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Three Polish translations of Romeo and Juliet

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Three Polish translations of *Romeo and Juliet*

Translators have difficult task as they are obliged to know the translation theories, the 17th century language and, what is more, it is expected that they will reflect the uniqueness of the original text with certain finesse, leaving the reader absolutely spellbound. In the article I intend to demonstrate that Polish translations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by Józef Paszkowski, Maciej Słomczyński and Stanisław Barańczak are not the same. The lexical elements have been changed in the three translations. However, these changes do not always weigh in favour of the original version. To what extent do the translations differ from each other? This is the question the article gives the answer to.

Translation theories

The terms “dynamic equivalence” and “formal equivalence” are associated with the translator Eugene Nida. “Dynamic equivalence” and “formal equivalence” are two approaches to translation. Dynamic equivalence (also known as “functional equivalence”) attempts to convey the thought expressed in a source text (if necessary, at the expense of literalness, original word order, the source text's grammatical voice, etc.), while formal equivalence attempts to render the text word-for-word (if necessary, at the expense of natural expression in the target language)¹.

Central to House's discussion is the concept of “overt” and “covert” translations. In an overt translation the TT (Target Text) audience is not directly addressed and there is therefore no need at all to attempt to recreate a ‘second original’ since an overt translation ‘must overtly be a translation’². By covert translation, on the other hand, is meant

¹ Ch. Kasparek, “The Translator's Endless Toil”, *The Polish Review* XXVIII (2), 1983, p. 83–87.

² J. House, *A model for translation quality assessment*, Gunter Narr, Tübingen 1977, p. 189.

the production of a text which is functionally equivalent to the ST (Source Text). House also argues that in this type of translation the ST ‘is not specifically addressed to a TC (Target Culture) audience’³.

Vinay and Darbelnet in Venuti⁴ mention that the method or procedure of translation can be divided into two covering procedures, they are: “literal” or “direct translation” and “oblique translation”. Literal or direct translation procedures are used when structural and conceptual elements of the source language can be transposed into the target language. Oblique translation procedures are used when the structural or conceptual elements of the source language cannot be directly translated without altering meaning or upsetting the grammatical and stylistic elements of the target language.

Semantic approaches

“Semantics” is the area of linguistics, which is defined as the study of meaning.

Meaning postulates are tightly related to the relation between words. Words enter in relation with other words to create a certain meaning. A translator has a choice, namely, which lexical item should they employ in the text to communicate the message as accurately as possible.

Shakespeare translators

Perfectly crafted Shakespeare’s tragedies have been read, analyzed and appreciated for hundreds of years. One of such well-known plays is *Romeo and Juliet*.

Romeo and Juliet belongs to a tradition of tragic romances stretching back to antiquity. Believed to be written between 1591 and 1595, the play was first published in a quarto version in 1597. This text was of poor quality, and later editions corrected it, bringing it more in line with Shakespeare’s original text⁵.

Since the tragedy was written more than four hundred years ago, it appears to be no surprise that several Polish translators have undertaken the task of translating the original play into their mother tongue. Among such prominent translators are Józef Paszkowski, Stanisław Barańczak and Maciej Słomczyński.

Józef Paszkowski (1817–1861) is one of the most distinctive translators who got the recognition by translating Shakespeare’s dramas. He spent all his life in Warsaw. At first, he was a teacher but then he dedicated his life to translating. His translation of *Romeo and Juliet* was published in the mid-19th century⁶.

³ Ibidem, p. 194.

⁴ Vinay and Darbelnet in Venuti, 2000, p. 84–93.

⁵ G. A. Bonnard, “Romeo and Juliet: A Possible Significance?”. *Review of English Studies* II (5), 1951, p. 319–327.

⁶ Z. Szwejkowski, J. Maciejewski, *Literatura pozytywizmu i Młodej Polski* (The Literature of Positivism and Young Poland), Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1970.

The only person in the world who translated all of Shakespeare's works is Maciej Słomczyński (1922–1998). He is known to work very fast as he needed only twenty-one days to translate *Romeo and Juliet* in 1983⁷.

The third translator, discussed in this article is Stanisław Barańczak. A poet, translator, literary critic, essayist, scholar, editor and lecturer, he is the most famous translator of Shakespeare's plays. He studied Polish at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, where he became a lecturer and earned his Ph.D. He has lectured on Polish literature at Harvard since 1981. Some years later, as in 1990, he translated *Romeo and Juliet*⁸.

***Romeo and Juliet* and its three Polish translations**

Paszkowski, Słomczyński and Barańczak took the responsibility for translating the masterpiece. Paszkowski's translation dates back to the 19th century, whereas two others were written in the 20th. Due to the range of time, the differences between the Polish versions are distinguishable.

Most literature translations are characterized by the lack of conformity in terms of lexis. "The Prologue" in *Romeo and Juliet* is not an exception. Although, the sentences describe the same situation and refer to the same context, it is highly difficult to compare them in terms of semantics as the words employed in the three translations vary significantly from one another. Paszkowski in his Polish translation employs one fragment translated by Kasproicz, namely, "The Prologue" and its fourteen passages said by chorus.

Shakespeare's passage reveals the place of the action as "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene". The meaning of 'fair' corresponds to 'beautiful', 'pleasant', which dates back to the 12th century when it was mainly used in reference to weather⁹. Kasproicz does not reflect the word in his translation as he formulates "Tam, gdzie się rzecz ta rozgrywa, w Weronie". Barańczak presents a very similar version, "W Weronie gdzie się rozgrywa ta sztuka". The only difference concerns 'rzecz' and 'sztuka'. The word 'sztuka' emphasizes that *Romeo and Juliet* was to be shown on stage and this was its main purpose. The word-for-word translation of 'fair' is found in Słomczyński's version as he literary translates the whole passage "W pięknej Weronie, gdzie przebiega sztuka". Instead of 'rozgrywać', his translation includes the word 'przebiegać'.

