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Polish translation of wordplay based on homonyms in *Automated Alice* by Jeff Noon

A review of translation theories shows a multitude of approaches, whether linguistic, functional, cultural or cognitive etc., which could be taken when dealing with translation of wordplay. The approaches offer a set of theoretical and practical guidelines that need to be considered when aiming at equivalence. However, what they seem to be missing is detailed and precise strategies that Translator could employ to achieve this goal. The aim of this paper is to present strategies that could be used when translating wordplay based on homonymy. In order to elicit the strategies, the examples of homonyms in *Automated Alice* by Jeff Noon, and their Polish translations are analyzed.

1. How and what to translate?

The problem of wordplay translation boils down in its essence to the faithfulness to form and/or meaning. It seems that the attempts to settle the form-vs.-meaning quandary of translation have a long history. Its early traces could be dated back to the Classical Roman period. At that time it was Cicero and Horace that tackled the problem by making the distinction between faithful and free translation (Baker, 2008:87). The ideas of the precursors of the so-called "Latin tradition" were later eagerly developed by St Jerome, the author of the Vulgate, who laid the ground for the three-term taxonomy: word-for-word,

sense-for-sense, and free (Baker, 2008: 87). This approach proved to be a point of reference for some later authors who tried to fathom the problem of how to translate or how not to translate. The years and centuries to come witnessed the emergence of a number of theories dealing with the form-meaning problem. This resurgence of theories reached its zenith in the 20th century when it was the rich traditions of formalism, structuralism and semiotics (the 20th century literary trends which stressed the importance of form/structure/sign and concentrated on studying formal devices) that shaped the translatory approaches of that time. Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, maintained that it is a faithful translation that should manage to salvage the treasures of the original meaning and "[i]f (...) the letter has killed the spirit (…) there must have been something wrong either with the original letter or with the original spirit" (Nabokov, 2000:71).

Such strong proclivities towards faithful translations could be juxtaposed with voices of other researchers. One of them is Tancock, who claimed that Translator should in fact do his/her best to maintain both meaning and form, yet in the instances where this should not be possible it is the former that ought to be given precedence. Similar conclusions were reached by Nida who claimed that Translator should strive for naturalness of an utterance:

> In transferring the (…) content of the message, one is not concerned primarily with the precise words or exocentric units (i.e. Meaning, Truth and Morality the idioms), but with the sets of components. In fact, one does not really translate words but bundles of componential features. The words may be regarded essentially as vehicles for carrying the components of meaning. In fact the words may be likened to suitcases used for carrying various articles of clothing. It does not really make much difference which articles are packed in which suitcase. What counts is that the clothes arrive at the destination in the best possible condition, i.e. with the least damage. The same is true in the communication of referential structures. What counts is not the particular words which carry the componential features, but the fact that the correct componential features are lexically transported (Nida, 1969:492).

Thus, Nida's notion of translation could be tantamount to representation of a text in one language by a dynamic representation of an equivalent text in another language. The approach based on dynamic equivalence seems to be particularly apt for any possible

translation of Jeff Noon's *Automated Alice* (2000), which makes use of homophones, homonyms, fixed phrases, idiomatic expressions and lexical experiments. It is in such contexts that the case of being faithful to meaning and form is usually of the "either-or" nature.

Nida's proposal of formal and dynamic equivalence met with criticism. The claim was that too much focus was put on the lexical level and that equivalent effect, ranging from a full scale to zero, is unmeasurable (Munday, 2008:43). However, it was Sperber and Wilson (1987) who undermined the foundation on which the equivalence was built, suggesting that it did not go in line with theory of communication. In its place they proposed relevance theory, which claims that communication does not take place just by the processes of encoding and decoding, but by the communicator who provides evidence of his/her communicative intentions. This new model laid the ground for Gutt's (1991) two types of translation: direct translation, which aims to convey the whole message of the source text, and indirect translation, which aims to convey only the parts of the source text that are deemed relevant to the target audience, thus promoting a functional approach to translation. This approach was later developed by e.g. Reiss (1971), who claimed that contents of wordplay may be changed if this is required by the artistic organization of the text, or Vermeer (1989) who proposed that the purpose (skopos) of the source text should be reflected in the target text. Also Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), who understood equivalence-oriented translation as a procedure that "replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording" (1995: 342), were followers of a similar approach. Although both relevance and functional theories stressed the need for the target text to maintain the stylistic impact of the source text, they also met with criticism. The main claim was that they did not propose much more than the well-known dichotomy of faithful-vs.-free translation (Wendland, 1997:87).

