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Translation of poetry is still translation

The title of the article might seem too obvious to require any further investigation or explanation, yet – having considered a number of scholarly views – I believe it opens up a whole field for analysis of the status of poetry translation, which will be outlined in the subsequent paragraphs. At the very beginning, it also needs emphasising that I am assuming here the point of view of a translation teacher, practitioner of translation and recipient of literature in translation. A scholarly perspective is undoubtedly valuable, yet at times it may lead to conclusions which are too abstract or distant from the perspective of recipients of translation, which is a truly practical application of language even in its literary embodiment.

An organisational complexity, creativity, subjectivity, implicit meaning, individuality of style determined by a unique combination of stylistic devices and semantic value [cf. Connolly, 2001: 172-175] are the features traditionally emphasised in interpreting poetry *per se*, as well as analysing it for the purpose of translation. One might risk the statement that most translation studies courses taught in Poland start from Roman Jakobson's *On linguistic aspects of translation*, in which poetry is juxtaposed with all the other text types. Written over fifty years ago, the article is still instrumental in triggering various discussions on the nature of translation, yet they all seem to converge in one point:

> In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. […] Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term – paranomasia, reigns over poetic art,

and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible […] [Jakobson, 1959/2006: 49].[1]

Two words which have become clichéd in analysing the issue of poetry translation seem to be most important here, namely 'untranslatable' and 'creative'. The multiplicity of elements which are deployed in a poem, their complexity in their own right as well as the network of relationships they enter result in the alleged untranslatability. Thus the approach to translation of poetry must be different than to other texts. Most other texts communicate messages, their informative aspect dominates. Whatever conclusions concerning their texture are drawn, they are juxtaposed with the utilitarian function, most often to be found irrelevant. Although artistic prose is also obviously unique, it is still seen as 'less unique' or closer to the ordinary forms of communication used on a daily basis.[2] Untranslatability of poetry is believed to be one of its fundamental characteristics, defining its position in the world of translation. As a consequence, it is believed that only its creative transposition is possible, which makes the matter even more complicated as it is always difficult to determine what limits of creativity one should observe.

Jakobson mentions poetry only briefly, as if only to emphasise the discrepancy between its untranslatability and the translatability – with a whole palette of tools – of other texts. It is arguably his linguistic background that makes him optimistic when it comes to rendering various texts in the TL. Other scholars, whose main field of analysis is literature, are rather disillusioned. A poet herself, Rosmarie Waldrop provides a powerful metaphor to illustrate her approach to poetry translation: "The destruction is serious. Translating is not pouring from one bottle into another. Substance and form cannot be separated this easily. […] Translating is more like wrenching a soul from its body and luring it into a different one. It means killing" [Waldrop, 1984: 42-43].

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[1]   Perhaps only Robert Frost's conviction that poetry is what gets lost in translation, recalled by Edwin Gentzler in his *Contemporary translation theory* [2001: 27], is equally salient in students' minds.
[2]   David Connolly claims that "the language of poetry will always be further removed from ordinary language than the most elaborate prose, and the poetic use of language deviates in a number of ways from ordinary use" [2001: 171].

However, in a lot of publications within translation studies content and form are somehow separated and used to refer to the semantic and organisational aspects of translated texts. Naturally, such references are simplifications, yet to a certain extent they describe what actually happens in translation. A translator of poetry interprets the text on the basis of formal solutions and its semantic layer. Although both are interconnected, a rhyming pattern, number of syllables or literary devices have to be chosen. If we assume that form and content are one, how then to explain the very process of selection which inevitably takes place in translation? How to justify adjusting the choices made by translators to some interpretation they opt for?[3] The matter is more complex and more intangible than scholars would like to see it.

The problem of content and form comes back in Stanisław Barańczak's reflection on 'music' and 'sense' in translating good poems, with the former being part of the latter [2004: 27]. The so called music often results from rhymes, which were of utmost importance to him. He was an ingenious translator of absurd poetry, in which auditory elements are especially conspicuous and add much to the humour. Reading Willis Barnstone's words on poetic translation, one cannot escape the feeling that Barańczak could have subscribed to his point of view:

> While translation into rhyme requires more skill and time, it is not a restrictive experience and one need not stray from the text. […] But, more important, the very strictures incite imagination. In meeting the demands of rhyme, one is freed from dull literalness, from the tyranny of the obvious. One dares, one leaps, and in the end is perhaps closer to the original meaning [Barnstone, 1984: 51].

