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Ambiguity and the uncanny in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and its Polish translations

Ambiguity, polysemy, and vagueness are an intriguing topic both for linguistics and the philosophy of language; however, they also create a variety of problems of a theoretical and interpretative nature. The same three properties of language create a rich tapestry to work with for its users, especially those more advanced, including poets and fiction writers. These properties, if deftly put to use, can create an artistic effect that adds to cognitive uncertainty or even produces a sense of terror in the reader. It is no wonder, then, that ambiguity often features in various ghost stories, horror fiction, or accounts of the supernatural. A prime example of this kind is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, a novella considered to be the classic of the genre and an ambiguous narrative that still provokes emotional response and contradictory readings.

Cognitive linguistics defines ambiguity and vagueness as two extremes of the same continuum, and what falls in between is described as polysemy. Ambiguous statements differ from vague utterances in that the former imply two or more distinct meanings, whereas the latter create “non-distinguished subcases of a single, more general meaning” [Tuggy, 1993: 273]. In Polish, a standard example of ambiguity is the word *zamek*, which denotes either *warowna budowla mieszkalna* (in English, a fortified residence, i.e. a castle) or *urządzenie do zamykania drzwi, szuflad, walizek* (in English, a fastening device for doors, drawers, suitcases, i.e. a lock) [Dubisz, 2003]. Vagueness is an inherent characteristic of words such as the Polish *ciotka* or the English “aunt”, in which “mother’s sister” and “father’s sister” become one [Tuggy, 1993: 274]. The Polish *zamek* can also be narrowed down to several polysemous meanings, as it denotes *urządzenie do zamykania drzwi* (in

English, a fastening device for doors, i.e. a lock), *zamek błyskawiczny* (in English, a zip), or *mechanizm broni palnej służący do zamykania tylnej części lufy* (in English, in firearms, the piece of mechanism by which the charge is exploded) [Dubisz, 2003].

The ambiguities of poetic language were described in excruciating detail by Empson in his seminal *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. The focus of this paper is on the ultimate type of ambiguity in Empson's classification, or ambiguity proper, as cognitive linguistics suggests. According to Empson, this type of ambiguity "occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind" [Empson, 1949: 192]. Ambiguity proper occurs when the two meanings of the word or utterance provide for two exclusive interpretations. A prime example of this kind is can be found in the "linguistic" investigations that Freud pursues in *The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words*, which also inspired Empson. Freud props up his argument on examples such as the Latin *altus* (high or deep) and *sacer* (sacred or accursed) and the English "let" (allow or hinder) [Freud, 1957: 287]. Regardless of the linguistic or etymological value of these findings, the interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw* may nonetheless benefit from the way Freud elaborates on these ideas in *The Uncanny*, an essay he wrote several years later and, presumably, to much enjoyment of horror fiction fans.

In *The Uncanny*, Freud argues that the German *heimlich*, which can be rendered as "homely", "domestic", or "familiar", "becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*," or uncanny [Freud, 2003: 241]. With a speculative charm of his own Freud later recaps that "the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar" [Freud, 2003: 241]. Freud elaborates on the findings offered by Jentsch, who as Freud himself recounts, argued that

[...] the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty. One would suppose, then, that the uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny [Freud, 2003: 236].

As he attempts to link the uncanny with the terrifying return of the repressed, Freud adds that “the term ‘uncanny’ (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” [Freud, 2003: 240]. His argument is exemplified by E.T.A. Hoffman’s *The Sandman*. The short story features Olympia, an automaton bearing an almost perfect resemblance of a real woman, which/who (sic!) the story’s protagonist Nathanael falls in love with. Other motifs explored by Freud include: the double, repetition, dismembered bodies and dancing human limbs, as well as the awakening and return of the dead and any kind of visitations galore [Freud, 2003]. It is worth noting that, according to Freud, the uncanny object, just like Hoffman’s Olympia, provokes both repulsion and desire. Switching from the language of desire to the language of epistemology, one may also add that the uncanny provokes cognitive dissonance. A perfect illustration of this is Kafka’s *Odradek*, a creature that defies definition and can be said to be neither animate nor inanimate. Equally fitting is also the narrative structure of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, which leaves the viewers uncertain as to whether the story recounted by the protagonist is true or whether it is just a figment of his delusional mind.