In the cultural approach to translation, Lefevere and Bassnett (1990:1) suggested that translation is a bicultural process that requires "mindshifting" between two linguacultural models of the world. The linguacultural model could be analyzed, for example, through its

"cultural grammar", defined by Wierzbicka (1996) as "a set of subconscious rules that shape a people's ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and interacting" (1996:527). In fact, this approach boils down to an adjustment of the source text to the expectations of the target culture, and is often subject to interpretation. Hence, it does not offer precise strategies of translation, and especially the translation of wordplay.

Some kind of a break-through in the approaches towards translation was the advent of cognitive theory, which suggests that the target text should create an adequate mental representation of the source text (e.g. Langacker, 1987; Kiraly, 1995; Tabakowska, 2001). The processes behind mental representation are complex, and they are not only of linguistic nature. These processes should be understood also in their social, cultural and psychological contexts. Because the cognitive approach incorporates some previously mentioned approaches and adds a mental element to them, it is able to describe explicitly the functions and mechanism of wordplay in the source text. However, it seems to have problems with proposing possible strategies of translating wordplay into the target text.

On the basis of the sketch of the above-mentioned approaches and theories it seems that translation of wordplay could be described in terms of linguistic, intentional and/or functional, or cognitive equivalence. Although they provide some theoretical and practical guidelines for Translator, they do not offer ready-made strategies for text translation. The problem seems to have been probed by Adamczyk-Garbowska (1985:110-125), who studied the challenges behind the Polish translations of wordplay in Caroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The methods of translation proposed by Adamczyk-Garbowska, which are in compliance with those proposed by Delabastita (1996: 127-140), boil down to: deleting the wordplay, translating the wordplay on one level only, translating the wordplay directly (which is generally possible only if the languages/cultures are related, or if a certain bit of wordplay just happens to work in more than one language), adding an explanation to the text or adding extra textual material (footnotes, introduction), replacing the wordplay with another pun or another kind of humorous or rhetorical device, adding

in a new wordplay or even a completely new text. Still, these are rather general strategies that do not enable the English wordplay to be translated into any language, but suggest some styles of doing it. Therefore there is still a need to propose some specific strategies so that they might serve other (especially Polish) translators dealing with the problem of wordplay translation.

2. Wordplay in Jeff Noon's *Automated Alice*

According to Delabastita (1996), wordplay refers to:

> (...) the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings (Delabastita 1996:128).

In the above-mentioned definition, wordplay can exploit all sorts of features, whereas phonological, graphological, orthographic, morphological, syntactic or semantic. Still, the author does not clarify or specify the term "similar", which seems to be very important here. According to Steriade (2001:151), wordplay is based on forms that are "perceptually sufficiently similar" for wordplay to work. This adds a perceptive (cognitive) element to the definition. Grassegger (1985:9) also stresses another aspect of wordplay, namely creativity. It is obvious that any linguistic production requires some amount of creativity yet, although it is not an easily measurable notion, wordplay seems to require more creativity than e.g. everyday language.

Alexieva goes one step further towards a quasi-cognitive view on wordplay by stressing a multitude of meaning and associations that are ascribed to words:

> Punning is possible in any language insofar as it seems to be a universal feature of language to have words with more than one meaning (polysemy), different words with the same spelling or pronunciation (homographs and homophones), and words which are synonyms or near-synonyms while having different pragmatic meanings and evoking different associations. These features all exemplify the basic asymmetry between language and the extra-linguistic world it is used to denote: languages cannot be and are not expected to provide a separate sign for every single object or event in the extra-linguistic world. If a language is capable of such one-to-one correspondence with the world existed, it would be an extremely unwieldy and inefficient instrument of communication, and an impossible one to learn in the first place. Therefore, language works with a

> relatively small repertory of signs (e.g. phonemes and words) that can however be combined in a multitude of ways to reflect the complexity of reality (Alexieva, 1997:138-139).

