

**TRAPS OF THE TRADE. GENDER AND MISTRANSLATION
IN FIVE POLISH TRANSLATIONS OF T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND***

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One of the crucial problems of translation, according to Roman Jakobson, consists in the fact that “languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey” [1, 116]. The linguist develops this statement with examples concerning grammatical gender. Indeed, the category has a different status in languages like Polish and English. Polish nouns are feminine, masculine, or neuter, whereas English ones are rarely gender-marked; moreover, in Polish, the past tense and the conditional mood require distinct gender suffixes, while in English only reflexive verbs reveal the gender of agents. Consequently, the sexual identity of speakers (or, more broadly, agents) in Polish and English may be constructed differently, and Polish translators are often forced to make gender choices in cases where the English original leaves the issue unknown or ambiguous.

Furthermore, in English, gender is more likely to be implied than expressed, so translators who are used to its direct grammatical manifestations may easily overlook the subtle hints of English originals. Such is the case of the Polish versions of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The original poem outlines numerous speakers or agents of different social status, nationality and gender. The latter category seems particularly troublesome for Polish translators of this poem. In this essay, I will refer to five versions: Czesław Miłosz's *Jalowa ziemia* from 1946 [2, 99-131], Krzysztof Boczkowski's *Ziemia jałowa* – two translations: from 1990 [3, 132-147] and 2001 [4, 103-120], Andrzej Piotrowski's *Ziemia jałowa* from 1996 [5, 111-145] and Jerzy Niemojowski's *Kraj Spustoszony* (1978) [6, 57-93]. On the basis of these translations, I will discuss an example of gender mistranslation from the initial passage of *The Waste Land*. The analysis will develop on the contrastive level of English-Polish grammar (addressing language-specificity) and on the interpretative level (discussing the consequences of the gender shift for the understanding of the poem).

The mistranslation problem, which will be undertaken here, arises on the level of grammar, culture and imagery. Eliot's poem opens with an image of April, immediately contrasted with that of winter:

<i>April is the cruellest month, breeding</i>	1
<i>Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing</i>	
<i>Memory and desire, stirring</i>	
<i>Dull roots with spring rain.</i>	
<i>Winter kept us warm, covering</i>	5
<i>Earth in forgetful snow, feeding</i>	
<i>A little life with dried tubers.</i>	

[7, 59-77]

In English, neither April nor winter are grammatically gender marked, although culturally winter is associated with death and with masculine features, in contrast to more female, life-bringing spring, as have been demonstrated by George Lakoff and Mark Turner [8, 18], and which has been also pointed out by Elżbieta Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al. [9, 22]. Furthermore, in European tradition, winter is valued negatively, while spring – positively, which has been marked by Magda Heydel [10, 1-2].

In *The Waste Land*, however, winter is clearly feminine and positive, engaged in “feeding,” “covering” and caring, whereas April, even though engaged in similar activities, seems cruel and destructive, as notices Heydel [10, 1]. Paradoxically, the negative image of spring does not result in the gender change. We observe April's actions, traditionally attributed to mothers and wives, being acutely aware of their negative evaluation in the poem. Eliot faces us with two female figures, seemingly behaving in a similar fashion, yet attributed with contrastive values. Spring forces the plants to activity, while winter sustains their immobility. Since movement is valued negatively in the passage, April appears as “the cruellest month.” Magda Heydel explains the axiological choices in the poem by referring to the perspective of the speaker, who remains under the ground, as if in a “hiding place” [10, 1]. Furthermore, the interpretation is in accordance with the themes of introspection and introversion, which appear not only in *The Waste Land*, but also in other early poems of Eliot, such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” or “Portrait of A Lady.”

Unfortunately, the Polish translators of the passage have problems with rendering this interpretation in the target language; the analysis of gender immediately reveals the incompatibility of grammar and culture between English and Polish. In Polish grammar, April (*kwiecień*) is masculine, while winter (*zima*) is feminine – contrary to their manifestations in English culture. The target reader, therefore, enters the poem with a different background than the original reader. For Polish speakers, April is definitely masculine, while winter's femininity sounds natural to them. At the same time, similarly to the English audience, Poles may find the caring behaviour of winter rather surprising. The passage poses, therefore, significant translation problems on the level of gender, and Polish versions of *The Waste Land* exemplify them very well.