Similar reservations can be made by the readers of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, which in his own cold artistic design was “an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught” [James, 1999a: 125]. The subversive entertainment that James draws his readers into consists in the fact that the narrative can be read in at least two ways: as a moralistic ghost story or an equally horrifying study of the female protagonist and her madness. The readers first engage with the protagonist when she arrives to a country estate called Bly to take over as a governess to two children, Miles and Flora. She soon discovers that the estate is haunted by the apparitions resembling a recently deceased valet, Peter Quint, and a late governess, Miss Jessel. The protagonist soon finds out that the two had an affair, which ended up in an unwanted pregnancy and the expulsion of the governess, who soon died in childbirth. The valet passed away soon afterwards, probably due to heavy drinking, found by the roadside. The protagonist begins to suspect that an equally secret and illicit intercourse occurred between the two adults and the children. As she strives to set the charges free from her evil predecessors, the governess starts to unravel a mystery behind the recurring visitations.

Right from the outset, James's masterful commingling of Gothic and detective themes provided a basis for two mutually exclusive interpretations of the story. Some of the readers believed that the ghosts were real and the account presented in *The Turn of the Screw* is an allegorical representation of the harm the children suffered at the hands of their late caregivers [Heilman, 1999]. However, Freudian interpretations soon began to emerge; they challenged Gothic readers by claiming that the spectres are but projections of the repressed sexuality of the female protagonist [Wilson, 1999]. A metanarrative approach set out to reconcile the two camps. Following some of the hints dropped by the author himself, this group of readers pointed out that the narrative was designed as inconclusive, a trick on the readers, as it were, that eludes and escapes any attempts at resolving the story's inherent ambiguity [Felman, 1977]. The tricky qualities of *The Turn of the Screw* are best exemplified by its misleading narrative framework (Chinese boxes), ambiguous narrative rhetoric, and mirror imagery.

The metanarrative reading is also supported by some of the linguistic choices of James, which are to be expounded in detail below, together with their Polish translations. The reading I personally adhere to in this paper is that of the metanarrative approach, which describes *The Turn of the Screw* as an inconclusive and ambiguous narrative riddle. Readings implicit in translations offered by Witold Pospieszala (2012) and Jacek Dehnel (2015) diverge from this interpretation. As for the former, the translator's choices fail to reveal which interpretative approach he has adopted in his rendering. Thus, it is very difficult to identify which model prevails in Pospieszala's translation: Gothic, psychoanalytic, or metanarrative. The strength of the latter is that, despite his restricted mode of interpretation, i.e. the Freudian reading, Dehnel's translation remains consistent with his preferred reading strategy. His rendering brings out the repressed sexuality of the protagonist while attributing bad intentions to those who would stop at nothing in their quest against evil.

The repressed sexuality of the protagonist comes to the fore in the passages where she describes her sightings of the ghosts, the relationship between late caregivers and their charges, and the communion between the apparitions and the children. In each of the cases the governess's account features the word "intercourse" [James, 1999b: 20, 36, 51, 53], which at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries might have conveyed

any of the related and synonymous meanings: to commune, to have a relationship, to be in contact with, or to have a conversation. The word may have suggested one more thing, that is, an intercourse of a sexual rather than spiritual nature. Dehnel seems to deliberately play on the sexual note, as each “intercourse” he renders as *stosunki* (i.e. relations, with a strong connotation of sexual relations). Depending on the mode of reading and the context, Pospieszala’s lexical choices can sometimes be called flexible and sometimes inconsistent (in so far as one adheres to the Freudian reading).

The story also gives voice to the suspicious nature of the protagonist, which is best exemplified in the way she interprets the behaviours and words of her charges. The children are not exactly helpful, either, as their gestures are both allusive and indeterminate. As a result, the governess is led by mistrust and disorientation in equal measure. Miles’s behaviour only adds to her cognitive bewilderment; not only does he dress like a gentleman, but he also has a non-committal if not openly evasive bearing. One such example is the way the boy smiles to the governess. James’s choice of the word “inconclusive” suggests that the governess finds it difficult to resolve what Miles’s gesture may actually mean. This in turn adds to his aura of ambiguity and mystery.

