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Translating Esotericism: Polish

Rafał T. Prinke

rafalp@amu.edu.pl

In spite of centuries of philosophical speculations and scholarly research on the nature of human language, the process of translating a text from one tongue to another still remains a mystery. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was translated (in its entirety or substantial fragments) into Polish no less than twenty-five times between 1797 and 2013, by some of the greatest poets and playwrights in Polish history; yet none of those versions can be called definitive or perfect, and new ones will certainly follow.[1] The 1938 Polish translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* became part-and-parcel of Polish culture, having successfully transmitted the spirit of Milne's classic and, according to some, making the book even better; but actually, in many points the translation formally diverged from the original, starting with the very name of the main character.[2] On the other hand, a reckless attempt to produce a literal translation that should be truly faithful to Milne's prose turned out to be a complete disaster.[3]

Therefore one might almost be tempted to conclude that there must be some esoteric dimension involved in the process of translating, but one that can never be perfected enough to match the original on all levels. A similar belief has been expressed throughout history by some philosophers and poets who have commented on the nature of language and argued that it determines the very worldview, the ways in which members of different nations think, or how they

1. Jung, "Polscy tłumacze 'Hamleta'."
2. Milne, *Kubuś Puchatek*.
3. Milne, *Fredzia Phi-Phi*.

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perceive reality and create their cultures. Roger Bacon, for instance, believed that the resulting mismatch between semantic fields in different languages made accurate translation impossible.[4] A few centuries later, John Dryden observed that "what is beautiful in one [language] is often barbarous, nay sometimes nonsense, in another." Introducing the Greek terms *metaphrase* (word-for-word) and *paraphrase* (using different words), he argued that it would be unreasonable to limit a translator to the former because "'tis enough if he choose out some expression which does not vitiate the sense."[5] The linguistic scholars of German Romanticism, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, upheld and explored similar views, finding the prevalent ideas of *Volksgeister* to be confirmed by language differences, which in turn were reflected in every nation's *Weltanschauung*.

This approach culminated (although without direct influence) in the theory of linguistic relativism that is better, although incorrectly, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It was developed during the first half of the twentieth century by two American scholars, while some German and Russian linguists arrived independently at similar conclusions, supported by field work and experiments. The early (strong) version of the hypothesis states that the native language crucially determines its speaker's perception and cognition; during the 1960s, this position was rejected by most linguists under the influence of strong criticism from Noam Chomsky, whose concepts of a universal grammar obviously could not accommodate the linguistic relativity principle. His views, in turn, were thoroughly criticised in the following decades, most notably by George Steiner, whose influential (and controversial) book negated the possibility of faithful translation between languages and argued that different languages developed out of the desire for secrecy.[6] The ongoing debate opened the field for the return of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and from the end of the previous century its weaker version, supported by empirical research, has been widely accepted. It

4. Kelly, *True Interpreter*, 9.
5. Kasparek, "Translator's Endless Toil," 83.
6. Steiner, *After Babel*.

states that while a language does not *determine* cognitive categories and thus the worldview in question, linguistic categories do strongly influence thoughts and decisions.[7] Consequently, fully adequate metaphrasal translations are possible only for basic statements, but not for complex and nuanced texts.

If a text like *Hamlet* – quite involved but nevertheless intended for the general public – cannot be translated in a straightforward and unequivocal manner, then literary works from the domain of esotericism, where meaning in their original languages is often purposefully hidden or unintentionally enigmatic and therefore hard to comprehend for the would-be translator, should be even more difficult to convert into another language. And yet, of course, esoteric texts have been subjected to such a process for centuries, with both practitioners and scholars often relying on texts that had themselves already passed through not just one, but a whole chain of previous translations. Moreover, both groups usually insist on the importance of proper representation of metaphorical and allegorical language; and in magical rituals or mystical visions every word or even every character may carry heavy loads of weight and meaning that are indispensable for their respective purposes. Also, for scholars of esotericism and its practitioners alike, it is always necessary to negotiate the approximate meaning of technical terminology, as otherwise communication with others (whether esotericists or scholars) becomes impossible. Such negotiations never end, as may be inferred from some recent publications on just one key term such as "magic"; but nevertheless, intuitive approximations and compromises are usually reached.[8]

Looking generally at the problems that arise when translating texts between English and Polish, the main difference is perhaps that English (as well as French or German) is a fixed word order language, while in Polish (as also in other Slavic languages or Latin) the word order is more or less free. This makes a simple word-for-word metaphrase from Polish to English impossible. Another

7. Gumperz & Levinson, *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*.
8. Otto & Stausberg, *Defining Magic*; Asprem, "Patterns of Magicity."

