

## TRANSLATION STUDIES

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### TENDERNESS: GENERAL COMMITMENTS OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

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#### Abstract

Inspired by the Nobel Lecture of the 2018 Laureate in Literature, the Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk, the paper discusses the keynote notion of Tokarczuk's text, rendered by the Polish word *czulość*, as a complex of principles that jointly constitute the commitment of the translator. The author claims that the tender translator should work on the premise that in translation "foreignness" is taken to imply difference, without implying lack of understanding or empathy.

**Key words:** *czulość*, difference, commitment of the translator, foreignness, tenderness, understanding.

**Motto:** [*Tenderness*] appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our "self" (Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Lecture, 2019)

#### 1. Introduction

The present paper is inspired by the official Nobel Lecture delivered last year by Olga Tokarczuk, the Laureate in Literature 2018. The novelist received the prize in Stockholm on December 7, 2019. Her lecture was entitled "Czuły narrator" alluding to the tender translator. In her passionate and much quoted plea for tenderness as a keystone of all literary creation, she did not openly speak about translation. But a sizable group of translators of her books into numerous languages of the world gathered in Stockholm, united by a common bond, to testify to their role in the dissemination of her books. Indeed, although Tokarczuk did not speak about translation itself, she addressed her translators and expressed her gratitude to them. Her plea for empathy, understanding and compassion clearly referred to their work in the same measure as it did to the original literary creation.

Tokarczuk's reference becomes clear from the perspective of general commitments of the literary translator. The **aim** of my work is to conduct an **analytical and theoretical survey** of the present facets in the light of translation studies and literature based on the case-study of Olga Tokarczuk's critical work. The paper stresses that the work of the translator is to make the literary output of other nations available to his/her own people, especially if the case happens to be that of the so-called little literatures. By doing this, translators become providers of patterns of community identification (Markowski, 2014). However, while accepting the idea, neither theorists of literature nor literary critics and translators seem to notice that what underlies the understanding of the translator's mission is precisely the key notion of Tokarczuk's speech: the attitude shaped by tenderness.

## 2. *Czulość* – tenderness or more?

On a different occasion Tokarczuk brought up the issue once again, claiming that the Polish *czulość*, roughly translated into English as tenderness, unites *love* and *mindfulness* (Tokarczuk, 2020). Unwillingly, she signalled a fundamental problem to the translators of her speech, as well as to translators at large: the understanding of her plea raises the perennial question of translation equivalence. Needless to say, the contemporary translation studies no longer construe equivalence as the key notion and cornerstone of translation theory. Its very existence comes to be questioned – especially with reference to the level of single context-free lexemes. With the advance of translation studies, 'equivalence' has acquired the meaning of 'cognitive equivalence', that is correspondence on the level of conceptualization rather than on the level of words, phrases or sentences (Leandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2010; Sickinger, 2017). The translation of the word *czulość* in Tokarczuk's title into English, the *lingua franca* of today's world, becomes a case in point. Lack of cognitive equivalence is precisely the reason why some competent English-speaking Poles (Glaz, 2013) were dissatisfied with the English version of Tokarczuk's lecture, even though the translation had been made by two of her most competent translators, Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Both chose the adjective tender as, perhaps, the most inclusive of the available terms, and both failed to satisfy bilingual readers...

The semantics of the Polish word *czulość* is complex and multi-faceted. Thus one talks about *czulość dla kogoś* – 'lovingness towards somebody' or 'fondness for somebody'. But *czulość* can also be taken to mean tenderness – with reference either to palpation, felt in the soft tissues of the body or, in a metaphorical extension of the primary meaning, to tender spots (*czule miejsca*), implying areas of mental vulnerability. This last meaning comes close to *czulość* interpreted as 'responsiveness', i.e. the ability to react to a state or activity, e.g. misfortune or suffering. Finally, *czulość* may be used as a counterpart of the English 'speed', that is, sensitivity of a measuring device or other mechanisms. More aspects of the meaning of *czulość* are revealed by the etymology of the word. Historically, it is derived from the same stem as its cognate *czuwanie*, that is, 'vigilance' or 'carefulness'. Thus Tokarczuk's *czulość* may be interpreted as '*mindfulness*' – being conscious and attentive to somebody or something.