However, Alexieva seems to forget that wordplay would be still possible even if one-to-one correspondence between de Saussure's signifier and signified existed, simply because of the principle of perceptual similarity. Delabastita (1996:128) still exploits his definition by giving a list of universal, different ways through which linguistic structures can be similar, i.e. can share a similar form: identical spelling and sound (homonymy), identical sound but different spelling (homophony), identical spelling but different sound (homography), or slightly different spelling and sound (paronymy).

Hence, according to the author, wordplay is lined with ambiguity, which could only be understood in an appropriate context. The appropriate context should be related to the human knowledge and expectations of grammatical texts (verbal context) and/or should go in line with the world spoken of in the utterance (situational context) (Delabastita, 1993:72-73). However, this taxonomy seems to be incomplete as wordplay encompasses much more phenomenon than similarity of spelling and/or sound which results in ambiguity placed in the appropriate context. Davis, for instance, (1997:24) draws attention to a meta-linguistic aspect of wordplay:

> Wordplay not only exploits the ambiguities of linguistic structure, but that, foremost, it makes reference to the systemic operation of language itself. The way wordplay elicits multiple meanings calls attention to the implications of a particular relation - a conjunction and yet a difference within a language system: it is not one word invoking another word or set of ideas, but a play that invokes within one example the methodology of the entire system (Davis, 1997:24).

Bearing in mind all the previous theoretical constructs, we agree that a definition that encompasses a multitude of points of view is proposed by Schröter:

> Language-play, contrary to normal, or non-playful, fragments of conversation or writing, is marked in the sense that the linguistic building blocks involved draw attention to themselves and their form, in addition to functioning as transmitters of content. In other words, language-play is present where the peculiarities of a linguistic system (or linguistic systems) have been exploited in such a way that an

> aural and/or visual (and by extension: cognitive) effect is achieved (...) (Schröter, 2005:78).

The wordplay that Jeff Noon uses in *Automated Alice* is based mostly on the exploitation of phonological and graphological features of the English language, i.e. building blocks of homonyms. Homonym could be defined as "a word that is identical in form with another word, either in sound (as a homophone) or in spelling (as a homograph), or in both, but differs from it in meaning" (Baldick, 2001: 116). One of the problems with translating homophones from English into Polish is that the English language is equipped with larger number of such lexical items than the Polish language, which does not leave much scope for finding any text-related equivalent. There are about 11,980 homophones in English, 4,743 of which are one-syllable homophones (Ogura and Wang, 2006), whereas according to *Słownik polskich homonimów całkowitych* (Battler, 1988) there are only about 1,500 homonymes in Polish.

Because, as evidenced e.g. by the homonyms above, languages differ in their structures, different languages have different ways of creating wordplay. Therefore, I would like to present the structures that could be used to translate English homonyms, used in Jeff Noon's *Automated Alice*, into the Polish language.

3. Polish translation of homonyms in Jeff Noon's "Automated Alice"

1. homonym	1. translation
"I'm **Alice**," replied **Alice**, politely. "You're **a lis**?" the ant said. "What in the earth is **a lis**?" "I'm not **a lis**. My name is **Alice**." Alice spelt her name: "**A-L-I-C-E**." "You're **a lice**!" the ant cried. "We don't want **no lice** in this mound!" "I'm not **a lice**, I'm **Alice**! I'm a girl."	„Wszyscy znają mnie jako **Alicja**", odpowiedziała grzecznie **Alicja**. „Koalicja?" powiedziała mrówka. „Co to za ko**alicja**?" „Nie jestem Ko**alicją**. Mówią mi **Alicja**". „M**ilicja**!" zawołała mrówka. „Nie chcemy m**ilicji** w naszym kopcu!" „Nie m**ilicja**, **Alicja**! Jestem dziewczynką".

The wordplay is preserved by means of blending, that is the last syllable of one word becomes the first syllable of the next word. The stem word here is *Alicja* which is the Polish equivalent of the name "Alice". By adding certain syllables at the beginning of the word completely different meanings may be obtained, thus, *ko+alicja* refers to the English word *coalition*, and *mi+alicja* refers to the English *militia*, although with some typically Polish connotations and incorrect spelling. In this way, making use of Jeff Noon's idea behind *Automated Alice*, where "words become a liquid medium, a malleable substance capable of being transformed in surprising ways" (Noon 2001), we preserve both the meaning and incorrectness that was typical of this particular usage of homophones (*a lice*). The usage of blending of words entails certain changes in the text. Hence the omission of the part where Alice spells her name, as such spelling would be possible only in the case of the Polish homophone-equivalents of the English *Alice-a lis-a lice*. However, such equivalents cannot be found.