Although these words seem to depict pertinently what Barańczak and many other poets-translators do, they also draw one's attention to a risky concept, i.e. crossing the borders between recreation and creation. Obviously, a translator of literature has to consider much more than just mere words. The extended complex network of elements in both metacontext A and B [cf. Krysztofiak, 1999: 53] influences the interpretation, which in turn has effect on lexical decisions. Yet it is difficult to

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[3] Pondering these issues, Karl Dedecius saw translating as a process in which the translator progresses from sense to form, from deciphering information, providing transposition, through paraphrase to a complete translation [1974: 56].

decide at which point fighting the boredom of literalness or striving at creative transposition have already crossed the limits of interpretation.

Barańczak was creative and independent in his choices and postulates, yet he never went as far as Jerzy Jarniewicz seems to be going in the interview published in *Przejęzyczenie. Rozmowy o przekładzie*, where he states that the translator "simply is an author" [Zaleska, 2015: 195]. He reiterates the same idea in *Ways to translation*, a handbook to be used in teaching translation studies:

> The decisions that a translator of a poem has to make are essentially of the same order as the decisions that an "original" poet makes: translators, like poets, select and combine elements of language, so as to achieve a particular aesthetic or emotional effect. However radical this may sound, the translator is thus a second author – not a reproducer, or imitator, involved in a parasitic, derivative or automatic activity [Jarniewicz, 2015: 237].

Although translator's responsibility for the final shape of the text in all its aspects as well as his authorial impact on the final effect of the TT are indisputable, equating the author with the translator seems to be a risky venture. Jarniewicz's claim does not sound odd when applied to him – a poet, a literary scholar, a critic of literature, a critic of translation, finally a translator of literature, prominently encompassing poetry. However, if other translators, less experienced, knowledgeable and responsible, take advantage of such empowerment granted them by an authority in the field, the effects of translation might be too distant from the source text.

Here a question might be asked how to decide what is and what is not too distant. I believe that a general, so to speak philosophical approach to translation can be decisive. As translation studies has evolved employing ideas from various fields of humanities, its representatives are influenced in their conclusions on theory and practice of translation by their fundamental views. As I am primarily a linguist, a practising translator (although not of literature), and a teacher of translation and language, the perspective which determines my understanding of the nature of translation is deeply rooted in the linguistic views I follow, namely cognitive linguistics. Thus, as much as I am convinced that literary interpretation is one of the factors to be embraced when approaching

the task of translation, for me the ultimate solutions are encoded in the
language of the poem itself,[4] with all its complex relationships to be de-
ciphered, for instance applying the tools of cognitive grammar.[5]

Having considered all the above views, it is worth summarising
some points. It is true that poetry is saturated with a multitude of stylistic
devices whose role is to express the author's vision of the world. Never-
theless, it is mainly the density of these devices that characterizes poetry
as they can also appear in various types of texts, from press reports to
scientific articles. Some of the latter follow complex conceptual meta-
phors, advertisements heavily lean on puns, informative texts employ
alliterations in their titles or use metaphors to make the presentation
clearer. Literary devices are used to enhance the texts stylistically or
appeal to a larger audience. On the other hand, many poems are written
in everyday language, which becomes one of their distinctive features.
Poetic prose or prosaic poetry are generic contaminations, but also sim-
ply show that the language is used in its entirety for various purposes
[cf. Leech, 1979: 25-26]. Already three decades ago Anna Legeżyńska
emphasised that although specific linguistic features distinguish poetry
from other types of texts, prose enters the sphere of the poetic, while
poetry resorts to colloquial language [Legeżyńska, 1986: 45].

Perhaps the most distinctive feature to be considered when ap-
proaching poetry for the purpose of translation is its interpretative com-
plexity, with Jakobson's verbal equations being only the surface of its
involved structure. All levels of an artistic text [cf. Ingarden's schema
of four layers, 1988: 52-57] have to be taken into consideration while
preparing translation-oriented analysis. Yet these elements are addition-
ally dependent on the person who interprets the text, as every act of

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[4]   This somewhat too personal effusion is necessary at this point because it relates
the notion of personal views and convictions to the standpoint assumed in analysis.
Scholars are never objective, and objectivism [cf. Lakoff, Johnson, 2003: 186-188
on the myth of objectivism] seems to be most conspicuously and naturally irrelevant
in the field of poetry and all the research related to it.