Even more subtle differences between the meanings of *czulość* are revealed by various collocations. The different non-equivalent English counterparts which were listed above are accompanied by diverse prepositions. Thus the usage requires that speakers of English feel (and express) *tenderness TOWARDS* somebody, but they feel (and express) *fondness or lovingness FOR* a person. *Towards* merely indicates the direction of the affection within a mental space shared by subjects and objects, while *for* implies the presence of a potential recipient, suggesting possible interaction. The presence or absence of the interactive component makes an obvious semantic difference. The translator of the English phrases must find them troublesome, even though there exist the seemingly accurate Polish counterparts of the two prepositions.

However, the point is that the Polish *czulość* is never merely directed *TOWARDS* (Polish *do*), it is always designed *FOR* (Polish *dla*). On the other hand, yet another kind of tenderness, the sensation felt *IN* the soft tissues of the body, or, metaphorically, in the soft tissues of one's heart, evokes the same image in both languages. This can be easily explained: both languages use the same conceptual metaphor, that is, universal reference to human bodies or their parts conceptualized as containers for emotions and feelings. Finally, the Polish *czulość autora* (the author's tenderness) needs no preposition at all, which is an iconic formal representation of mental closeness of the person who experiences the feeling to the feeling itself; it is signalled by the genitive case, constituting what is called a reference-point construction. And the English translation? Well, the author's tenderness is not exactly the same as the tenderness of the author.

## 3. The translator's commitments

The sheer number of the English lexemes and collocations that were listed above as the counterparts of *czulość* show the obvious: the fundamental inadequacy of the search for equivalence of linguistic

structures of different levels. However, at this juncture, a less obvious point can be made: all the meanings of *czulość* may be taken to stand for relevant items on the list of the translator's commitments. Lovingness, responsiveness, sensitivity and attentiveness – all are properties of the tender translator.

### **3.1. Translation from the perspective of the tender translator**

What is translation when seen from the perspective of the tender translator? Both the English 'translate' and the Polish *przekładać* come from Latin, and etymologically both imply taking something from one place and transferring it to another place. The reference of that 'something' often seems to be taken for granted. But if it were indeed obvious to all, it would become difficult to justify the very need for translation studies. What is it that becomes transferred – the question is the *raison d'être* of the development of the discipline. Looking for yet another answer would mean going beyond the scope of this paper and beyond the limits of the present author's competence. It must suffice to say that whatever it is, it must be handled tenderly. It is the handling that matters.

While traditional translation theories mostly favour the 'product attitude', whereby researchers focus upon the product of translation (that is, the transferred object that is found in its new target location), in more recent theoretical approaches a significant shift of interest can be observed, which involves focussing upon the process of the transfer. Significantly, much attention is paid to a wide range of cultural, social and historical (source and target) contexts. As is well-known, this notional shift is known as the 'cultural turn in translation'. Following the turn, the cliché trade label of the translator has become that of 'a mediator between cultures'. One might wish to add an adjective: a tender mediator.

### **3.2. The tender translator**

What, then, is the role of the tender translator? First, and rather trivially, the tender attitude (in all possible meanings of Tokarczuk's *czulość*) towards the text to be translated conditions and enables its in-depth reading. The most important effect of such reading is discovering *differences* between the native (one's own) and the foreign (pertaining to the Other). Indeed, 'difference' is probably the most crucial term to be used when talking about translators and translation. The notion itself is a matter of course, but it must be remembered that dissimilarity is endangered in the epoch of globalization, whose essence is precisely to remove disparities and to level out differences. This contemporary attitude tallies with the old slogan 'the translation should be read as an original', which has for long sanctioned the unattainable goal of translation.

But the tender translator does not level out differences; they bring them out. Their work could perhaps be compared to *kintsugi* – the Japanese 'philosophy of golden scars'. *Kintsugi* is an old technique of mending broken pottery by putting the shards together and fixing them with a mixture of Japan and gold or platinum. While the standard attitude of a craftsman would be to make the fittings invisible (that is, to level them out), using the method of *kintsugi* results in exposing the 'golden scars': making the mended vessel the same as before and yet very different from what it had been. In the philosophy of *kintsugi* the object, adorned with golden scars, gains in value, precisely by being different from the unscarred original. The extended metaphor seems to hold when one thinks about translating.

