

TERESA BAŁUK-ULEWICZOWA
Jagiellonian University

Beyond cognizance: fields of absolute untranslatability

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech [...]. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth [...] And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

Genesis 11, 1–9

My purpose is to demonstrate the reality of the phenomenon of ‘absolute untranslatability’, to convince you of its existence. Some students of translation have claimed that there is no such thing as ‘absolute untranslatability’, that ‘untranslatability’ is relative, viz. that all problems in translation may ultimately be resolved in some way, or that the barriers to translation lie chiefly in the linguistic sphere (Catford). I hope to show that such premises may not be seriously upheld. Some problems in translation are not relative and negotiable but absolute though they may pass unnoticed as ‘trivial’. The ultimate blocks to full translation do not lie in the sphere of language alone, though they are intrinsically linked to linguistic problems. The story of the Tower of Babel told in the language of the Scriptures will serve as an apt introduction, because it incorporates two important words and ideas – ‘scatter’ in the sense of distance, physical and cultural, intellectual, spiritual, mental, emotional, and experiential; and ‘name’, in the modern sense of ‘identity’.

I shall begin with my own definition of ‘absolute untranslatability’: Absolute untranslatability occurs whenever a text is presented for translation the full comprehension of which by its source-language recipients requires the application of extra-textual subjective information or, more generally, extra-textual emotional experience which is inaccessible to the recipients of the target language for the translation. Ultimately absolute untranslatability involves irreconcilable differences of collective social identity between the group of recipients of the original text in its source language and the target group

of recipients of the translation in the target language. These irreconcilable differences of recipients' communal identity create insurmountable, absolute, barriers preventing the full transfer of the original message in the translation – however good the linguistic quality of the translation.

By 'extra-textual subjective information' I do not mean individual differences of a text's reception, but those features of reception which are specific and exclusive to the whole of the particular group of original recipients.

Figuratively speaking, the problem is one of 'scattered locations', of looking at the same thing and receiving intrinsically the same message from different vantage-points. In instances of absolute untranslatability such shifts cannot be easily effected, because they would have to involve a shift in the target recipients' group identity.

Cases of absolute untranslatability as defined in this manner are legion; we as translators are sub-consciously aware of their nagging, irritating presence; yet in the practical pursuit of our livelihoods, whether professional or academic, we tend to ignore them. We might as well recognise the presence of these hobgoblins to translation and inform ourselves of their colossal scale.

In his recent book, *The Scandals of Translation*, Lawrence Venuti makes extensive use of this terminology, 'domestication', 'foreignisation', and 'the remainder' as applied to his approach to translation. For him 'domestication' means 'the domestic assimilation of a foreign text' (1998:80). A fuller explanation of his intended meaning of 'domestication' is to be extracted from the following paragraph:

Translation is often regarded with suspicion because it inevitably domesticates foreign texts, inscribing them with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies. This process of inscription operates at every stage in the production, circulation, and reception of the translation. It is initiated by the very choice of a foreign text to translate, always an exclusion of other foreign texts and literatures, which answers to particular domestic interests. It continues most forcefully in the development of a translation strategy that rewrites the foreign text in domestic dialects and discourses, always a choice of certain domestic values to the exclusion of others. And it is further complicated by the diverse forms in which the translation is published, reviewed, read, and taught, producing cultural and political effects that vary with different institutional contexts and social positions (1998:67).

This concept of 'domestication' is a welcome tool for my study, but in certain texts there are limits beyond which 'domestication' cannot be pushed: limits which defy the simple 'rewriting of a foreign text in domestic dialects and discourses' and 'its inscribing with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies'; limits which frustrate the translation's attempt to 'answer to particular domestic interests'. These limits are often dismissed by us as 'trivial'.

My ideas first grew out of an observation, based on practical experience as a translator, of the untranslatability of the political propaganda issued by totalitarian regimes. In the mid 1970's, when I first came to Poland, I was asked by certain official academic institutions to translate short reports on

work in the humanities and social sciences designated for circulation among other similar academic institutions in other countries, mostly in the Communist Block. The texts were couched in the language and ideas of Marxism, as materialised in the official Polish translations. This was in the time before the current vogue for Marxist terminology, phrases and ideas in contemporary English. I found that I was totally unable to produce reasonably accurate translations into English that did not sound 'strange' because of the 'strangeness' of the verbal and conceptual fixtures and fittings of Marxism in which the otherwise quite academic subjects were communicated.

