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The translator and his/her language/culture

Many scientists try to define the terms “language” and “culture”. F. Grucza [1992: 13], see also S. Grucza [2008, 2010], R. Utri [2009: 74 f.], differentiate between “idiolect” and “polylect” as well as between “idioculture” and “polyculture”. An idiolect is the individual language that a person possesses in his/her mind – all the language qualities and abilities: with the help of these a person produces the language output – oral or written texts.

So the language is not in the text, it stays in the mind, in the human being, in the *ánthrōpos* – that is why the theory that is based on these premises is called the anthropocentric theory of human languages or anthropocentric linguistics. So a person can have his/her Polish idiolect, German, English idiolect etc. A national language – and here Grucza quotes Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, a great Polish linguist at the beginning of the 20th century – does not really exist:

Właściwy proces powstawania i utrwalania się języka indywidualnego dokonywa się w mózgu jednostkowym, w duszy jednostkowej. [...] Język *istnieje* tylko na gruncie psychicznym, w indywidualnej duszy ludzkiej [Baudouin de Courtenay, 1984: 15].

The Polish language exists in reality only in the mind of Polish speaking people. What we call English, Polish (ethnic idiom or national idiom) is simply a theoretical construct – defined as the sum of all English or Polish idiolects.

Below I will show the idea of idiolect and polylect (e.g. *nacjolekt*) in a graphic way to make more clear what is meant.

Diagram 1. Polish idiolects [on the base of S. Grucza, 2008: 139]

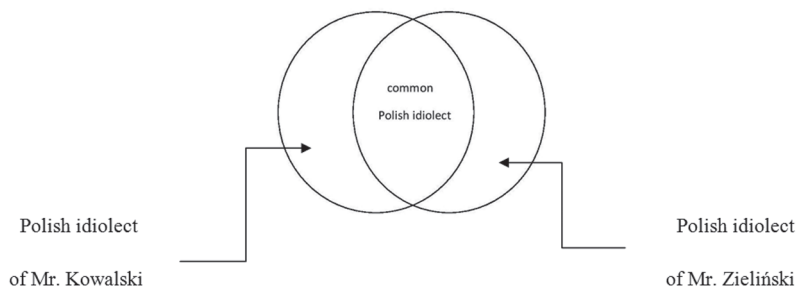
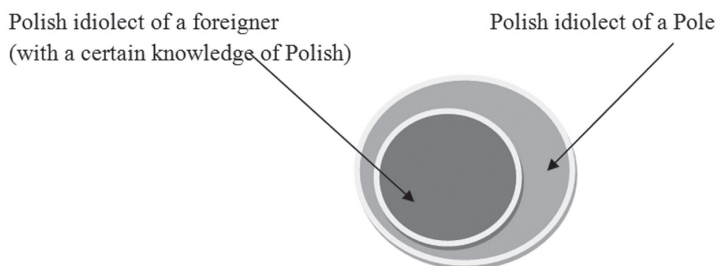


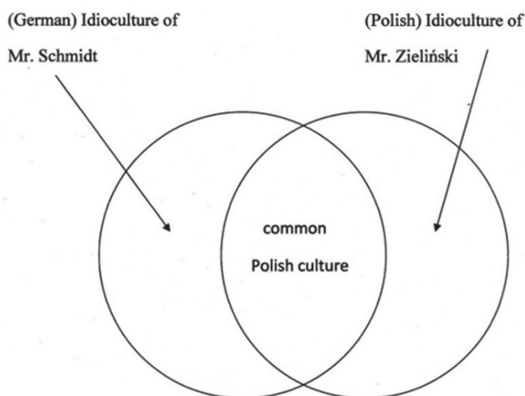
Diagram 2. Polish idiolects of a Pole and a foreigner
[on the base of S. Grucza, 2008: 139]



We see that a foreigner (who learnt Polish as an adult) has a smaller lexical range of language than a native Pole. The lighter element indicates the part of the language of the native Pole that is not present in the mind of the foreigner.