### **3.3. "Otherness" and "foreignness"**

At this point, yet another manifestation of the translator's tenderness might be pointed out. It concerns their realization of the fundamental distinction between 'otherness', on the one hand, and 'foreignness', on the other. The opposition between the two notions reappears, in different guises, in messages authored by people of various persuasions, not necessarily associated with translation, especially if one thinks about it in the narrow sense of a translinguistic operation. For instance, according to Francis, 'differences give rise to creative thought', which, in turn, is a necessary condition of all progress (Wanders, 2018).

In Francis's message (Wenders, 2018), being *the Other* is being *different*, but it is not being *foreign*, or *strange*, or potentially *hostile*. Acknowledging the difference implies a willingness to understand, to empathise, to be attentive not only to things that separate but also to those that unite. In relation to interlingual translation Markowski (2014) demonstrates that the label 'foreign literature' is in fact a misnomer: foreign literature is just the literature of the Other, and it must not carry any pejorative implications. On the other hand, in contrast to *otherness*, *foreignness*, or *strangeness*, or *hostility*, it precludes all attempts at understanding, any willingness to understand. What is *foreign*, or *strange*, or (potentially) *hostile* "remains beyond the limits of our world, outside our own home, because that is where it is pushed by our fear, by our need for protection, by our drive towards self-identity, in short – by our own life" (Markowski, 2014, transl. by E.T.). While to be different means to vary, being foreign implies difficulty in establishing one's own identity. Classifying *the other* as *different* is not harmful. Classifying *the other* as *foreign* means potential harm. Being classified as foreign results in isolation, and isolation leads to exclusion.

The translator who treats literature of the Other as foreign in this latter aspect does not profess tenderness – in any sense. Of course, Francis does not talk about the tender translator, and for that matter, he does not at all refer directly to translation. But, in more general terms, he still speaks about 'spiritual tenderness', which he considers to be "not weakness, but strength, (...) a God's gift that makes our eyes see and our ears hear" (Wenders, 2018). Indeed, it is a kind of such 'spiritual tenderness' that makes it possible for the translator to see more just because of their lovingness, responsiveness, sensitivity and attentiveness. They notice things that matter but which might easily pass unnoticed.

#### **4. Translation as interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer**

To say that the relation between the text and the reader – in their capacity of author-as-first-reader, translator-as-reader and translator-as-translator is fundamentally interpretative is to state something extremely banal. Such also seems to be the claim that the necessary prerequisite of interpretation is understanding. Understanding is in general just taken for granted. Of course, we all know what it means 'to understand'. But do we? It might be useful at this juncture to recall Hans-Georg Gadamer's famous slogan "Being that can be understood is language". What it implies is that "[we] are 'in' the world through being 'in' language". It is the language which is "that within which we encounter ourselves and others" (Malpas, 2018); we understand language when we "live in it" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 521). And since understanding is always mediated by language, all understanding is interpretative. And again, since interpretation 'involves the exchange between the familiar and the alien', all interpretation is inherently translative.

#### **5. Gadamer's hermeneutics and translation studies**

In Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, translation involves linguistically mediated understanding and interpretation of the world (Gadamer, 2007). The *reading* of a text is thus tantamount to the reader's interpretation of the reality that surrounds it, it implies observing reality only within its historical and cultural context. But in order to understand and to interpret, which implies bringing together the familiar and the alien, the translator must be concerned, that is, emotionally engaged, must be able to apply their interpretation to their own situation (Grondin, 2002, p. 4).

Gadamer calls this attitude *application*. Translation is for him a form of conversation, in which "we turn towards the Other, we recognize his point of view and we identify with him because of our willingness to understand him" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 521). Indeed, Gadamer calls for the translator's tenderness (cf. Piecychna, 2019, p.11). Gadamer does not use the term *empathy*, but this is what he advocates. As for Paul Ricoeur, translation is "an act of <hospitality> to the foreign otherness" (Stefanink and Bălăcescu, 2017).