The untranslatability of totalitarian propaganda into the languages of cultures which had not experienced an oppressive political régime had been observed already by German emigrants fleeing the Nazi regime and endeavouring – unsuccessfully – to compile an English/Nazi-Deutsch dictionary. The failure was accounted for by the same reasons: an intrinsic unbridgeable gap between the source community's extra-linguistic experience of their social and political realities, and the total lack of any parallel experience in the target community allowing them to identify the messages embedded in the original text.

But the political propaganda of the totalitarian state is only a special case of the phenomenon. There also exist natural barriers to full social communication, often dependent on time and place, ephemeral like the totalitarian propagandist's directive, which after a time may become incomprehensible even to successive generations of the same nation; or, alternatively, more long-lasting though subject to change with time, but essentially determined by the nature and social identity of the original group within its own natural conditions. Messages which are transmitted across such natural barriers through the act of translation are transmuted versions of the original message – transmutations regardless of the quality and effects of the linguistic performance applied in the translation. They are transmutations determined by the nature of the recipient group and its ability to read the message as intrinsically *native* and relating to its own subjective group experience, or – in translation – as intrinsically *exotic*, relating to the emotional experiences of a foreign group or society.

Such transmutations in translation are unavoidable and come into play whenever group identity is involved in the process of message-reception. They defy mitigation by means of explanation, contextual definition, footnoting – all the translator's usual devices to cope with cultural problems in translation – because they are lodged in the source community's subjective, emotional group experience, which therefore frustrates all attempts at rationalisation. You cannot 'explain' a totalitarian harangue to one who has not lived in a totalitarian system so as to make him 'know the fear' in the same way as the victim who has suffered. Describing it in a history-book manner is the best you can do; straight translation yields a science-fiction effect: the non-involved audience experiences the message in much the same way as they might the reading of *Brave New World* or of the myriad screen or novelists' fantasies. But the totalitarian tirade is only a special case. The field of absolute untranslatability is much

wider, and it includes national literature, especially national epic; religious and devotional scriptures; philosophies and ideologies; and writings which involve distinctive codes of aesthetic values. All of these spheres of human communication are different depending on whether you read them as an *inside man* or as an *outsider*, as one of *us* or one of *them*.

I shall illustrate my observations with one example chosen specifically to convince my immediate audience of individuals able to appreciate the cultural separateness of texts in Polish and English. I shall start with the analysis of a 'brilliant' new English translation (by Noel Clark) of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele*. It is not Clark's 'fault' that his rendering has ultimately failed to reproduce in translation what is so inherently sealed into that monument of Polish tradition as experienced by those born into the Polish cultural heritage and language. Instead, the translator should be praised for having managed to create a dramatic text that is *exotic* rather than just *foreign* – this is the best he could have done as far as Lawrence Venuti's 'domestication' goes... Table A shows a few examples of Clark's successful renderings which still fail to fully transfer the native cultural meanings.

Wesele presents an excellent specimen of a text hermetically bound to its native culture, period and language, not merely because of its idiosyncratic linguistic medium, a mixture of regional dialect and urbane literary parlance. Written and first performed on the stage in Cracow in 1901, based on an event that occurred in 1900, and with stage characters modelled on real figures, it addressed local, Polish matters through a then fashionable artistic mode, the *Młoda Polska* Symbolist style, it was never meant for an international audience. In 1998 a new translation by Noel Clark with a brief introduction by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, endeavoured to put Wyspiański's *Wesele* among the 'absolute classics', to win for it 'a deserved recognition as a European classic' (Clark & Peterkiewicz 1998:13).

Let us assume that Noel Clark's effort has been as nearly successful as possible linguistically and artistically. His translation does, indeed, sound like Wyspiański Englished, especially as regards the phonic effects of *Wesele*'s short rhymed lines. He makes a valiant attempt to preserve the original names of the characters with explication where necessary and, while immediately abandoning the futile hope of reproducing the original mixture of city and country speech, he renders the play into an expressive stream of British idiom. Notwithstanding the three-score or so mistranslations he makes in understanding and/or rendering original meanings (in a play of nearly 1200 lines), he deserves acknowledgement and praise for his achievement, and recognition for his quest to retrieve the original sense or senses of the Polish discourses. Yet there is a barrier beyond which his courageous adventure in translation cannot be pressed, and that insurmountable barrier marks the bourne of what is absolutely untranslatable about this drama, the line of demarcation for recipient's perspective on the play. On the far side of that fence are all those elements in the drama which not only make it so specifically Polish but which are also identified as specifically native, specifically 'ours' by Polish audiences. Extraneous viewers observing those items from

beyond the pale may be able to comprehend them rationally – as the translator has managed to do everywhere except in the trivial sixty instances – but they will never experience them in the same way as native audiences do.