2. homonym	2. translation
"Oh, this is no good at all!" spluttered Alice. "My Great **Aunt** will be furious!" This statement stopped Miss Computermite completely in her tracks. "You've got a great **ant**?" she asked, astonished.	Och, To bez sensu!" prychnęła Alicja. „Moja **pracowita jak mrówka** cioteczka będzie wściekła!" To zdanie wprawiło Pannę Komputermitkę w całkowite osłupienie. „**Jak mrówka**, cioteczka?" spytała, zdumiona.

The translation is based on the Polish phraseological expression *pracowity jak mrówka* (literal translation: *as hard-working as an ant*), the meaning of which aptly describes the nature of Aunt Ermintrude. The humorous effect is achieved as the confused termite mistakes a hard-working aunt for a much-despised species of insect.

3. homonym	3. translation
"You know, I thought you were a **wurm**, Alice," the Captain continued, "when first I saw you marching out of the mound." "I'm not a **worm**," answered Alice. "I didn't say you were a worm, Alice. I said you were a **wurm**." (...) "Why do you keep saying the word with a U in the middle of it?" "Because it stands for **W**isdom-**U**ndoing-**R**andomized-**M**echanism.	„Wiesz, gdy pierwszy raz zobaczyłem cię wychodzącą z kopca, myślałem że to **robag**". „Nie jestem **robakiem**", odpowiedziała Alicja. „Nie powiedziałem że jesteś **robakiem**, Alicjo. Powiedziałem że jesteś **robagiem**". (…) „Czemu wymawiasz G na końcu wyrazu?" „Ponieważ oznacza on: **R**zadko **O**czekiwany **B**łyskawiczny **A**tak **G**łupoty.

The wordplay is based on the rule of final devoicing. In the Polish language, the voiced consonant in the final position in a word becomes devoiced when not followed directly by a voiced sound of the following word. Thus, we have managed to produce a homophonic pair *robak-robag*. The problem that is easily noticeable here is that *robag* is one letter longer than *wurm*, which needs to be accounted for when translating the acronym *WURM*.

4. homonym	4. translation
"Alice is a girl," Celia responded. "When was the last time you saw a girl?" Pablo looked long and deep into Alice's eyes and then answered, "Years and years ago. Years and years! Not since the years before the **Newmonia**." "But why should **pneumonia** cause such a lack of girls?" asked Alice. "**Newmonia**!" Pablo screamed at Alice, "not **pneumonia**! You silly creature! There's no **P** in **Newmonia**." "But the **P** is silent in **pneumonia**," Alice explained (holding her patience).	„Alicja jest dziewczynką", odpowiedziała Icalja, „Kiedy ostatni raz widziałeś dziewczynkę?" Pablo spojrzał głęboko i długo w oczy Alicji po czym odpowiedział: „Całe lata temu. Całe lata! Nie wcześniej niż przed **Nowymtworem**." „To z powodu **nowotworu** jest tak mało dziewczynek?" spytała Alicja. „**Nowegotworu**!" Pablo krzyknął na Alicję, „nie **nowotworu**! Głuptasie! W słowie „**nowytwór**" jest tylko jedno **O**". „Ale w słowie „**nowegotworu**" są aż **trzy**", wytłumaczyła cierpliwie Alicja.

Nowytwór (English translation: tumor) connotes a more serious disease than the English (*p)neumonia*. At the same time, it still preserves the element of newness (*nowy* - English: *new*).

Yet the most problematic part of the translation is the part where Alice says: “But the P is silent in pneumonia,". Because of the discrepancy between the rules that govern the Polish and the English phonetic systems, the phrase had to be transformed by means of a loose equivalent. Since the only phonetic difference between *nowotwór* and *nowytwór* is between the sounds “o” and “y”, which is a naturally perceptible difference for a Polish speaker, this particular humorous message had to be based not on the quality but rather on the quantity of the sounds. Hence, Pablo explains the difference between the words by telling Alice that there is only one *o* in *nowytwór*.