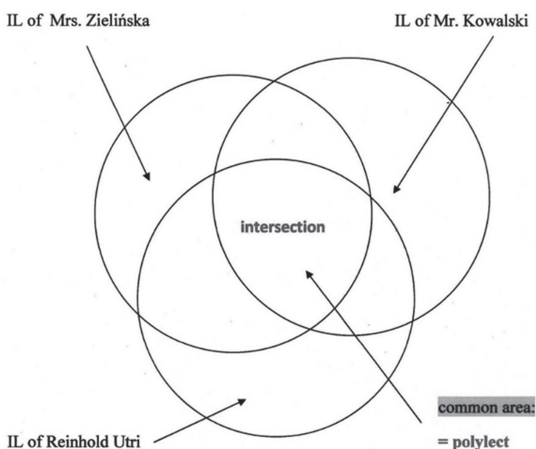
The same is the case with culture. Below I present the idea of “idio-culture” and “polyculture”, adequate to the concept of idiolect and polylect above. The common part of both idiocultures of both Poles is the common Polish culture.

Diagram 3. Idiocultures of a Pole and a German
[on the base of S. Grucza, 2008: 139]



The following chart presents the idea of a polylect: it is the common area of all idiolects (IL). One can transfer the same model to other types of languages, e.g. to languages for special purposes (see more in Sambor Grucza [2008]).

Diagram 4. Polylect as the intersection of three idiolects
[on the base of S. Grucza, 2008: 139]



F. Grucza [2003: 46] says:

On the one hand languages and cultures enable people to understand each other, on the other hand they “restrain” people because they impose the “Weltanschauung” (philosophy of life) of their followers, since they function in people’s heads like paradigms; but not only in the communicative respect. They also contribute to the constitution and establishment of the individual as well as the collective identity of human beings; that is why they tend to create a border to other human beings.¹


The question “what is an element of a foreign culture?” is not so easy to answer. Within our culture we have many elements that used to be foreign (or have only a foreign name) but are no longer extraordinary – just think of Polish cuisine (*barszcz ukraiński, pierogi ruskie, salata grecka, ryba po grecku, kluski śląskie, kawa po wiedeńsku*). Sarter [2005: 262, transl. author] characterizes these cultural elements as follows:

Cultures are not homogeneous blocks, but differ between regions and social groups. In spite of that, there are things in common for all members of one culture, especially in daily behavior, in actions and reactions, in expectations and attitudes. These are often accepted by people of one culture as “normal”, “natural”, as obvious, and are rarely reflected within the frame of one culture. Only when one compares contacts with culturally differently imprinted behaviours does one becomes aware of that. What Goethe said about other languages, fits also for the knowledge of cultures: He who does not know other cultures does not know his own.²

¹ Orig.: “Einerseits ‘eröffnen’ Sprachen sowie Kulturen den Menschen die Möglichkeit, sich miteinander zu verständigen, andererseits ‘beengen’ sie aber diese, indem sie die Selbst- sowie die Weltsicht ihrer ‘Träger’ prägen, indem sie diese in den Köpfen der Menschen quasi paradigmatisch vorbestimmen. Jedoch nicht nur in kommunikativer Hinsicht. Sie tragen auch zur Erzeugung und Festlegung sowohl der individuellen als auch kollektiven Identität der Menschen und damit zugleich dazu bei, dass sie dazu neigen, sich geistig von anderen Menschen abzugrenzen”.