I was so slow to find anything that he had plenty of time, after a minute, to continue with his suggestive but inconclusive smile: “You know, my dear, that for a fellow to be with a lady ALWAYS—!” [James, 1999b: 53]

nieprzekonywającym uśmiechem (unconvincing smile) [Pospieszala, 2012: 143]

i po minucie podjął z tym swoim wymownym, ale zagadkowym uśmieszkiem (mysterious smile) [Dehnel, 2015: 109]

Pospieszala’s translation suggests that the governess has already jumped to conclusions, and she now knows exactly how to judge the boy’s mannerisms. The “unconvincing” smile implies that the boy is hiding something she has already unravelled and finds inadmissible. Dehnel renders the smile as “mysterious,” that is, an expression that reveals very little and hardly succumbs to any conclusive interpretation. Miles is thus keeping a secret that the governess can only have vague intimations of. The same passage also features a slight provocation on

the boy's and the author's part, which nonetheless escapes the attention of both translators.

I have kept to this day the heart-breaking little idea of how he seemed to know that and to play with it. "And you can't say I've not been awfully good, can you?" [James, 1999b: 53]

sprawuję się bardzo dobrze (very good)? [Pospieszala, 2012: 144]

że zachowuję się bardzo ładnie (very nice)? [Dehnel, 2015: 110]

The game the boy plays with his governess and James with his readers is an incredibly allusive and subtle one. The collocation in the passage is so common that it becomes virtually transparent if not invisible. However, it takes on a new and surprisingly subversive meaning in the story. The little perfect gentleman becomes almost awful in his goodness, which may raise the suspicions from the governess and the readers. However, both translators, either unwittingly or on purpose, render the boy's phrase as "very nice" or "very kind," which puts a damper on Miles's discreet yet evil charm. The same goes for little Flora, who speaks to the governess in a way that is not as unambiguous and straightforward as it might seem at first sight. As in the following passage:

Instead of succumbing I sprang again to my feet, looked at her bed, and took a helpless middle way. "Why did you pull the curtain over the place to make me think you were still there?"

Flora luminously considered; after which, with her little divine smile: "Because I don't like to frighten you!" [James, 1999b: 41]

Bo nie lubię pani straszyć! (good behaviour) [Pospieszala, 2012: 111]

Bo nie lubię pani straszyć! (good behaviour) [Dehnel, 2015: 86]

When Flora explains why she drew the curtain again, the English reader finds it impossible to resolve whether the girl is invoking the rules of good behaviour or is obliquely threatening the governess. This slightly unsettling sense of foreboding seems to be played down a little in Polish translations. Both translators transmogrify the passage into an innocent game with the governess, as if the only thing the girl sought was praise for her good deportment. Perhaps *nie chcę pani straszyć*

(I don't want to frighten you) would be more fitting in this context, as it both expresses the girl's good intentions and conveys a hidden threat or a warning or good advice (as in *nie chcę cię straszyć, ale...* – I don't want to frighten you but...). This in turn might suggest that the girl knows more than she allows herself to share, which is also in line with the intimations of the governess.

James's ambiguous style fully comes to the fore at the very climax of the story when the governess tries to exact "the truth and nothing but the truth" from the boy about his contaminated past and the illicit relations with the adults. The ambiguity is amplified by the scene construal and the author's linguistic virtuosity, which may come across at first as stylistic shortcomings rather than an intelligent design. The resulting drama makes for one of the most convincing horror scenes in the history of the genre. The governess, as she presses the boy against her, is facing the window in which the menacing presence of Peter Quint is looming. Facing the governess, the boy is unable to see the spectre behind his back. Hence initial uncertainty, as the reader does not know whether the boy would be able to notice the ghost at all; the only testimony available is that of the governess. The second uncertainty, which looks like an amusing slip of the tongue, is purely linguistic and derived from vague syntax.

I saw him, from the midst of my act, meet it with a divination, and on the perception that even now he only guessed, and that the window was still to his own eyes free, I let the impulse flame up to convert the climax of his dismay into the very proof of his liberation. "No more, no more, no more!" I shrieked to my visitant as I tried to press **him** against me [James, 1999b: 84].