key difference is that English has a richness of synonyms which exceeds that of any other European language.[9] Many words in English have been inherited from Germanic Anglo-Saxon roots, to which French and Latin branches were attached in the Middle Ages, and each bore different fruits. Such words of different descents often carry the same denotative meaning (i.e. they refer to the same thing or phenomenon) but are culturally charged so that they can only be used in their own specific contexts. Just to give two examples, the Polish adjective *królewski* has three English equivalents: *kingly* (Germanic), *royal* (French) and *regal* (Latin), while *serdeczny* can be translated as either *hearty*, *cardiac* or *cordial*. Obviously, Polish also has numerous loanwords from both classical and vernacular languages, but the historical evolution of their meanings often went far beyond the original. For instance, Polish *sympatia* derives from Greek (via Latin), just like English *sympathy*, but it means "liking" or "fondness," while the Polish equivalent of the English word is *współczucie*, which is a literal translation of the Greek word ("fellow feeling"). The situation is naturally different with scientific terminology, which is usually derived from Latin or Greek and either reflects international usage or uses Polish terms that were created under strictly controlled conditions (especially in the life sciences).

Turning to the translational difficulties within the field of esotericism, the problems start with the name of the discipline itself. The foundational book of Antoine Faivre and his later writings in French referred to it as ésotérisme,[10] with the same term being used by the original "Association pour la Recherche et l'Information sur l'Ésotérisme" that published the first series of the field's primary journal *Aries*. The publication of the *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme* in 1998 continued the same usage and defined esotericism as a universal phenomenon, with entries covering the whole spectrum from ancient civilisations to Aboriginal Australians, while Faivre was responsible for

9. Palmer, *Semantics*, 88.

10. Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*.

those referring to the specifically Western manifestation.[11] Wouter Hanegraaff contributed an extensive entry on the New Age to this volume, in which he also used the term ésotérisme; even though already three years earlier he proposed to introduce a distinction between "esoterism" and "esotericism" because the former, he argued, had been appropriated by perennialists and traditionalists.[12] However, in a volume edited by Faivre and Hanegraaff that could be seen as the methodological manifesto of the new discipline, Faivre observed perceptively that the proposed convention is not possible in French ("l'ésotérisme") or German ("Esoterik").[13] Thus this important terminological distinction, a useful analytical tool for scholarly debates, was restricted to English and lost in translation to other languages. Indeed, very few recent authors writing in those languages have even attempted to incorporate linguistically impossible terms such as "ésotéricisme" or "Esotericizmus," while most fundamental scholarly publications have continued to use the traditional term appropriate for their respective languages.[14] Because of that translation problem, Hanegraaff's valuable proposal of using two distinct terms for two different approaches to esoteric studies (religionist and empirical), is unfortunately confined to English as the language of the debate. When moved to other languages, the debate needs to paraphrase to explain the difference between the two terms. The reason for the whole confusion is the fact that "esoterism" was introduced into English occult lore as a *calque* from French via a series of authors from Jacques Matter to Éliphas Lévi,[15] while the morphologically correct form is "esotericism." This is because such noun-forming suffixes are proper for adjectives ending in *–ic*, as for example *ascetic/asceticism*, *fanatic/fanaticism*; other languages do not insert

11. Servier, *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme.*
12. Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method"; "On the Construction."
13. Faivre, "Questions of Terminology," 2n4.
14. For instance Caron et al., *Ésotérisme, gnoses & imaginaire symbolique*; Neugebauer-Wölk, Geffarth & Meumann, *Aufklärung und Esoterik*.
15. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism," 337.

the *–ic* part, so that they have *fanatisme* (French), *Fanatismus* (German) or *fanatyzm* (Polish). Thus it appears that *esotericism* is simply the properly formed word loaned to English from Greek. However, as already noted above, the history of English made it quite open for absorbing words from other languages and thus the form "esoterism" loaned from French did not appear wrong and could coexist happily with "esotericism" as its synonym. Only when it was charged with a special shade of meaning by American perennialists did its usage become more restricted (at least in the scholarly debate), and Hanegraaff's proposal can be perceived as just a reflection upon actual semantic evolution.

Faivre's observation on the untranslatability of the convention is likewise true for Polish. Whether "ésotéricisme" or "Esoterizismus" may even be used in French and German can only be decided by native speakers of those languages, just like the values of phonemes in the spoken language cannot be identified by outsiders. But "ezoterycyzm" most certainly would be inappropriate in Polish as it sounds awkward to the native speaker's ear.[16] This problem was already pointed out by a number of Polish scholars, who chose to use one of the two terms but rejected the proposed distinction.[17] When in 2014 a conference on Western esotericism was held in Cracow, at which a scholarly society devoted to it was to be inaugurated, the terminological question was presented and discussed by Karolina Maria Kotkowska (now Hess), and the uniform opinion of the founding members was that the organisation should be called *Polskie Stowarzyszenie Badań nad Zachodnim Ezoteryzmem* (Kotkowska [Hess] 2014).[18]

The remarks above are equally applicable to the other key "minimal pair," namely that of *Hermetism* and *Hermeticism*, the former signifying the ancient conglomerate of teachings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, while the latter denotes the Renaissance and later developments of that current and incorporates

16. To use the terms introduced by Monty Python (from lack of others), the word is heavily "tinny," while both "ezoteryka" and "ezoteryzm" are quite "woody."