[5]   Although Ronald Langacker deploys mainly examples from everyday commu-
nication, his dimensions of construal (comprising specificity, focusing, prominence
and perspective [Langacker, 2009: 85-128]) are arguably useful in analysing poetry
and its translations. As detailed linguistic analysis goes beyond the scope of this
article, tools of Langacker's cognitive grammar are only mentioned here.

interpretation is individual, with a lot of factors related to the knowl-
edge, experience, reading practice, etc. (in short – cognitive base) of the
reader-translator. This gives origin to synchronic and diachronic trans-
lation series, as well as to a lot of criticism concerning interpretations
followed by particular translators [cf. Jarniewicz, 2015: 237 on lack of
definitive interpretation; Connolly, 2001: 173 on interpretation as part of
translation task; Ingarden, 1988: 316-326 on places of indeterminacy].

Additionally, one still ought to remember that what is subject to
translation are not complexly structured verbal equations which undergo
extralinguistic interpretation, but the communication value of the orig-
inal. And this rule pertains to all types of texts, to all genres. Analysing
the modern linguistic approach to translation, Roman Lewicki concludes
that communication (a message) cannot be tantamount to the linguistic
elements from which it is built, and that the communication value of
the text has to be considered together with the communication compe-
tence of its recipients [Lewicki, 2016: 22]. In the case of literature, the
communication competence of the translator has to be accompanied by
a number of other competences related to comprehending artefacts of
culture.

What matters a lot is the relationship established between the object
of communication and its interpreter, in the discussed case – a transla-
tor of poetry. The approach that is adopted to language in general, and
to its embodiments in particular, determines pathways of interpretation
to a greater extent than the object of interpretation. As mentioned be-
fore, when a cognitive linguistics-oriented approach is adopted, what is
emphasised is a particular kind of linguistic sensitivity rooted in close
reading in which all the grammatical elements communicate what can
be further interpreted with various tools, depending on the type of text,
be it a poem or a press article. Analysing the notion of equivalence, in
its various understandings still central to translation studies, Elżbieta
Tabakowska states:

> "stylistic" equivalence in translation involves, in a large measure, the dimen-
> sions of imagery as defined within the framework of Cognitive Grammar.
> Consequently, "stylistic competence" of a translator must not be seen as some
> kind of "linguistic competence" (defined within any chosen theoretical frame-
> work); […] this particular type of competence […] comprises also the ability

to recognize the subtle ways in which individual dimensions – like individual strokes of a painter's brush – co-exist to produce a coherent and harmonious picture [Tabakowska, 1993: 72].

Tabakowska's "stylistic competence", arguably very much suited to analysing poetry, might be seen as part of or an element complementing Lewicki's "communication competence". This in turn suggests that the theoretical premises for the translator's workshop can only benefit from combining elements from various approaches eclectically, in as much as they correspond to each other or complement each other. Translation studies has developed over the years with focus on its literary, linguistic and finally, most recently, cultural aspects. Philosophically-wise, scholars who have contributed to this development assumed a phenomenological, hermeneutic, cognitive, postmodern or postcolonial perspective as their point of reference. Theoretical assumptions concerning the purpose of translation as such, its ideological or political engagements, its status within the target culture, the notion of equivalence (which nowadays goes much beyond simple dictionary adequacy) seem to be much more influential when it comes to analysing texts for translation than their mere type or genre.

Moreover, what should not be underestimated is the practical approach to translation. In James Holmes's model of translation studies the relationships between theory and practice are dialectical [Holmes, 1972/2006: 190]. Whatever rules or good practices are proposed, they are not truly valuable if they are not applicable. Translations are produced, and only later – when asked to reflect upon them – translators try to point out some rationale behind their choices. Barańczak himself saw such a rationale in semantic dominant deciphered in the ST and implemented in the TT. This was his prescription supposedly guaranteeing a successful rendition of a poem. However, as his own translations sometimes show [cf. Kodeniec, 2011: 66-75 on Emily Dickinson in Barańczak's translation], semantic dominant is not enough. It can be either mistakenly chosen or faultily implemented, or both. The unity of content and form poses serious problems here, as it is rather a theoretical construct. A few examples which are to follow illustrate how much attention, ingenuity, and creativity is needed to translate poetry without freely departing from the ST, whatever semantic dominant translators have in mind.