² Orig.: “Kulturen sind keine homogenen Blöcke, sondern sowohl regional als auch sozial unterschiedlich. Dennoch gibt es im Vergleich Übergreifendes, allen Angehörigen einer Kultur Gemeinsames, auch und gerade im alltäglichen Verhalten, in Aktionen und Reaktionen, Erwartungen und Haltungen. Diese werden von den Angehörigen dieser Kultur häufig als ‘normal’, ‘natürlich’, selbstverständlich angenommen und folgerichtig im Rahmen einer gegebenen Kultur selten reflektiert. Erst

What Sarter says is appropriate and also very important. We get to know our own culture much better when we get to know another culture, because we see the other perspective (other habits, other (religious) traditions, other *Weltanschauungen*) and nearly automatically we start to compare elements of the other culture with those of our own. The foreign concepts of life, the unfamiliar thinking is then (partly) also reflected in the language. For this I will give some – partly very impressive – examples.

- In Chinese for example there is a completely different concept for the expression “good”: it is the combination of the sign for woman and son (see the sign below; it is part of the speech of Vera F. Birkenbihl in her lecture 2008; one can find a similar shorter passage on Youtube, e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ_igyRDwpI).
- Sayings: in English the saying *The early bird catches the worm* is in German *Morgenstund hat Gold im Mund* and in Polish *Kto rano wstaje, temu Pan Bóg daje*. They are three different concepts. But we still cannot draw the conclusion that the English concept of language is biological, the German always materialistic and the Polish religious. 
- I was 16 when I was in England for the first time. I was offered a cup of tea four or five times a day, which was too much for me. When I was offered a cup of tea for the third time in one day, I wanted to refuse and said: “Thank you”. I immediately got the tea and was astonished. At that time I thought one word means simply a different word in another language. Later on I realized that “thank you” in English means “Yes, please”. “Danke” in German or “dziękuję” in Polish means the opposite, namely “Nein, danke” / “Nie, dziękuję”.
- Let’s have a look at the word “no”. If you ask in Polish “Will you go with me to the cinema?” or in a shop “Is there a black

im Vergleich, im Kontakt mit anders kulturell geprägten Verhaltensweisen werden sie bewusst. Denn was Goethe über die Kenntnis anderer Sprachen sagte, trifft auch auf die Kenntnis von Kulturen zu: Wer andere (Sprachen, Kulturen) nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen”.

currant jam?” you can get the answer: “Nie”, or “Nie, nie dzisiaj” or “Nie, nie ma”. In English such an (abrupt and short) answer would be quite rude and impolite, because of such an answer the friendship could end.

- When a Turk talks to a German, the Turk keeps a distance of about 30-40 cm, while the German about twice as much. The Turk approaches the German, the German moves away, the Turk comes nearer again and so on. There is no compromise for anybody; everybody feels uneasy. The science of proxemics deals with the analysis of this usage of the space of a person (including body contact).³
- Concerning invitation: in some cultures a “no, thanks” can be a polite form of “yes” (for Egyptians, for Russians, often also for Poles). A German friend here in Warsaw invited his Polish friend Artur, and when he offered him something to eat, Artur said politely “no, thanks” (and waited for another offer of food); my German friend took this for serious and Artur stayed hungry the whole evening.
- Eating or drinking in certain situations: in the book “Lekcje Pana Kuki” (Orig. in German: Herrn Kukas Empfehlungen) by Radek Knapp, three guys are celebrating something: they want to eat something cheap which goes with vodka: in Vienna they eat canned fish – in the Polish translation they eat “ogórki kwaszone”. This is not a word-for-word translation, but it is an excellent cultural translation.
- Concerning invitation: when you are going to visit somebody in Poland, you bring a gift with you: either flowers, a bottle of wine or some sweets. In Germany or Austria, for example, guests rarely bring a present, it is not a habit. So people from cultures with this habit (Poles, but also people from South Europe or Northern Africa) have this problem and they often consider the Germans as impolite and penny-pinching; the Germans on the other hand think that people from the above mentioned nations overact, that they are too generous.

³ More about this topic see: http://www.iug-umwelt-gesundheit.de/pdf/2006-4_schwerpunkt2_Proxemik.pdf.

