergence to the *Bible*.[11]

Up to this point we have discussed the role of the *Bible* in the history of the languages of the Christian world. In order to reflect the second part of the title of this paper, one

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[10] Cf. the great bibliography in: LEWASZKIEWICZ 1995.

[11] From many publications, most often foreign, on the subject, I would like to recall the following book: MAJEWICZ 1989.

should mention the significance of the *Bible* in the development of the study of language in general and the study of particular languages, namely linguistics.

The original text of the *Bible* in Hebrew, Aramaic and Koine Greek has been examined for many years, mainly in philological studies. In the Renaissance, *philologia sacra* developed extensive research tools and methods and became the leading philological field of the era. Classical philology, Hellenic studies, and Latin studies adopted research methods developed by *philologia sacra*.[12] Philologists specializing in *Bible* studies could not refrain from taking up linguistic issues *sensu stricto* in the study of Greek or Hebrew as they are intertwined with philological problems. This refers to the past as well as to the present. The text of the Bible has served the purpose of testing, developing, and verifying new concepts and linguistic methods for a very long time. I will limit these deliberations to one example only: the linguistic statistics.

The text of the *Bible* was subjected to statistical analysis quite early and quite many times (the most prominent work in this area includes studies by MORGENTHALER 1958, HERDAN 1960 and PONIATOWSKI 1971 in Poland; also SAMBOR 1972). The statistical analysis is very important as it serves as an objective criterion in the verification of the hypotheses on the biblical exegesis, especially those concerning such issues as the authorship of particular books, the filiation of the texts, etc. The statistical analysis of the lexis and grammar of the books which comprise the *New Testament* revealed numerous similarities in terms of language and stylistics between the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*, the *Gospel of John* and the *Book of Revelation*, etc., proving many historical, philological, and theological theses concerning the authorship of the books of the *New Testament* correct.

The translations of the *Bible* into national languages gave rise to many linguistic reflections, not to mention their significance for Translation Studies (translatology), where no text could compare to the *Holy Scripture*. This will be depicted on the example of translations into Polish.

Compared to the French and German translations of the *Bible*, the Polish translations already in the 16th century distinguished themselves among other such efforts due to the abundance of the paratexts, both translation-focused as well as general-philological. Thorough and extensive prefaces and commentaries manifest reflection on the languages of the source text (containing numerous notes about grammatical and phraseological idiomatic expressions in Hebrew and in Greek), and, first and foremost, the in-depth scientific reflection on the Polish language.[13] They include comments on the possibility of rendering (i.e. the translatability of) the synonymy in the source text (mentioned by Budny, Czechowic, Wujek), word-formation- and semantics-related translation problems (it should be noted, however, that the dissidents adhered, both in theory and in practice, to linguistic innovations, developing the concepts of neologisms and neosemantisms, by introducing such terms as for example *ofiarownik* [~the offerer] instead of *kapłan* [priest], *pokajanie* [repenting] instead of *pokuta* [penance, atonement], *zbór* [congregation] and *zgromadzenie* [congregation] instead of *kościół* [church], *ponurzenie* [~immersion] instead of *chrzest* [baptism], *ponurzyciel* [~immerser] instead of *chrzciciel* [baptist], *nauczyciel* [teacher] instead of *mistrz*

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[12] Cf. CZERNIATOWICZ 1965, as well as CZERNIATOWICZ 1969.

[13] Many observations and comments on the subject can be found in OTWINOWSKA 1974.

[master], etc.,[14] while Wujek advocated the traditional approach to language: " ... hence I retained the old ones on purpose. Though simple, they reflect the truth, the antiquity and the ceremonies of the Catholic faith well" (WUJEK 1593; cited in: TASZYCKI 1969: 93)),[15] and many other general and specific linguistic issues, going as far as to discuss the concept of the literary language and its relation to the dialects (Budny claims: " ... Poles commonly use the language of this land in writing, holding to where they come from. But I did not have this habit, as I translated not for one region but for all, therefore I was not directed by any sense of local identity. You will find Greater Polish words here, words from Kraków, Masovia, Podlasie, Sandomierz, and some Ruthenian words too" (BUDNY 1572; cited in: KLEMENSIEWICZ 1965: 186-187).[16] Moreover, the target texts themselves constitute a significant object of numerous lexical, phraseological, semantic, word-formation, inflection, and even syntax-related studies.