Gadamer's hermeneutic vision of the tender translator is significantly similar to ideas proclaimed by most scholars working in the framework of today's translation studies, such as has emerged following the cultural turn of translation theory. It is also compatible with the image of the translator as defined within the framework of contemporary linguistics such as has been taking shape after the cognitivist turn. One might perhaps risk the thesis that those varied 'turns' can be subsumed under an umbrella heading: a turn towards tenderness.

Like Gadamer's hermeneutics, contemporary translation studies and the model of language and grammar proposed by cognitive linguistics point out the inherent interdependence of language and culture; works that explain or illustrate this point are legion. Yet, as a rule, the linguistic material used for the illustration exemplifies what is easiest to describe and at the same time most clearly seen, that is, culture-specific lexical items. Being obvious stumbling blocks for translators, such labels refer to the everyday experiences of users of particular languages embedded in their cultures, and the former typically belong to the domain of culinary art. In Polish, word frequency lists are headed by the notorious *bigos* and *pierogi*, which are repeated so often that students of translation are fed up with them (pun intended). Next on the list come idioms and forms of address as an obvious accompaniment to culturemes such as can be found in textbooks and dictionaries.

#### 6. The "tenderness" of grammar

In their search for words, tender translators must treat dictionaries with caution. Because dictionaries lack tenderness. To quote the Italian romantic poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, "A dictionary can embrace only a small part of the vast tapestry of a language", or – in Lombardi's own parlance – it removes strangeness from words. The tender translator seeks understanding in the reality in which the text functions (cf. Piecychna, 219, p. 88). Being tender involves looking at a word tenderly, as if it were a gem cut so that its many faces reflect light depending on how the stone is being held. This is still rather trivial.

What is perhaps less so is the recognition that the grammar of a language, which translation theory and pedagogy often ignore (as an obvious constituent of the translator's competence) or treat superficially (as ancillary to rhetoric or poetics), incorporates culture in the same measure as does the lexicon. Grammar is symbolic, and cultural priorities are among the aspects that it symbolizes. Hence translating culture becomes tantamount to translating grammar, and translating grammar implies translating culture. But grammar can also symbolize meanings that are to be found between the lines (as Schleiermacher believed it to be), or hides 'behind the words', as in Gadamer's view of understanding. It is not static and it is not "to be seized by mere intellectual analysis" (Stefanink and Bălăcescu, 2017); it takes *czulość* to grasp it. A case in point is a specific use of proximal and distal deictic pronouns. Classified as *optional* in traditional grammars of Polish, once detected, they are understood and interpreted, but troublesome when it comes to the translation into other languages:

- (1) a. Ja *tu* się martwię, as ty się *gdzieś* wałęszasz po nocy.  
b. (literally) I *HERE* am getting worried, and you loiter somewhere at night.
- (2) a. Ja *tam* nie wiem, wolę się nie wtrącać.  
b. (literally) I *THERE* don't know, I prefer not to meddle.

Neither of the italicized pronouns is optional if one takes this term to stand for what is traditionally referred to as free variation. Free variation is never free. In (1) and (2) grammar symbolizes either the speaker's emotional involvement or his/her lack of involvement, exploiting the metaphorical meaning of the notions close and remote (as in close relationship, distant acquaintance): positive (here, i.e. close to me) or negative (there, i.e. far from me). The tender translator has to find a way of transferring the intimate idea that the English language does not consider as worth grammaticalization. They have to find a way of marking the golden scar.

### 7. A case study: *Emigranci (The Emigrés)* by Sławomir Mrożek

It is *czulość*-as-mindfulness that makes the tender translator reach beyond systemic grammar and profess empathy to the Other as implied by what the other says. Another case in point is that of *Emigranci (The Emigrés)*, a play written in 1974 by a prominent Polish author Sławomir Mrożek. The one-act play has two protagonists: AA, a highbrow intellectual, and XX, a manual worker. Both had emigrated to a nameless foreign country: AA because he wanted to be free to write a book he would not be able to write at home for political reasons, and XX because he wanted to make money to send back to his family in his home village. Confined to a poor basement room which for financial reasons they have to share, both give in to self-deception. On the miserable New Year's eve XX goes out and, upon coming back, relates the trip to AA. Relevant extracts are given below:

(3)

1) Myślę sobie: co będę telefonował?