- One can translate the Polish word “zaraz wracam” to “at once” / “immediately”. But in Polish it can mean longer than two or three minutes, maybe up to one hour (I once noticed a small note on a desk in a library in Warsaw, so I waited patiently 25 minutes and nobody came).
- The difference between cultures and the kind of problems that can arise is shown in several films: e.g. in the film *My big fat Greek Wedding* or some Austrian productions: e.g. *I love Vienna* (conflict with the Muslim religion; for more about the cultural differences shown here and the resultant emerging conflicts and funny situations see Utri [2008]) or *Cappuccino Melange* (the main female part is played by an Italian); some others show the difference between Austrian and German culture and language: e.g. *Das Weiße Rössl am Wolfgangsee*, *Kebab mit alles*, *Poppitz*, or nearly all the films of the Turkish-German film director Fatih Akin (e.g. *Im Juli*, *Solino*, or the German slapstick comedy *Kebab connection*).
- Another, more linguistic-semantic aspect of Slavic languages is the aspect of verbs: here the given translations of the Polish aspect of verbs are often totally insufficient. Most Polish-German dictionaries tell us that the verb with the two aspects “sprzedawać” / “sprzedać” can mean “to sell”, but can also mean “to offer sg. for sale”, so one is connected to a certain amount, the other not; dictionaries also give the meaning “to work as a sales person”, which is not connected to the aspect anymore (compare Schwenk [2008: 282⁴]; different shades of the aspect see Kątny [2000]).

⁴ “Im Deutschen einfach mit ‘verkaufen’ wiederzugeben, und es unterlässt, darauf hinzuweisen, dass der imperfektive Aspekt entweder für ein nicht-resultatives Verkaufen, also für die Bedeutung ‘(etw.) zum Kauf anbieten’, oder für ein resultatives, aber in der Menge nicht begrenztes Verkaufen steht, während der perfektive Aspekt stets ein sowohl resultatives als auch in der Menge determiniertes Verkaufen meint. Im Falle der beiden zuletzt genannten Wörterbücher kommt erschwerend hinzu, dass neben dem Sachverhalt ‘verkaufen’ zusätzlich die Bedeutung ‘als Verkäufer tätig sein’ aufgeführt wird, wobei man diese zwar korrekt dem imperfektiven Aspekt zuweist, dabei aber übersieht, dass es sich hierbei weder um eine verbsemantische noch um eine aspektsemantische und damit um keine lexikalische, sondern in Wirklichkeit um eine grammatische Erscheinung handelt [...]”.

A German or Englishman learning Polish cannot find out from the dictionary what form of the aspect he/she should use.

- There are expressions in one language that do not exist in others; e.g. “matka Polka”; once I had to translate this expression in a text written by the Polish bishop (R.I.P.) Józef Życiński. I made a footnote and explained the expression in several sentences.
- The French film *Les choristes* – “the choir singers”, was translated into Polish not word-for-word “chórzyści”, which one does not associate with school (but rather with a church choir), but properly – which means according to the reality in Poland – *Pan od muzyki*.

We can see that when we try to translate something, we have to have in mind many aspects of the language *and* the culture. That is why it can be very useful for (high school) students to exercise translating in classes.

Iluk [2008: 68] states that by translating as an exercise the pupils/students will realize not only the linguistic differences – which means that they realize that one cannot translate literally or to learn false cognates (and here in the *l’approche diachronique* as well as the *l’approche synchronique et contrastive* – see Goffin [2008: 40]⁵), but also cultural differences.⁶ He says:

Translating should be a fixed of the function of realizing structural, semantic and intercultural differences (so-called *faux amis culturels*) and therefore contributes to the deepening of reflective language awareness. Translations should show that the learner is conscious of the deviating grammar and idiomatic structures in the mother tongue **and** (bold: author) in the target language and that he/she has possibly internalized that already.⁷

⁵ For the use of the knowledge of false friends in language classes, esp. in German classes, see Sitarek [2008].

