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What is Polish language to the translator?

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

What Is the Polish Language to the Translator?¹

On superficial examination of the records coming from various epochs we can easily have an impression that translators view their native language only instrumentally, in terms of its practical usefulness. (Rarely do the practitioners of this craft go into sentimental raptures about the beauty of the speech! Rather they are apt to show forthright aversion, dry sarcasm or simply to enumerate dispassionately its merits and defects.) As long as our translators worked the language that had not yet been formed and universally recognized to be of the equal value with Latin, they had to face the fact that it was “greatly wanting in words” (Stanisław Gosławski²), and since there was no ideology which would unequivocally absolve them from the sin of being untruthful to the original, there was no end of complaints. All those statements concerning the deplorable state of the material, expressions of discontent with the “inadequacy” of Polish supported the theory of the translators’ work as an exceedingly difficult task. Later, when Polish grew stronger and richer not only in its lexical resources but also in “the aptest usage” (Stanisław Potocki³), there came a time of its general apology. Ludwik Osiński⁴ finds then his native tongue “free in its course, unhampered in its forms, varied in its idioms, and while allowing great liberty as to the order of words, it is subject to certain rules only insofar as demanded by clarity, called

¹ The closing paragraphs of preface to *Pisarze polscy o sztuce przekładu 1440–1974. Antologia (Polish Writers on the Art of Translation 1440–1974. An Anthology)*, selection of texts, commentaries and preface by E. Balcerzan, Poznań 1977.

² S. Gosławski, “Dedication” [to his translation of] Simon Simonides’ *Castus Joseph*, Cracow 1597. All the authors quoted by Balcerzan in his preface are included in the anthology.

³ Stanisław Kostka Potocki (1755–1821)—poet, playwright, literary critic and historian, author of memoirs and of the famous satirical novel *Podróż do Ciemnogródu* (1820); translated Horace, Cicero, Rousseau, especially noteworthy is his translation of a fragment of Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*.

⁴ Ludwik Osiński (1775–1838)—literary critic and historian, after Bogusławski director of the National Theatre in Warsaw, lectured in the Dramatic School and Warsaw University; among the authors translated by him are: Ovid, Horace, Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, Schiller.

for by power, fluency and harmony due to every image." Still later, flexibility of the language having grown impressingly (although the development took a different course from that postulated by pseudo-Classicists), also the appetite of its speakers grew more insatiable. The system of verbal communication—not only within our language, but as regards all linguistic contacts—became the subject of dramatic contestation. If the spontaneous writing discloses whole regions of untruth in the area of speech, and if in every attempt at rendering the world in words "the tongue lies to the voice, and the voice lies to the thought," the translator finds himself working at a double disadvantage. He must preserve the verisimilitude of the untruth expressed in a foreign language and at the same time he cannot avoid recreating the deception of his own language. The problem is not limited to the sheer suspicion of the word—such a distrust of language is often deliberately assumed for artistic purposes—the translator feels also restrained by the standards of correctness; Boy⁵ already stated, in his preface to Proust's novel in his translation, that the Polish reader would not have excused the translator if he had reconstructed the original syntax faithfully; now we are told by Zofia Chądzyńska⁶ about incessant collisions between Cortazar's experiments and limitations of Polish syntax. Moreover, above the translator's accounts with the language there is an imperative that still binds his "superego"—to translate understandingly. What is one to do, asks Maciej Słomczyński,⁷ when philological expertise of the original only increases obscurity and ambiguity? When in Joyce's rough drafts and notes he finds the accumulation of "constructional ideas, minute corrections and insertions, constantly contributing to obscurity of the text?" Despite

⁵ Tadeusz Żeleński (Boy, 1874–1941)—theatrical critic, satirist, author of numerous essays on culture and manners; author of a gigantic series of translations from French: *Dictionary of Modern Polish Writers* (Warszawa 1963) gives 112 titles of books and fragments of books translated by Żeleński; among them are the works of Balzac, Beaumarchais, Bédier, Chateaubriand, Diderot, Gide, Mérimée, Musset, Pascal, Prévost, Proust, Rabelais, Rousseau, Stendhal, Voltaire.

⁶ Zofia Chądzyńska (b. 1912)—translator from Spanish, among the authors translated by her are Cortázar, Borges, Cardoso, Rodorada.

⁷ Maciej Słomczyński (b. 1920)—author of several novels and plays, translated such masterpieces of English literature as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

the theory of language deceptions the translator has to find out the meaning of the work, he must play a double game and show uncommunicability of the vision by detecting elements of communicability that are projected into it. This is the requisite of his activity. While searching for the key to *Finnegans Wake*, writes Słomczyński, "I read the book for I do not know which time and still I could not find a passage which I could translate with the feeling that I made a translation, i.e. that I wrote in Polish what the author wrote in another language."

Records included in this anthology come from various times. For what Piotr Kochanowski⁸ shares with Maciej Słomczyński, Stanisław Potocki with Boy Żeleński, and Bolesław Leśmian⁹ with Zofia Chądzyńska, is the approach to their language, treated not only as a repository of instruments (more or less useful in their craft) but also as a concrete literary task. Translation, to be sure, reveals embarrassing "shortcomings" of the system; but at the same time it supplies what is lacking, fills up the gaps and repairs the speech. The "enrichment" of Polish (of which Piotr Kochanowski wrote) through the art of translation differs from analogical endeavours of original writing in that it is liable to precise measurements: linguistic possessions are not estimated against supposed, often impalpable needs of the society, but in direct confrontations with the actual possessions and possibilities of languages—and thereby experiences—of other societies. To translate is to introduce into the consciousness of the readers experiences stored in a foreign speech.

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⁸ Piotr Kochanowski (1566–1620)—poet, translated into Polish Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*.

⁹ Bolesław Leśmian (1878–1937) began his literary career as a bilingual, Polish-Russian, poet; while showing in his poetry the idiomatic character of Polish, its lexical and phraseological particularities, its archaisms and local idioms, as well as its inexhaustible possibilities of word formation, he explicitly admitted foreign inspirations of this poetry.