That is, of course, because *Wesele* has been singularly *relevant* (Sperber & Wilson's theory may prove useful in explaining the roots of its problems with intrinsic untranslatability) and personally meaningful to many Polish men and women over the past three or four generations. Insights into that relevance may be provided by the following aspects:

1. Polish symbols in *Wesele*;
2. religious aspects;
3. Polish historical, legendary and mythological figures;
4. native proverbs in the play, both the established ones and those created by Wyspiański;
5. instances of intertextuality with relation to other classics of Polish literature, art, and music;
6. the realities of and divisions within Polish society as reflected in the interpersonal, especially erotic, relations between the characters;
7. social and historical relations with other national or ethnic groups (Jews and Ukrainians);
8. a specifically Polish metaphor system for the presentation of some of the major themes in the play.

1. Polish symbols

A handful of the key symbols in this Polish Symbolist drama defy satisfactory and comprehensible rendition into modern English. There is, of course, *Chochół*, where the obvious translation, 'Strawman', or 'Man of Straw' carries the impediment of an unwanted connotation of weakness: a connotation which endows the closing scene of the translation, as *Chochół* 'the Strawman' disarms and hypnotises the company, with an additional underpinning of an ironical sense not present in the original. Another absolutely indigenous and not fully translatable symbol is the recurrent motif of peacock's feathers, identifiable for Polish recipients as part of the national (or regional Cracovian) costume, well-nigh a stand-in for the familiar trait of introverted pride in the Polish peasant's character. Not to mention the *Złoty Róg*, Golden Horn of national opportunity (though a rearrangement into 'Horn of Gold' would have avoided the unfortunate association with Constantinople). Finally, there is the closing song, 'Miałeś, chamie, złoty róg...' Because it has passed so indelibly into Polish cultural tradition, this crucial line should be treated as a self-standing semantic unit, which thus has no exact equivalent in any translation into a foreign language. It is no good translating the word 'cham' in it in isolation, since in the original text its dramatic function is modified and determined by the context of the complete line and its prescribed music, and by the entire play. The word 'cham' appears here neither in its historical biblically-derived meaning, nor as the usual vulgarity. No possible equivalent in English will do it justice in translation.

2. Religious aspects

Despite the universal qualities of Roman Catholicism worldwide – partly because of the Church's traditional policy of 'inculturation' – the religion of *Wesele*'s protagonists, from the opening stage directions with the description of the holy pictures of the Virgin Mary in the setting, is an undeniably Polish Roman Catholicism. This distinct them-and-us feature defies straight domestication in translation. Noel Clark is acutely tuned, indeed, occasionally over-sensitive, to problems concerning the national brand of Catholicism in the play: he even sees 'icons' and 'halos' where there are in fact none.

3. Polish historical and mythological figures

All national histories, legends, and mythologies share the property of group specificity. Within their indigenous social environment, they are 'native'. Translate them into another language, and they acquire the quality of exoticism. So, too, all the ghosts and spectres which appear in *Wesele*. In the original play they communicate a specific, immediately recognisable message to the native group of recipients through their very costumes, gestures, and language – some of them, like Wernyhora the Bard or Zawisza the Mediaeval Champion Knight or Stańczyk the Royal Jester, are for a long time not identified verbally, only by their traditional visual attributes. Extraneous audiences, even if prepared for the fantastic characters by preliminary information, will not be able to exercise the same mode of recognition through a shared heritage of collective emotional experience.

4. Polish proverbs

Like many writers, Wyspiański deliberately incorporates a welter of Polish proverbs into his discourse. In *Wesele* his main reason for this is to accentuate the linguistic contribution of 'folk wisdom' to the play. Alongside the traditional proverbs in *Wesele*, there are the playwright's own phrases, proverbial since they were first uttered on the stage. A frequent use of proverbs, local in subject-matter and in linguistic formulation, again is a reflection of the homely 'here-and-now' of family matters; but when translated, an array of culturally identified aphorisms becomes a retinue of linguistic determinants highlighting the exoticness of the text in translation. Noel Clark shows an intuitive awareness of this, and there is, of course, nothing he can do about the inevitable transformation, albeit with some proverbs ('jedni do Sasa, drudzy do lasa') he follows a policy of cultural replacement ('town and country'). Elsewhere – where the original has no proverb – he adopts tactics of compensation bringing in English proverbs ('birds of so different a feather' *etc.*).