⁶ About the foreign culture as a challenge for the translator see Brzozowski, Filipowicz-Rudek [2009].

⁷ “Einen festen Platz soll das Übersetzen in der Funktion der Bewusstmachung struktureller, semantischer und interkultureller Unterschiede (sog. *faux amis culturels*) haben und dadurch einen Beitrag zur Vertiefung des reflexiven Sprachbewusstseins leisten. Übersetzungsleistungen sollen nämlich nachweisen, dass sich der Lernende der abweichenden grammatischen und idiomatischen Strukturen der Mutter- und Zielsprache bewusst ist und dass er sie möglicherweise schon internalisiert hat”.

There has been research into the fact that some words have different connotations in Polish and in German; such words include “Kirche” / “kościół” or “Vaterland” / “ojczyzna” see e.g. Pawłowski [2009, 2010].

The fact that a word in one language is often not simply another word in another language, is not always present strongly enough in the awareness of students; this would be what F. Gurcza [in S. Grucza, 2010: 59] calls “etykietowanie pojęć”. He says that the prime function of terms:

[...] polega na tym, że są one narzędziami mentalnego przetwarzania świata, czyli najpierw narzędziami wytwarzania i zarazem przetwarzania informacji o świecie, tworzenia i przekształcania mentalnego i intelektualnego obrazu świata, a następnie także urzeczywistniania tego ostatniego.⁸

The linguistic and cultural world is part of the identity of a person. And it is not easy to get out of these identity structures, to see things from a different perspective. Berdychowska [2003: 355] tells us why:

Identity is a mental, that is an individual, phenomenon that is based on the acquisition and learning of basic action principles and routines. In the process concerning social patterns, existential structures are built. An individual has to take into consideration two external dimensions: a) the relation between himself/herself as a subject of culture and his/her close social surroundings as well as b) a certain canon of cultures of a bigger community.⁹

To improve the understanding of the role of identity Berdychowska¹⁰ [2003: 359] demands from the education for translators the following:

⁸ Transl. author: „Deal with the fact that they are tools of a mental transforming of the world, which means first tools producing and at the same time transforming the information of the world, the creation and transformation of the mental and intellectual picture of the world, and later on also the realization of the latter”.

⁹ „Identität ist ein psychisches, also ein individuelles Phänomen, das auf dem Erwerb und Erlernen von grundlegenden Handlungsprinzipien und -routinen aufbaut. Im Prozess ihres Bezugs auf soziale Muster bilden sich Existenzstrukturen. Ein Individuum muss in seinem Verhalten zwei äußere Dimensionen berücksichtigen: a) die Relation zwischen ihm als Subjekt der Kultur und seiner unmittelbaren sozialen Umgebung sowie b) einen bestimmten Kulturkanon einer größeren Gemeinschaft”.

¹⁰ She is (since 2012) the president of the Stowarzyszenie Polskich Germanistów (Association of Polish Germanists).

[...] the implementation of awaited changes in the practical language education in the direction of a **stronger diversification** of the language classes following the **functional varieties** and registers of using German; the development of practical implementation of a concept for translation workshops on the spot (bold: author).¹¹

Because Germany is so dominant in the press, television¹² and publishing houses (further see Muhr [2003a, 2003b]), the consequences of the language as a pluricentric one should be seen in the practical use especially for German – in schools, in studies and in scientific works. Austrian and Swiss German is virtually non-existent in textbooks for pupils and students. The fact that in Austria different phrases, different grammar and idioms are used, also arouses many questions for translators; here the translator has to be client-oriented.

The work of Märzluft [2010] clearly shows the differences in a comparison between the texts of an Austrian and of a German interpreter – she showed this on the example of the simultaneous translation of the speeches for president Obama.

Also in (written) translations, as Lang [2010] states, this phenomenon of pluricentrism can cause problems.

A similar case is for example with Portuguese – the books of the Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński translated into that language have a separate edition for Portugal and a separate one for Brazil.