17. Stępień, *Okultyzm*; Wójtowicz, "Ezoteryzm."

18. Kotkowska [Hess], *Między ezoteryką i ezoteryzmem*.

numerous new influences.[19] Needless to say, this distinction cannot be directly used in Polish either and can only be expressed by paraphrase. Otherwise, however, most of the technical terms that are used in the study of esotericism, such as Faivre's *tria prima* (or "three rivers," as he puts it) of *astrology*, *magic* and *alchemy*, have direct unproblematic equivalents in Polish (*astrologia*, *magia*, *alchemia*). The difference between *gnosis* and *gnosticism* is easily maintained as well (*gnoza*, *gnostycyzm*). One important exception is "the occult," when used as a noun designating the broadest category of beliefs and practices loosely related to esotericism. There is no way of providing a sensibly close translation of it — which may be one of the reasons why Colin Wilson's famous book has not been translated into Polish.

Another type of challenge to translators consists of collocations and idiomatic expressions that established themselves in various languages during the course of their evolution. For example, the alchemical *lapis philosophorum* is usually rendered correctly in English as *the philosophers' stone*, but in much wider popular usage it became the stone of a single philosopher (as in the title of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*). In Polish, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the term was translated as *kamień filozofski*, an adjectival form of the possessive plural in Latin; but in the early nineteenth century, it turned into an ordinary adjective (*filozoficzny* = *philosophical*) and remained such in both scholarly texts and popular culture (hence the Polish translation of Rowling's book is titled *Harry Potter i kamień filozoficzny*). A similar case is that of the English adjective *secret*, which can be translated either as *tajny* or *tajemny*, and there are set collocations for either of them, so that we have *tajne stowarzyszenie* (*secret society*) but *nauki tajemne* (*secret sciences*). What is more, there is also a direct loanword *sekretny*, but with the special connotative meaning of more personal secrecy which does not allow it to be used in the above-mentioned phrases. Another common collocation is *czarna magia* (*black magic*), a very popular phrase in colloquial Polish that describes something one does not comprehend or has problems with (e.g. "trigonometry is black magic

19. Hanegraaff et al., *Dictionary*, ix–x, note 12.

to me," "using this new washing machine is black magic to my wife"). Thus the expression lost all of its scary and demonic connotations suggesting a dreaded esoteric practice, instead putting on the soft coat of a rather humorous set phrase.

One cannot forget grammatical gender as a major obstacle to metaphrasal translation, especially in the context of sexual imagery. The prime example may be the alchemical *conjunctio oppositorum* (which also plays an important role in Jung's esoteric psychology) between *Sol* and *Luna*. They are masculine and feminine respectively, in Latin and all the Romance languages deriving from it; but in Germanic languages the genders of the Sun and the Moon are reversed (*die Sonne*, *der Mond*). In Polish and other Slavic tongues, the former (*Słońce*) is neuter and the latter (*Księżyc*) is masculine, so it is quite difficult to convey the meaning of a sexual alchemical metaphor from Latin into Polish. It may also be noted that, unlike the Sun, the word for the Moon differs among Slavic languages: for example, in Russian it is feminine (*Luna*, derived from Latin), whereas in Czech it is masculine (*Měsíc*) like in Polish, but with a different connotative meaning (from the word meaning "month," while in Polish it was originally "prince [of the sky]").

Finally, some mention may be made here of some common words that are often used in esoteric contexts and have no Polish equivalents covering the same semantic field or connotations. For example *weird* is even hard to paraphrase, while *mystery* is often translated as *zagadka* (= *riddle*) or *misterium* (loaned from Latin). But *mystery religions* cannot be translated and is typically rendered simply as *misteria*, so the connotation of their link to religion is lost.

The art of translation, and of translating esoteric texts in particular, is indeed demanding and quite often requires greater writing skills and mastery of the languages in question than the authors of the original texts had themselves. A good example of how key terms transferred to a different culture may become, using Dryden's words, "often barbarous, nay sometimes nonsense," is the translation of *Baopuzi neipian*, a fourth-century Chinese treatise on Daoist alchemical, medical and ritual practices. In an edition by James R. Ware, the

Harvard Professor and renowned translator of ancient Chinese classics, the key notion of *Dao* (*Tao*) was rendered by the English word *God* throughout the text (as was also done in his other translations).[20] This met with fervent criticism from his fellow sinologists, but Ware defended his solution — it is always the translator who has the last word. If his or her decisions are not rejected immediately by the learned community, they may have unpredictable consequences for future developments in scholarship and culture at large.

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20. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, and Religion*.

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