Barańczak shows certain individuality in the next passage, "Gdy w sercach ojców nienawiść szaleje". This sentence is his translation of "From forth the fatal loins of these two foes". If comparing these two passages separately, one could not spot that it is a direct translation from SL (Source Language) into TL (Target Language). None of the Shakespeare's words finds their equivalents in the Polish translation. Kasproicz's and Słomczyński's versions are in opposition. The lexical elements correspond to the original

⁷ M. Kucharczyk-Kubacka, *Maciej Słomczyński (1922–1998): bibliografia* (Maciej Słomczyński (1922–1998): bibliography), Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna w Krakowie, Kraków 2008.

⁸ R. Matuszewski, *Literatura polska, 1939–1991* (Polish Literature 1939–1991), WSIP, Warszawa 1992, p. 332–335.

⁹ D. Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–2010.

as Słomczyński writes “Z lędźwi dwu wrogów zrodziło się życie”. It’s possible to compare SL words to the TL as ‘loins’ has its equivalent ‘lędźwie’, ‘loins’ and ‘foes’ is reflected by ‘wrogowie’. A reader finds almost identical translation in Kasproicz’s “Z łon tych dwu wrogów wzięło bowiem życie”.

The same situation is with the next passage, “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life”. Kasproicz and Słomczyński translate in a similar way “Pod najstraszliwszą z gwiazd, kochanków dwoje”, “Pary kochanków, przez gwiazdy przeklętych”. Certain lexical resemblance is noticeable, precisely both authors mention ‘gwiazdy’ and ‘kochankowie’. This kind of likeness is not observed in Barańczak’s “Dzieciom, wiedzionym przez los ku zagładzie”. These three translations have the same pragmatic function as they reflect Shakespeare’s intentions. Since the most important thing is to preserve the cross rhymes, the Polish translators tend not to transfer lexical elements from the original. They try to give the original context instead.

Next, Shakespeare writes “Whose misadventured piteous overthrows”. ‘Misadventured’ means “an unlikely chance or accident”¹⁰ and as an adjective it corresponds to ‘unfortunate’. Kasproicz writes “Po pełnym przygód nieszczęśliwych bycie”, “A wraz z ich śmiercią smętną, jak ujrzycie” (Słomczyński) and finally, “Miłość podsuwa daremną nadzieję” (Barańczak). There are no shared lexical elements in these three Polish translations. In terms of semantic equivalence they are wide apart, which does not resemble the translation of the same English passage.

The last two lines demonstrate that three translators analyzed the original text from a totally different perspective, leaving nothing to compare in terms of lexical elements. Shakespeare writes “The which, if you with patient ears attend”. ‘Attend’ has its origin in the 13th century as an explanation of “to direct one’s mind or energies”¹¹. Although, the word has even deeper roots since in the 12th century Old French language presented the definition “to expect, wait for, pay attention”. The sense of “take care of, wait upon” is used from the early 15th century¹². Despite the word’s rich history, it did not find its translation in Kasproicz’s text as he writes “Które otoczcie cierpliwymi względy”. The only similarity with the original is based on the word ‘patient’ and its Polish counterpart ‘cierpliwy’. The last resemblance corresponds to the relative pronoun ‘which’ and Polish ‘które’. The rest of the text in this line carries much the same meaning, although with a totally different choice of words. Słomczyński, on the other hand, presents another version “Słuchajcie zatem, a co umknie uszom”. Here, the word ‘ears’ finds its Polish equivalent ‘uszy’ but this is the only shared element. Barańczak translates the line “Oglądać będzie tu, na naszej scenie”. He changes ‘słuchać’ into ‘oglądać’, which is not only far from the other Polish translations but also it differs from the Shakespeare’s line as ‘ears’ emphasizes the act of hearing, listening to something rather than seeing or watching.

¹⁰ A. Room, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Word Histories*, Cassell & Co., London 2002, p. 385.

¹¹ D. Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–2010.

¹² Ibidem.

The Comparison

Since Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* over 400 years ago, it comes as no surprise that many translators tried to transfer the language of the original masterpiece into their mother tongue. However, not everybody is aware that the versions significantly differ not only from the original text but also from each other. Over the years, different translators have applied different lexical elements from a totally dissimilar perspective. “The Prologue” presented above demonstrates that the Polish texts share the same words, although in most examples they differ considerably. Later translators do not seem to follow of their predecessors and their version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Each translator wants to make his translation truly unique and identified by many Shakespeare’s enthusiasts. However, it does not denote that all translations are equally successful.

To evaluate the three Polish translations I will take Nida’s dynamic equivalence as a criterion, which attempts to convey the thought expressed in the source text, if necessary, at the expense of literalness, original word order, the source text’s grammatical voice, etc. Barańczak’s version is the closest to this approach as he gives the main meaning of the original play, disregarding, as most examples proved, the lexical elements used by Shakespeare.

However, the analysis of the Polish texts with reference to the spirit of Shakespeare’s times gives different results. The translator who lets the reader go back time to the 16th century is Kasprowicz and his version of “The Prologue” used in Paszkowski’s translation of the play. He uses less modern language than Słomczyński and Barańczak, maintaining a lot of Shakespeare’s lexical elements.

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