This is summarized in a compact way by Łompieś [2010: 306], who states that the interpreter him/herself and his/her experience is of importance:

Następuje tu przeniesienie punktu ciężkości z tradycyjnej relacji między tekstami na między ludźmi przy pomocy mediatora, jakim jest tłumacz.

¹¹ Orig.: “Bewirkung erwünschter Änderungen in der sprachpraktischen germanistischen Ausbildung in Richtung einer stärkeren Diversifikation des sprachpraktischen Unterrichts nach den funktionalen Gebrauchsvarianten und -registern des Deutschen; Entwicklung und praktische Umsetzung einer Konzeption für translatorische ‚Vor-Ort‘-Praktika”.

¹² One convincing example: Most of the (e.g. English) films that are dubbed, are synchronized in Germany, so the Austrians hear German German and not Austrian German. So Austrians borrow much more often words from Germans than the other way round.

W sposób logiczny i konsekwentny wynika to z antropocentrycznej teorii języków ludzkich, według której prymarnym obiektem badań lingwistycznych jest człowiek i jego właściwości językowe.¹³

Translating is not only a task of language and a task of culture, but also a task of communication. Żmudzki [2003: 346] points out that the translator has to reduce the barriers between the participants of this communication act:

In the centre of this dynamic constellation stands the translator himself, with his mental and non-mental language-cognitive activities. He has to focus on a successful process of interlingual-intercultural communication. The main aim is the liquidation of interlingual-intercultural distance which exist between the participants of this communication in the specific communication act, where the translator makes a cognitive transfer with the original text.¹⁴

So, translating is quite a complicated task. The translator has to be “at home” in both languages, in both cultures. He/she has to be fluent in both languages, he/she has to know the realities in both cultures (countries). The Polish translation of the film *Shrek* is regarded as an excellent

¹³ “Here follows the transfer of the main point from the traditional relation between texts to between *human beings* (Italics: author) with the help of a mediator represented by the translator. In a logical and consequent way this is the result of the anthropocentric theory of human languages, according to which the essential object of linguistic research is the human being and his/her language qualities”.

¹⁴ “Im Zentrum dieser dynamischen Konstellation steht der Translator selbst, d.h. seine mentalen und außermantalen sprachlich-kognitiven Aktivitäten, die alle auf den erfolgreichen Verlauf der interlingual-interkulturellen Kommunikation mittels schriftlicher und/oder mündlicher Texte angelegt sind. Diese Kommunikation selbst vollzieht sich in einem Trileg zwischen zwei interlingual und interkulturell einander fremden Parteien unter der sprachlich-kommunikativen Vermittlung eines Translators als kommunikatives Zwischenglied und Verarbeitungsstation. Die Vermittlung versteht sich deswegen als eine kommunikative, weil der Translator zu deren Realisierung jeweils eine konkrete Translationsaufgabe im Sinne der Kommunikationsaufgabe definieren muss. Ihr übergreifendes Ziel ist die Beseitigung von interlingual-interkulturellen Distanzen bzw. Barrieren, die zwischen den Kommunikationspartizipanten im jeweiligen Kommunikationsakt bestehen, indem der Translator den AS-Text einem kognitiven Transfer unterzieht”.

translation, because there are many references to well-known Polish ads (from TV). This makes the film much more amusing.

Translating literature is another topic worth mentioning when we are concerned with the importance of understanding the culture and using cultural elements expressed in a language. A translator who translates literature can encounter many problems, especially when he/she translates poetry. Then the talent of a writer – of the translator! – is to some extent necessary to fulfil the task of translating literature.