The first poem brings into focus the tendency to blur the border between poetry and non-poetry. It is commonly believed that poems have to contain 'poetic' words; however, when reading modern poetry we can observe that a strict division into literary and non-literary language does not exist. Poets use a lot of 'borrowings' from various discourses to express their ideas. Marzanna Bogumiła Kielar is one of such Polish poets. Her admiration for the natural world is expressed in emotional descriptions of plants, animals and earthly elements, such as water and soil. Yet her language is very precise and enriched with scientific terms. They are translated competently in other types of texts and here should also be rendered accordingly to foreground the interests of the author and give justice to her nature-oriented linguistic expression.

> ***
> Gdy już sunący zboczem gruzowo-błotny strumień
> rozerwie tę aluwialną pokrywę, życie, i wymiesza nas z gliną
> i kamieniami,
>
> poznam cię po korzeniu, po drobnej rdzy na blaszce pierzastego liścia.
> Poznam cię po nasieniu i liściowych bliznach,
> Po ochronnej łusce na zimującym pąku –
>
> będę całować cię
> wargami z ziemi
>
> ***
> When, rushing down a slope, a debris flow
> bursts open the alluvial crust, life, and mixes us with soil
> and stones,
>
> I will know you by the root, by the rust on the lamina of a pinnate leaf.
> I will know you by the seed and the leaf scars,
> by protective scale on a wintering bud –
>
> I will kiss you
> with my lips of earth

As it can be seen, the translator, Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese, did not resort to simplified equivalents but followed the scientific lexical choices. She preserved the elements which compose the texture of the poem, but

also somehow stand out in the text, which is otherwise very personal in tone. 'Debris flow', 'alluvial crust', 'lamina of a pinnate leaf', and 'protective scale on a wintering bud' add to the vivid image of the relationship referred to in the poem. In poems such as this one it is important for the translator to remember that the traditional vision of the poetic must not interfere with the communication the poet wanted to establish with the readers.

Another example of difficulties to overcome is based on cultural discrepancies between the source and target traditions. Carol Ann Duffy's poem in its title refers to a custom unknown in Poland but practised in the Anglo-Saxon world as a form of punishment for using profanities, lying or verbally showing disrespect.

MOUTH, WITH SOAP

She didn't shit, she soiled or had a soil
and didn't piss, passed water. Saturday night,
when the neighbours were fucking, she submitted
to intercourse and, though she didn't sweat cobs then,
later she perspired. Jesus wept. Bloody Nora. Language!

USTA, MYDŁEM

Nie srała, wypróżniała się
i nie sikała, oddawała mocz. W sobotni wieczór,
kiedy sąsiedzi się pieprzyli, ona ulegała
stosunkowi i, choć wtedy nie pociła się jak szczur,
później perspirowała. Na Boga… Cholerna Noro. Jak mówisz![6]

The expression used in the Polish title could preclude TRs' full understanding, yet the rest of the poem is fairly clear, as the disparities between polite self- or society-imposed terms and the real nature of certain phenomena are omnipresent in Polish as well. Although some gaps in the TRs' cognitive base might make it impossible to 'feel' the poem, the communication is not broken. It is difficult to imagine replacing the

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[6] The translation provided here is just a sketch produced for the purpose of my MA thesis in 2004, yet it can function as a point of departure in composing a publishable version. Only one stanza is quoted here due to editorial limitations.

ST images with ones closer to the TC, or removing them altogether. If the poem were to be published, perhaps some elements should be explicated, perhaps even a metatextual comment in a footnote would not go amiss, yet the essence – both linguistic and cultural – would be conveyed. The loss would be perhaps lesser in translation than if the text was to be read by a contemporary British teenager who does not understand references to old customs.

The last example to be mentioned definitely requires considerable effort on the part of the translator to provide a successful translation which would not be seen as an over-creative transposition. Poetry of absurd as authored by its master, Edward Lear, is perhaps the greatest possible challenge if one thinks about the interconnectedness of form and content. Yet the rhyming pattern can be determined, the rhythm – followed, the function of semantic elements – related to their position in the presented narrative situation. Such an amalgam amusing the SR must be broken into elements in translation and assembled together again, obviously with a great dose of creativity. Barańczak managed to reinstall the unity of content and form, despite, or maybe because of, lexical (guitar – cytra, to the stars above – w kierunku Nord-West) and structural shifts (senses moved between lines), and numerous additions (osoba, parówki, footnote with pronunciation of "The Honey"). His version somehow relates to the ST as well as meeting the requirements of a good poem of this subgenre – it is melodic, amusing and absurd.