5. homonym	5. translation
"From within came **a terrible racket**: a terrible banging! and a clattering! and then a terrible walloping! and then a terrible cursing cry! and then yet more banging! and clattering! and, indeed, walloping!" (…) "Celia was pounding on the shed's door: "Pablo, Pablo!" the doll croaked, "let me in, please. Stop making that terrible **racket**!" And the **racket** was stopped for a second, as a gruff and angry voice answered from the interior, "But I like making a terrible **racket**! It's my job! It's my Art!" "The shed's door was then flung open with such violence that it almost flew off its hinges, and standing in the doorway was an extremely overgrown man. (…) He was holding **a terrible racket** in his hands. (I must add at this point that **the terrible racket** he was holding was **a tennis racket**, and it was terrible because the man had obviously been making it that very morning (…)".	Ze środka dobiegał **okropny hałas** jak gdyby zaraz miała wystartować tam **rakieta kosmiczna**: okropne grzmocenie! trajkotanie! a następnie okropne walenie! Icalja waliła rękami w drzwi szopy: „Pablo, Pablo", zachrypiała lalka, „wpuść mnie, proszę. Przestań robić ten **okropny hałas**!" „**Hałas** ucichł na chwilę, gdy gburowaty i gniewny głos odpowiedział ze środka: „Ale ja lubię robić **Okropny Hałas**! To moja praca! To moja Sztuka!" Następnie, drzwi szopy ogrodowej otworzyły się z taką siłą, że niemal wyleciały z zawiasów, a w przejściu pojawił się ogromnie przerośnięty mężczyzna. (…) W rękach trzymał **Okropny Hałas**. (W tym miejscu muszę dodać, że **Okropny Hałas**, który trzymał w ręku był **rakietą tenisową**, a była ona okropna ponieważ mężczyzna robił ją dopiero od rana (…)".

Okropny hałas, while preserving the noise-related meaning of *racket*, does not reveal its final meaning (sports equipment) too soon. By capitalizing the initial letters of the translation of the phrase *a terrible racket*, the reader is given a hint of its hidden meaning, yet it is not until the author's final comment that this meaning is brought to the surface.

6. homonym	6. translation
Ramshackle rolled up his **right** trouser leg. Another tiny clock was fastened to his ankle. "It's a bleak twenty-fourth of November in shivery Manchester." "At least that's **right**!" "Of course it's **right**; this is a **right-leg** watch, after all!"	Zakopcony podwinął **prawą** nogawkę spodni. Kolejny malutki zegarek przymocowany był wokół kostki. „Mamy ponury dwudziesty czwarty października w wywołującym dreszcze Manchesterze". „Przynajmniej ta informacja jest **poprawna**!" „Oczywiście że jest **poprawna**, w końcu zegarek znajduje się **po prawej** stronie!"

The Polish wordplay is based on the juxtaposition of similar-sounding *poprawny* (English: *correct, right*) and *prawy* (English: *on or towards the side of your body that is to the east when you face north*).

4. Conclusions

Although the problem of wordplay translation has had a long history, it still has not been explored thoroughly. Obviously, throughout centuries, and especially the 20th one, different theories were proposed that offered different approaches towards translation of texts. But whether they concentrated on the equivalent transfer of the linguistic elements; intentions of the author; the purpose or functions; or cognitive mechanisms behind the source text, they did not provide precise strategies of wordplay translation. Because wordplay based on homonymy makes use of specific features of a given language, its equivalent translation must make use of some specific features of the target language. Therefore strategies of wordplay translation must be different across languages. What we can infer from the examples studied in this paper is that translation of homonyms into the Polish language is possible by means of a set of linguistic features of that language. These features are:

1. the specific qualities of the phonetic system (e.g. the rule of final devoicing) (e.g. *robag*);
2. blending of words (*jako Alicja – koalicja*);

3. similarity of words, i.e. similarity in spelling and pronunciation (paronymy of words) (e.g. *po prawej* and *poprawny*; *nowotwór* and *nowytwór*);
4. fixed phrases (e.g. *ciotka pracowita jak mrówka*)
5. capitalization (e.g. *Okropny Hałas*)

One has to be fully aware of the fact that the instances of homonymous wordplay presented in this paper are just a fraction of all wordplay examples in the whole text. However, bearing in mind the uniform nature of wordplay, it could be deduced that the linguistic features explicated herein could be used to translate most, if not all the homonyms.

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