5. Intertextuality

The original *Wesele* teems with overt references to the Polish classics – in literature, painting, and music: Kochanowski and Górnicki, Mickiewicz and Słowacki, Prus and Przybyszewski, often parodied or ironically adapted. The

Polish paintings important as symbols in this play are described in the opening stage directions. Some of the supernatural characters, principally the Jester Stańczyk, wear the costumes in which they are depicted on well-known national canvases. The folk songs and music accompanying the plot are clearly defined. Yet a non-Polish recipient, even if briefed on the facts concerning these intertextualities, will be denied the possibility of experiencing them in a familiar, traditional way like the Poles. Cross-referencing through the domestic arts serves to anchor and encode the text for recipients able to access and decipher it through their own, personal domestic, mostly childhood experiences. Any attempt to translate such a structure will involve the inevitable washing out of this experiential dye from target audiences' potential for reception.

6. Interpersonal relations between the play's characters

Let's assume a non-Polish audience in a theatre-house in which a performance of *Wesele* in translation is about to be staged has been instructed in all the details of Polish social and political history necessary to understand the play. There are still many things about the relationships between particular characters which the non-Polish spectators will never have a chance of enjoying through the same manner of personal and collective intuition open to native theatre-goers. While patterns of behaviour characteristic of a particular group may be rationally comprehended by extraneous observers, certain emotive modes of reception concerning conduct within the group may not be fully accessed unless the observer is himself within that group, unless he is himself participating in a direct way in the patterns of conduct relevant in that group. This applies particularly to the erotic and sexual overtones in the relationships between some of the characters in *Wesele*. Noel Clark occasionally blunders in this sphere, unavoidably because his intuition fails him.

7. Inter-ethnic relations

Here, again, no amount of rationalised explication will enable non-indigenous recipients to fully appreciate the emotional message carried by the presence on stage of the Jewish theme and the flood of Ukrainianisms, including the pivotal character of Wernyhora. The foreign observer may at most glean a logically motivated picture of why this character is so central to the play's plot – he will have missed the myriad domestic remarks made in Polish childhoods that are essential and preparatory for the full reception of this play. In this respect the Polish mode of reception has itself undergone transformation and development over the century that has passed since the play's premiere, along with all the political, historical and geographical changes that have occurred and affected the lives and attitudes of ordinary Polish men and women. It is self-evident that the reception in Polish audiences is different now to what it was to pre-1989 productions, especially under Martial Law, and to what it was in the pre-war period or immediately after the Second World War.

8. Metaphors for the expression of a sense of Polishness

An analysis of the errors made by the otherwise commendable Noel Clark reveals that in an astonishing nine cases out of the sixty what accounts for the mistranslation is far more than just failure to fully understand and/or transmit information on a purely linguistic level. What turns out to be responsible in these nine instances is an inability to successfully decipher the metaphors and metaphorical images used by Wyspiański to express certain aspects of his domestically-addressed message. Furthermore, there are a few among these culturally-bound metaphors that Clark simply misses; but there are also other passages which he interprets as metaphorical when indeed no metaphors are involved and the meaning is the straightforward literal one. The full details of these mistranslations is given in Table B in the annex. The point here is not the fact that Noel Clark in particular – a translator whose competence must otherwise be awarded a high performance rating – has erred. It is a question rather of whether, and if so – why, a group of native recipients should be capable of automatically deciphering the system of metaphors employed to present familiar subjects, while extraneous observers, even well-qualified translators, have to grope about in the dark for true meanings, and are thus far more likely than indigenous audiences of getting them wrong. My own hypothesis (and not only my own – cf. Tabakowska 1993:74–77, and others pursuing the cognitive approach) would be that there are certain culture-specific metaphor-sets with a special group relevance that we learn within our own community, usually in childhood, and that therefore defy simple attempts at translocation into the languages (or linguistic patterns) of other groups.