*I thought, "Why should I?"*

(2) Myślę sobie: co będę czytał?

*I thought, "Why should I?"*

(3) Postąpiłem sobie koło kasy.

*I stood there.*

(4) A potem myślę sobie: pójdę na peron.

*I thought to myself, "I'll go to the platform."*

(5) Myślę sobie: zawrócę.

*I thought, "I'll go back."*

(6) Myślę sobie: zostanę.

*I thought, "I'll stay."*

(7) Myślę sobie: to pójdę.

*I thought, "I'll go."*

8) Zapaliłem sobie tylko.

*I lit a cigarette.*

(9) Stoję sobie spokojnie...

*I stood there calmly...*

(10) Stoję sobie i palę swojego

*I was smoking.*

(11) Myślę sobie, skończę palić i pójdę.

*I thought, "I'll finish this cigarette and go" (Mrozek, 2016).*

The number of occurrences of the reflexive pronoun *sobie* in the dative case is easily seen. Grammatically, *sobie* implies that the activity predicated in the utterance is directed towards the subject, and traditional grammars list them as *optional*, which is obviously not the case. Cognitive linguists observed that activities described by verbs followed by the reflexive *sobie* are considered by the speaking subject as being favourable to them.

The interpretation is made on pragmatic grounds: human beings are not prone to become involved in activities that are unfavourable or harmful for them. Mrożek's XX sprinkles his narration with the pronoun. The pragmatic analysis suggests that he judges the activities that he performed during his trip to the railway station as pleasant, carefree and relaxing. So much for the grammar. The tender translator goes further: his understanding/interpretation of the play tells him that the repeated *sobie* is a non-systemic marker of XX's self-deception, as well as his attempt to deceive AA. In order to understand the scene (in terms of Gadamer's application), they have to consider the social and political context of the Polish reality in the year 1974: the reasons for emigration (political and/or economic), the financial situation of most emigrants, the psychological effects of having to admit failure, etc. Without a *tender* application, rendering XX's utterances is impossible, as can be seen from the attempt at English translation, quoted under (3) above.

## 8. Conclusions

As seen from the above examples, understanding is linguistically mediated, as are the next two steps of the process joined by a sort of mental osmosis: interpretation and translation. The tenderness of the translator consists in their understanding of the tenderness which can be encoded in the language itself. As for Gadamer's hermeneutics, "language is that within which anything that is intelligible can be comprehended" (Malpas, 2018). But translating the Other calls for yet another kind of tenderness, which is the translator's concern: his ability to notice the differences between the familiar and the strange (lovingness), to attend to the Other (mindfulness), to be sensitive to the Other (responsiveness). The complex of various semantic and pragmatic aspects of *czulość*, all encoded in Tokarczuk's understanding of the role of an artist, as well as the interpretation-cum-translation of this word make up the complex competence of the tender translator, whose ultimate mission is to reunite what is familiar with the non-hostile strangeness of the Other.

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## Résumé

The paper, inspired by the Nobel Lecture delivered by last year's laureate, the Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk, is an attempt to adapt the key notion of the lecture to the position and role of the translator. The title of Tokarczuk's speech is *Czuly narrator* – 'The tender translator', which means much more than the English *tenderness*, which Tokarczuk's translators used as the translation equivalent. The paper argues that the many meanings of the Polish word, when taken together, describe what are the translator's commitments. Contemporary translation theories focus upon translation seen as a process rather than a final product. It is precisely the process-sensitive analysis that makes it possible to reveal the competencies of the tender translator. Crucially, when translating texts

produced by 'the other', they should be sensitive to the fundamental distinction between 'otherness' and 'foreignness'. While the former calls for understanding, the latter does not imply the wish to overcome the barriers – historical, political, social or cultural.