Dość tego, dość tego, dość tego! – krzyczałam przenikliwie w stronę zjawy, starając się jednocześnie przycisnąć **chłopca** do siebie (as I tried to press the **boy** against me) [Pospieszala, 2012: 228]

Dość tego, dość, dość! – wrzasnęłam do gościa, próbując docisnąć **chłopca** do siebie (as I tried to press the **boy** against me) [Dehnel, 2015: 174]

The device that James resorts to in this passage makes it impossible to determine who the governess is actually pressing to her breast. Although the logic of the scene suggests that she is hugging the boy,

the syntax makes this conclusion impossible, as the pronoun “him” refers to its antecedent (“visitant”). This in turn implies that the woman is hugging the ghost. This “incorrect” device might be a telling sign that for the protagonist the boy is possessed by the evil presence. Thus, in the governess’s account Peter Quint and Miles become one, and the ontological or linguistic distinction between the two is obscured by imprecise syntax. However, both translators strive to preserve the difference, and they both improve the faulty textual material of the story. Both Pospieszala and Dehnel use the noun *chłopiec* (boy) instead of the pronoun. This leaves no doubt as to whom the governess is trying to save (Miles) and whose evil doings she is trying to prevent (Peter Quint’s).

The same scene features one more passage in which the boy, after an exchange full of pronouns creating a confusing *quid pro quo* (she, that is, Flora or Miss Jessel? He, that is, Peter Quint or?), begins to intimate (or perhaps gives in to the governess’s suggestion; it is almost impossible to determine which version is more likely) that there is one more person in the room. This person is vaguely referred to as “he,” whom the boy identifies as Peter Quint, to the protagonist’s obvious satisfaction.

I was so determined to have all my proof that I flashed into ice to challenge him. “Whom do you mean by ‘he’?”

“Peter Quint-you devil!”

Piotr Quint, ty szatanie! (satan, male) [Pospieszala, 2012: 229]

Petera Quinta... ty diabolic! (she-devil, female) [Dehnel, 2015:174]

His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. “Where?” [James, 1999b: 85]

This triumphal resolution fully resounds in Pospieszala’s translation. In his rendering the boy addresses Peter Quint, which in turn suggests that the “exorcisms” from the governess turned out to be a success. In Dehnel’s rendering her triumph becomes exposed as overzealous and dictatorial inclinations. The he-devil morphs into a she. The words, which are attributed to Miles, suggest that the real source of evil in the story is the same person who virtually stops at nothing and literally walks over anybody (including Miles, who dies in a moment) to protect her minor charges against the illicit ghosts and their doings.

The passage can be read in a different way, however. It is also possible that the governess refuses the boy to speak, and she answers the question she herself asks, as penetratingly as the best Spanish inquisitors (“Whom do you mean by he?”). The reading can be supported by the fact that the antecedent phrase in the dialogue is an enquiry on Peter Quint’s whereabouts (“Where?”) Logically speaking, the governess cannot ask the question, as she knows and see where the apparition is looming. The tormented boy neither sees the ghost now knows where to find him. This adds to the complexity of the passage while ruling out Dehnel’s interpretation. It is fairly unlikely that the governess has reached such soaring heights of introspection that she now begins to expose her own delusions. Pospieszala’s version seems to be more fitting, as he refuses to determine whether “you devil” refers to the boy or Peter Quint.

One is under impression, however, that since the cry of terror is preceded by the name and surname in the nominative, which can just as well be taken as a vocative (with another vocative following immediately after), one might be dealing with the words spoken by the governess, who heightens the drama by addressing the spectre in the window. In Pospieszala’s rendition the passage may have been taken as an aggressive prompt from the governess only if Peter Quint appeared in the accusative, the way Dehnel chooses to inflect the valet’s name in his translation. Provided the phrase is a reply to the question “Whom do you mean by he?,” the answer in the vocative makes little to no sense.

To summarise, both suggestions are unsatisfactory to some extent, as they ignore the sequence in which the remarks were exchanged. While Dehnel fails to notice that the phrase in question may have been uttered by both the boy and the governess, Pospieszala refuses to see that it is a response to an antecedent question. The strength of Dehnel’s rendering is that, despite trimming off all the ambiguities, it nonetheless adheres to the Freudian interpretation, whereby the repressed sexuality of the woman guides her in her efforts to find evil where there is none. This interpretation implies that it is the governess who is possessed and not the children. Coherent as it is, the reading seems a little too simplistic. Pospieszala renders the passage deftly enough for the reader to lose track who is speaking to Peter Quint. However, his decision to make the speakers address the ghost and not the question seems to be arbitrary and slightly grotesque. The reason for this may be quite mundane, and

Pospieszala's choice could have been dictated by a sheer lapse of attention rather than a design to obscure the identity of the speaker. The translator may have simply ignored that what he took as a cry of fear or summons, is merely a rejoinder to what the governess said a moment before.