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Aneks

Wyspiański	Clark
Ale tu <i>wieś spokojna</i> . – Niech na całym świecie wojna, byle polska wieś zaciężna, byle polska wieś spokojna. (I, 1) (Kochanowski intertextuality)	All's quiet here: why should you care? The whole damn world can take up arms, provided Poland's countryside remains at peace with no alarms. (p. 21)
(Radczyni) Wyście sobie, a my sobie. <i>Każden sobie rzepekę skrobie</i> . (I, 4)	You have your ways, we have ours – up to each to use her powers! (p. 24)
(Książdz) <i>Sami swoi, polska szopa</i> , i ja z chłopa, i wy z chłopa. (I, 8)	I'm at home among my flock, all good Polish peasant stock. (p. 26)
<i>Trza być w butach na weselu</i> (I, 12)	Who'd go bootless to be wed? (p. 31)
(Upiór) jeno ty nie przeklinaj usty, boś brat – drzyj! ja Szela! Przyszedłem tu do Wesela, bo byłem ich ojcom kat, a dzisiaj ja jestem swat!! Umyje się, wystroje się, Dajcie, bracie, kubek wody, ręce myć, głębę myć, suknie prać – nie będzie znać; chce mi się tu na Weselu żyć, hulać, pić – jeno ta plama na czole... (II, 15)	No call to yell at me that way – we're brother peasants after all; I'm Szela – come to join the ball! In forty-six, we slew their dads – Now, our daughters woo their lads! All toggged out in Sunday best! Fetch a bowl of water, please – give me face and hands a sluice, you won't know me, once I'm spruce I love these here festivities – drinking, dancing, cutting loose – it's just this mark upon me brow... (p. 87)
Leć kto pierwszy do Warszawy z chorągwią i hufcem sprawy, z <i>ryngrafem Bogarodzicy</i> : kto zwoła sejmowe stany, kto na sejmie się pojawi <i>Sam w stolicy – ten nas zbawi!</i> (II, 24)	He who reaches Warsaw first flags aflutter, troops athirst, under Mary's blessed shield – who, summoning district headmen all, before them, in the Sejm shall stand – he shall save our Motherland! (p. 100)
<i>hulaj dusza bez kontusza</i> z animuszem, hulaj dusza! (II, 29)	Noble be – and life's a spree – so enjoy it thoroughly! (p. 107)
(Poeta) Spił sie, no! (Gospodarz) Zwyczajna rzecz: powinien mieć <i>polski łeb</i> <i>i do szabli, i do szklanki</i> – a tymczasem usnął kiep. (III, 1)	(Poet) Drunk? (Referring to NOS) (Host) As usual. Drunk as a lord! One needs a good, strong Polish head to cope with blade as well as glass: only a fool sleeps out of bed. (p. 109)
(Nos) Piję, piję, bo ja muszę, Bo jak piję, to mnie kłuje; wtedy w piersi serce czuję, strasznie wiele odgaduję: tak <i>po polsku coś miarkuję</i> – <i>szumi las, huczy las: has, has, has. Chopin</i> <i>gdyby jeszcze żył,</i> <i>toby pił.</i> (III, 2)	I drink and drink, because I must; yet while I do, I feel oppressed by the heart-ache in my chest. An awful lot of things I've guessed: Thus, in plain Polish, I attest – breezes play, forests sway – Hip-hip-hooray! Were Chopin still alive, I think, he would drink. (p. 111)

Table A: Samples of Clark's successful renderings of Wyspiański's poetry,
which still fail to transfer native cultural elements

Wyspiański	Noel Clark	Comments
<i>obrazeczki</i> , sceny narodowe (II, 8); farbowany fałsz, <i>obrazki</i> (II, 30)	<i>icons</i>	no religious sense; patriotic sense misinterpreted in both instances
dług <i>święta</i> rzecz (I, 28)	a <i>sacred</i> debt	metaphorical meaning missed (= important, paramount, unavoidable)
Pani <i>by stała i stała na tym wietrze</i> (III, 6)	You'd be forever standing by, <i>waiting for that gale</i>	literal meaning misinterpreted as metaphorical (= you'll catch a cold if you stay out of doors in that wind)
pięć lat byli zaręczeni – naraz <i>kredens</i> wszystko zmieni (I, 35)	...engaged five years, a <i>sideboard</i> forced to part in tears	metaphorical meaning (= food, livelihood, material resources) missed
niedobrze ci w tej <i>koronie</i> (II, 18)	that <i>halo</i> doesn't fit you	literal meaning (= bridesmaid's head-dress) treated as metaphor; failure to identify folk costume item
i <i>gore</i> i piersi się palą (II, 10)	<i>hills</i> and heart one fiery hiss	metaphor mistranslated through lexical misreading (<i>gore</i> = it is on fire, misread as <i>góry</i> = mountains)
upomina się o swoje <i>Umarła</i> (II, 9)	The vaults are now wide open thrown and <i>yielding up their dead</i>	intertextual allusion to Poland missed (<i>Umarła</i> = the Dead One)
<i>głowę trać</i> (II, 7)	<i>heads let roll</i>	commonplace metaphor missed (= to lose one's head)
do samych granic (II, 26)	To <i>Poland's</i> borders!	Overinterpretation (the border mean is the one between the partitional zones)
A ja <i>swata</i> pokochała (III, 15)	I truly loved him [= Czepiec]	characters in the play confused: Wojtek mistaken for Czepiec (insufficient knowledge of folk culture)

Table B: Mistranslated metaphors & non-metaphors diagnosed as metaphors in Noel Clark's translation of Wyspiański's *Wesele*