In his/her search for meanings, the tender translator should be aware that all translation means interpretation, and that all interpretation is subjective by definition. The paper claims that a significant contribution to translation studies could come from philosophical hermeneutics, especially the theory of translation-as-interpretation as presented by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer.

While translation studies focus upon cultural sensitivity of individual cultureemes, the paper argues – in agreement with cognitive theories of language – that cultural values are encoded in and transferred by grammatical structures. It claims that some grammatical items, traditionally classified by grammarians as 'optional', do in fact carry meanings that only the tender attitude makes it possible to fully grasp. Two illustrations of this point are provided: the use of proximal and distal deictic pronouns (*tu* and *tam*) to imply emotional distance of the speaker, and the singular dative reflexive pronoun *sobie* used as an artistic device to render psychological experiences of characters in a theatre play. In conclusion, the author claims that the competence of the tender translator requires that they strive to reunite what is familiar with the non-hostile strangeness of the other.

**Key words:** *czulość*, difference, commitment of the translator, foreignness, tenderness, understanding.

#### **Анотація**

Стаття, написана під впливом лекції Нобелівського лауреата минулого року – польської письменниці Ольги Токарчук, є спробою адаптації ключового поняття (*Czuiy narrator*) лекції до ролі перекладача у відтворенні лінгвокультурних особливостей художнього тексту в перекладі. У назві *Czuiy narrator* О. Токарчук уживає прикметник *czuiy* (чутливий), що має набагато більше значень, ніж англійське слово *tenderness*. У статті акцентується на тому, що польське слово *czuiy* є багатозначним і серед інших включає значення певних професійних здібностей перекладача. Автор дотримується позиції, що сучасні перекладознавчі теорії концентрують увагу на перекладі як процесі, а не як кінцевому продукті. З огляду на це, у ході перекладацького процесу перекладач повинен мати найчутливішу інтуїцію щодо відтворення того чи іншого феномена або явища в перекладі. Така якість перекладача як *tenderness* виявляє його компетентні здібності. Важливо відзначити, що при відтворенні в перекладі художнього тексту, створеного представниками іншої культури, перекладачі повинні враховувати фундаментальні відмінності між *інакшістю* і *чужістю*. Тоді як перше вимагає розуміння, друге не передбачає бажання подолати бар'єри – історичні, політичні, соціальні, культурні.

У своєму пошуку смислів чутливий перекладач повинен усвідомлювати, що будь-який переклад означає інтерпретацію і що будь-яка інтерпретація суб'єктивна за визначенням. У статті йдеться про те, що значний внесок у *перекладознавство* могла б зробити філософська герменевтика, особливо теорія перекладу, запропонована німецьким філософом Гансом-Георгом Гадамером.

Незважаючи на те, що *перекладознавство* зосереджується на культурній чутливості до окремих культурем, у статті стверджується (згідно з когнітивними теоріями мови), що культурні цінності кодуються і передаються граматичними структурами. Деякі граматичні елементи, традиційно класифіковані граматиками як *необов'язкові*, насправді є носіями смислів, які можливо зрозуміти тільки *чутливому* перекладачеві. У роботі наведено дві ілюстрації цього погляду: використання проксимальних і дистальних дейктичних займенників (*tu* і *tam*) на позначення емоційної дистанції мовця і рефлексивного займенника *sobie* в давальному відмінку однини, що вжито як художній прийом для передачі психологічних переживань персонажів театральної п'єси.

**Ключові слова:** *czulość*, відмінність, постулат перекладача, чужорідність, чутливість, розуміння.



<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Contact data</b></p> <p>Elzbieta Muskat-Tabakowska, Professor Emeritous, Jagiellonian University of Kraków, Poland, Founder of the UNESCO Chair for Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication at the Jagiellonian University (between 2002 and 2012 acting Head of the Chair); e-mail: elzbieta.tabakowska@gmail.com</p>	 A portrait photograph of Elzbieta Muskat-Tabakowska, a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blue jacket over a white collared shirt, smiling slightly. She is positioned in front of a bookshelf filled with books.	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fields of interest</b></p> <p>Cognitive linguistics and translation studies, practising interpreter and translator</p>
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