But translators of literature have different ideas on how to translate poetry. There is only one German text of Goethe's *Faust*, but there are more than a dozen Polish versions. Another fact is that sometimes it is good to update a text for modern times. The American best-seller of 1951 (paperback 1953), *The Catcher in the Rye* (by Jerome David Salinger) was first translated into German by a Swiss translator, then changed a little by Heinrich Böll, because in the meantime the text was revised by a British publisher. So Böll used the revised text.¹⁵ But he translated the word "you" into the German "Sie" (instead of "du"), which sounds very formal, especially in a text about the life of young people. Not until 2003 was the book translated again and a more contemporary version was produced.¹⁶

Many different problems occur in kinds of translations which I am not going to explore in more detail (for more about these problems see Karski [1955], about the paradoxes of translating literature see Furmanik [1955]; about similarities and differences in the translations of an English text into Polish and German see Utri [2010]).

Anyway, the translator is at least a bilingual and bicultural (or multilingual and multicultural) person, a person who has dealt with the pluricentrism of languages and therefore is also able to have in mind pluricentric features of the given languages. Within a particular language there are often smaller or bigger differences between the different national varieties of the given language. This variety occurs not only in the language itself (in reference to this I mentioned the research of Märzluft), but also in the features of the culture of one nation. Thus the

¹⁵ See: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_F%C3%A4nger_im_Roggen.

¹⁶ An interview with the translator can be read at: <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/archiv/?dig=2003/04/07/a0146>.

Austrians have a different politeness/attitude to authorities/tradition etc. (which is expressed in verbal expressions) that is also expressed in behaviour, in the using of time and space and in applying cultural elements in a (slightly) different way.

Szczygielska [2008: 359] states the following, which is at the same time a good summary of the whole topic of my paper: a translation should represent also the thoughts and ideas of the person who spoke/wrote in her/his language. A translator has to do what she/he learned to do when studying the language as a student: to widen the horizons, to immerge into a different world (culture in the broadest sense) and to understand foreign attitudes and traditions:

Translating is also an assimilation of works of a foreign culture. A translation is a transfer of certain values, therefore it is a process that widens the reception of the world and of human beings. By this process one gets to know new, often unexpected parts of the world and discovers new meanings of words. [...] A translation faithful to the original should try to represent the thoughts and ideas of the foreign work in all its shades into the mother tongue of the translator. The demands towards the translator have a creative character.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Orig.: "Das Übersetzen ist auch eine Assimilation der Werke fremder Kultur. Die Translation ist eine Übertragung gewisser Wertungen, dadurch wird sie ein Prozess, der die Wahrnehmung der Welt und der Menschen erweitert. Durch diesen Prozess lernt man neue, oft 'ungeahnte' Welten kennen, entdeckt neue Bedeutung der Worte. [...] Eine originalgetreue Übersetzung soll sich also bemühen, den Gedanken- und Ideengehalt des fremdsprachigen Werkes möglichst bis in seine feinsten Schattierungen hinein in der Muttersprache des Übersetzers wiederzugeben. Die Forderungen, die diese Aufgabe an den Übersetzer stellt, sind schöpferischer Art."

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STRESZCZENIE

Tłumacz i jego język/kultura

Zdefiniowanie kultury jest tak samo trudne jak zdefiniowanie języka. Z punktu widzenia teorii antropocentrycznej te dwie koncepcje są widoczne w innym świetle. Musimy badać kulturę, ponieważ czasami tłumacz odkrywa, iż problemy w tłumaczeniu są tak naprawdę problemami w zrozumieniu kultury. Tak samo ważne jest bycie świadomym zarówno tła kulturowego mówcy (którego tłumaczymy), jak i swojej własnej kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: tłumacz, język, kultura, antropocentryczne podejście do języka i kultury, problem kulturowy

SUMMARY

The definition of culture is as difficult as the definition of language. From the perspective of the anthropocentric theory of human languages one sees these two concepts in a different light. We have to analyze culture because sometimes the interpreter finds out that linguistic problems are cultural problems. To be aware of the cultural background of a speaker (to translate) is as important as the awareness of one's own culture.

Key words: translator, language, culture, anthropocentric attitude toward language and culture, culture problems