    The Owl and the Pussy-Cat

    The Owl and the Pussy-Cat went to sea
    In a beautiful pea-green boat,
    They took some honey, and plenty of money,
    Wrapped up in a five-pound note.
    The Owl looked up to the stars above,
    And sang to a small guitar,
    "O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
    What a beautiful Pussy you are,
    You are,
    You are!
    What a beautiful Pussy you are!"

Puchacz i Kicia

Kiedy Puchacz i Kicia wyruszyli w rejs życia
W zgrabnej łódce groszkowozielonej
Wzięli w drogę parówki, duży zapas gotówki
I słój miodu z napisem „The Honey"*
Puchacz najrozmaitsze piosenki brzdąkał na cytrze
I tak śpiewał w kierunku Nord-West:
„Kiciu, cudna osobo! Kiciu, życia ozdobo!
Urodziwą mą Kicią tyś jest!
Tyś jest!
Tyś jest
Urodziwą mą Kicią tyś jest!".
                    * Czyt.: "Dze Honej" (przyp. tłum.)

Nevertheless, can it be said that Barańczak is the author of *Puchacz i Kicia* just like Lear is the author of *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*? I do not think so, as – to state the obvious – without the latter the former would not have originated. The fact remains that translations – despite the level of creativity they result from – are derivative by definition. Even if poetic masterpieces are translated by genius poets, to call the result of their work translation, they have to follow the rules or suggestions advocated within translation studies rather than creative writing.

Summarising, I would like to focus on three already discussed issues and one common-sense observation. First of all, despite its unique nature, translation of poetry is not totally disparate from other types of texts, primarily in as much as it is derivative. What is different are the proportions of stylistic devices employed in poems and the complexity of levels at which they are to be understood. Secondly, the fact that it is not the text itself but communication between participants of a communication situation which is translated explains why various interpretations can occur. Each recipient is determined by their cognitive base, in the case of reading and translating poetry supported with interpretations generated within literary studies. This allows for various translation choices at the semantic level but should preclude versions contrary to the source message. Thirdly, in the light of the above, the object of translation does not seem to be most influential when it comes to choosing the method of translation. The general approach or, in other words, the philosophical framework adopted by the translator seems to be more

significant. Thus we can be talking about theories of translation if we assume that various approaches generate separate theories. We cannot be talking, however, about theories of various types of translation, for instance a theory of poetic translation, computer games translation or press articles translation. The multiplicity of objects of translation naturally calls for multiple techniques, but they are just tools instrumental in achieving a goal governed by the philosophical approach followed by the translator. Finally, commonsensically, it can be observed that the translation effects which undergo scrutiny in scholarly publications, including this article and such like, very often result from flashes of genius or moments of despair, and no theoretical assumptions can be traced behind translators' decisions. As always, practice does not fully correspond to theory, yet it should still be considered when investigating theoretical matters.

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Streszczenie
Przekład poezji to jednak przekład

W wielu rozważaniach, które można zaliczyć do teorii przekładu, poezja traktowana jest inaczej niż pozostałe gatunki lub typy tekstów. Podkreśla się nierozerwalność jej „formy" i „treści", ponieważ formalna organizacja elementów językowych sama w sobie stanowi dodatkowy element znaczenia wiersza. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę ukazania poezji jako obiektu przekładu podlegającego podobnym zasadom jak inne teksty, m.in. poprzez omówienie opinii kilku badaczy i wierszy różnych typów. Jako czynnik, który może prowadzić do wielości teorii tłumaczenia, rozumiane jest tu raczej ogólne podejście tłumaczy

i badaczy wywodzące się z ich filozoficznych poglądów na język i naturę przekładu niż wielość rodzajów tekstów.

Słowa kluczowe: przekład poezji, jedność formy i treści, językoznawstwo kognitywne, podejścia filozoficzne

SUMMARY
In numerous TS-oriented discussions, poetry is perceived differently than other genres or types of texts. The unity of 'form' and 'content' is emphasised, as formal organisation of linguistic elements constitutes an additional element of the meaning of a poem. This article constitutes an attempt to show poetry as an object of translation which undergoes similar rules to those governing translation of other texts. It is done by discussing opinions of a few scholars and presenting a few poems. What is identified as a factor which can lead to the multiplicity of theories of translation is a general approach to translation adopted by its practitioners and scholars which is rooted in the philosophical views on language and nature of translation they follow, rather than the multiplicity of objects of translation.

Key words: translation of poetry, unity of form and content, cognitive linguistics, philosophical approach