Later on (and up until this day) the translations of the *Bible* into indigenous languages provided an important source for linguistic reflection. The missionaries translating the *Bible* into these languages often face challenges and problems which may not be overcome, caused by surprising differences between the grammatical system of the source language and the target language. There is a widely known example of such difficulties concerning translation into the language of one of the indigenous Native American tribes in southern Mexico. This language includes a separate category (reflected in morphology) of an action performed for the first time (as compared to an action which had already been performed before). This made the sentence about Jesus and his apprentices' arrival to Capernaum untranslatable as the *Bible* gives no evidence whether they had been to Capernaum before. It may seem pretty odd that there is no possibility to translate (of course in an accurate, proper, faithful, and fully equivalent way) such an easy passage. We should, therefore, recall the example of the Latin sentence *Petrus sorores habet* which now would be translated by any beginner Latin learner as *Piotr ma siostry* [Peter has sisters]. This sentence, however, was untranslatable into 14th- or 15th-century Polish. The Latin sentence tells us that Peter has more than one sister. The translator in the 14th or 15th century would have needed the information if Peter has two sisters specifically (they would have translated the passage as *Piotr ima siestrze*) or more (*Piotr ima siostry*). At that time, the Polish language still had the dual number, which is well known by the linguists, and which was used for two objects/persons. The traces of the dual number are still present in the Polish language, as we use *ręce* [hands] instead of *ręki* (compare to *nogi* [legs] which are no longer used in the dual). It is also preserved in the proverbs and adages, e.g. *Mądrej głowie dość dwie słowie* [two words are enough to the wise] [the word *słowie* occurs in dual number; its plural form is *słowa* – KG]. The plural was used for three and more objects/persons. One may not deduce from the Latin sentence *Petrus sorores habet* how many sisters exactly (i.e. two or more than two) Peter has.

Each language has its specific grammatical categories which make the speakers of that language include or not include some information. For example, the speaker of the Polish

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[14] Out of many papers on the subject I will mention a classical piece: GÓRSKI 1962.

[15] The source text is in Old Polish language, trans. K.G.

[16] Trans. K.G.

language can tell something about a person or an object not expressing whether they are definite, familiar, etc., or indefinite. The speaker of French, English or German, on the other hand, cannot not disclose such information, as the structure of those languages involves the compulsory use of definite and indefinite articles (French: *le*, *la* – *un*, *une*; English: *the* – *a/an*; German: *der*, *die*, *das* – *ein*, *eine*, *ein*) and makes the speaker reveal the familiarity/definiteness.

We had the chance to get used to the categories present in the European languages, and therefore they seem natural to us. We tend, however, to consider the categories of the indigenous languages from other parts of the world unnatural and odd. A vital role in "taming" those categories and taking hold of them in the theoretical linguistics is played by translations of the *Bible* into those languages. These translations also reveal great variety of the languages when it comes to typology, and they induce the linguists to reduce the number of the so-called linguistic universals, i.e. patterns that occur potentially across all languages (including language as such, i.e. the code). Many patterns were proved not universal and applicable only to our culture, i.a. due to *Bible* translations. This way, the Eurocentric character of linguistics, which has prevailed for obvious reasons for a long time, is reduced.

It is natural that contact with other languages, often so different from ours, sparks the interest in linguistics in missionaries working among indigenous peoples. Some of them use their observations just in their missionary work (proselytizing and translating), others become outstanding language theoreticians, especially in general linguistics, comparative linguistics, and ethnolinguistics, while still maintaining their missionary vocation. Their contribution to the linguistic achievements is enormous. In order to refrain from mentioning names which would not be familiar to non-specialists, I will only refer to two outstanding linguists. The first one is Eugene Nida, an excellent ethnolinguist and Translation Studies scholar, expert in biblical linguistics (the organizer and coordinator of large-scale, systemic efforts to translate the *Bible* into indigenous languages) and in semantics (the author of the componential-analysis technique). Nida was quite recently recognized as the best living linguist by Jacek Pleciński, a specialist in Roman and Translation Studies from Poznań (Pleciński 1986).[17] The second one is Kenneth Lee Pike, a great authority in phonetics and phonology, pioneer in the modern studies on prosody (accent, intonation, vowel length), the originator of the theory of tagmemics which was widely approved by the linguists, especially in the US, and was used as a theoretical basis for the descriptive studies of many Native American languages.

The Bible has had a great impact on many areas of culture and human thought. In order to understand the extent of this influence, one may not forget about its significance in the history of the literary languages of the Christian world and in the development of linguistics.[18]

Tłumaczyła Katarzyna Gaweł

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[17] Eugene Nida died in 2011 – K.G.

[18] The issue mentioned in the title of the paper was presented for the general public without methodological background and based only on the literature which was available at that point, cf. Walczak 1987.

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Role of the Bible in the development of languages and linguistics
An outline of the issue

Summary

The paper describes a very significant role of Bible translation in the development of the Slavic national languages. The author focuses on the Polish language which in its literary form was shaped in the Middle Ages but its full functional efficiency was reached in the 16th century. Among the medieval relics, the translation of psalms and other Bible passages played a great cultural role. However, the complete Polish translations of the Holy Bible appeared in the 16th century (Biblia Budnego, Leopolity, Wujka). Those renditions enriched the Polish language with a number of new words. Moreover, they provoked a scientific reflection on the Slavic languages. As a result, the author proposes a thesis asserting that the act of Bible philological translations contributed to further linguistic research.

Key words: history of language, Bible, development of language, linguistics