A similar test for the sharp wits of the translator and the reader's attention can be found in some of the preceding sections of the story in which the governess develops an interesting speculation on the quality of her own vision and the secrets concealed by the children. As she braces her cognitive powers for the worst, the protagonist begins to realise that her eyes fail to see what the children do. The governess realises that what she cannot notice is the deepest and, as one might easily guess, darkest secret of her charges.

I had then expressed what was vividly in my mind: the truth that, whether the children really saw or not – since, that is, it was not yet definitely proved – I greatly preferred, as a safeguard, the fullness of my own exposure. I was ready to know the very worst that was to be known. What I had then had an ugly glimpse of was that my eyes might be sealed just while theirs were most opened. Well, my eyes WERE sealed, it appeared, at present – a consummation for which it seemed blasphemous not to thank God. There was, alas, a difficulty about that: I would have thanked him with all my soul had I not had in a proportionate measure this conviction of the secret of my pupils [James, 1999b: 50].

tajemnicy moich wychowanków (charges) [Pospieszala, 2012: 135-136]

tajemnicy moich uczniów (students) [Dehnel, 2015: 104]

James resorts to a highly intriguing and ambiguous device, which opens the passage's coda to double interpretation. The phrase can be read as expressive of both the governess's profound belief in the power of her perceptions and the author's whimsical comment on her delusions. In English "the secret of my pupils" may denote both "the secret of my charges" and "the secret of my eyes," which suggests that what the governess takes for the objective truth is merely subjective and hallucinatory. In so doing, James recurs to one of his favourite themes, namely perception. In a style of his own, without resolving the deep seated ambiguity, James implies that what "is" (ghosts exist for real)

can only “seem to be” (only the governess can see them). The pun, however, can also be read in the reverse order, which makes it legitimate to conclude that what one “perceives” is the only “truth” one can afford. The pun can also serve as powerful evidence for the metanarrative interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*, which makes both readings equally valid. For the governess both doggedly persuades the readers and unwittingly debunks her own carefully crafted argument.

Unfortunately, neither translation renders the pun, which may reflect badly on Pospieszala’s and Dehnel’s reading and interpretative abilities. However, the pun also exemplifies a major difficulty that both translators faced while working on this carefully crafted, if not slightly contrived narrative. One promising solution would be to use the Polish expression *oczko w głowie* (the apple of my eye). This diminutive term for children also signals the theme of perception, which is central to James’s novella. The drawback of this solution would be that it is more emotionally charged than just “pupils,” and it sounds a little strained if not downright artificial. This makes it a little too salient for the enigmatic narrator to embrace it. Hence the conclusion for these considerations. The last example demonstrates how difficult it is to achieve perfect symmetry in translation, especially if the mirror like symmetry is inherent in the original’s language and narrative rhetoric.

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STRESZCZENIE

Niejednoznaczność i niesamowitość w *The Turn of the Screw* Henry'ego Jamesa i polskich przekładach tego opowiadania

The Turn of the Screw Henry'ego Jamesa stanowi wyzwanie interpretacyjne zarówno dla badaczy i czytelników, jak i tłumaczy opowiadania. Utwór ten, otoczony aurą niesamowitości, swój szczególny charakter zawdzięcza niejednoznacznym rozwiązaniom narracyjnym oraz językowym zastosowanym przez autora. Wśród odczytań tekstu można znaleźć interpretacje gotyckie, freudowskie oraz metanarracyjne. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą prześledzenia, na ile tłumaczenia zaproponowane przez Witolda Pospieszalę oraz Jacka Dehnela wpisują się w któryś z powyższych nurtów interpretacyjnych oraz czy i jak starają się one zachować niejednoznaczności stanowiące o niesamowitym uroku opowiadania.

Słowa kluczowe: niejednoznaczność, niesamowitość, interpretacja

SUMMARY

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* poses an interpretative challenge to its researchers, readers, and translators. The unique character of the novelette, which is surrounded by the aura of the uncanny, is closely related to the ambiguous narrative and linguistic devices used by the author. Major interpretations of the text followed Gothic, Freudian, and metanarrative approaches. The paper sets out to investigate the extent to which the translations proposed by Witold Pospieszala and Jacek Dehnel adhere to any these approaches and whether and how they try to deal with the ambiguities that make James's masterpiece so uncanny.

Key words: ambiguity, uncanny, interpretation