The Polish translators in most cases refrain from creating the feminine image of April, as if affected by the masculine grammatical gender of this month in Polish. Consequently, they significantly depart from the original. In Eliot's work, Heydel has distinguished two important feminine roles: that of a mother and that of a housewife. Significantly, the roles are constructed by the participles: “breeding” (mother – child relationship), “stirring” and “mixing” (housewife – food preparation). All Polish translators have rendered these forms by means of the present tense (Polish does not distinguish between the simple present and the present continuous). Thanks to that, they have escaped the awkwardness of several participles, linked to a single main clause (“April is the cruellest month”). Such a choice,

however, has deprived the original of its syntactic specificity; it has also changed the construction of imagery. The importance of the choice between verbal and participle forms for translation practice has been demonstrated, for instance, by Elżbieta Tabakowska [11, 167-184]. The application of the present tense has shifted the reader's attention from the domain of attributes to that of actions.

Along with changing the verbal form, the Polish translators have also changed the quality of spring's attributes. Only in one of the analysed versions, the translator refers to the act of giving birth. In his most recent translation, Boczkowski uses the word "rodzi" (gives birth, is giving birth) for "breeding," while all other versions include more abstract, gender neutral words. In his earlier translation, Boczkowski proposed "wyciąga" (pulls out, is pulling out). Similarly, Miłosz introduces the verb "wywodzi" (draws out, is drawing out) and Niemojowski – "dobywa" (extracts, is extracting). Finally, Piotrowski suggests "wywołuje" (calls out, is calling out).

As far as the housewife's role is concerned, Polish translators appear to be slightly more faithful to the original. Almost all the translators have rendered the word "mixing" with the Polish word "miesza" (mixes/ stirs, is mixing/ is stirring). Only Piotrowski has introduced the word "kojarzy" (associates, is associating) in this context, openly departing from the kitchen imagery. Due to the phonetic similarity, the choice of "miesza" seems natural and obvious. However, one may also argue for the verb "łączy" (joins, is joining) for expressing the idea of "putting things together," which is inherent in the English verb "to mix" [12, 878]; especially as it would be interesting even if controversial to introduce the verb "miesza" as an equivalent of "stirring."

The word "stirring" has been generally rendered in Polish translations in its secondary meaning of "rousing someone" – compare, for instance, *Chambers Dictionary* [12, 1385]. Piotrowski and Niemojowski have introduced Polish equivalents of the verb "awake" (*budzi, pobudza*). Miłosz has proposed the verb "podnieca" (excites), while Boczkowski has introduced the verb "niepokoi" (disturbs). None of the translators has suggested the primary signification of the verb "stir," that is "to mix or agitate (a liquid or semi-liquid substance) by repeated circular strokes with a spoon or other utensil" [12, 1385]. Interestingly enough, in the passage, the action of "stirring" is performed with the "spring rain" as an instrument, whereas "dull roots" function as the object (patient). In other words, the liquid from the dictionary definition seems to have changed roles with the utensil. The image contributes to other paradoxes in the passage, such as the cruelty of mother-like April or tenderness of life-preventing winter.

The image of winter itself also poses gender difficulties, which are visible in Polish versions of the poem. The Polish translators are rather faithful in expressing the caring attitude of winter towards plants, yet they are not always careful in explaining the character of this relationship to the readers. Heydel observes that Miłosz and Piotrowski suggest the mother-like status of winter by implying the child-like status of plants. Miłosz translates "the little life" as "maleńkie życie" (little life), and Piotrowski uses the phrase "drobniutkie życie" (tiny life). Consequently, the target reader is not faced with the paradox of winter as a tender female and a powerful figure supporting the plants' immobility. Instead, the translators propose the image of a mother and a child, in which case the plants' attitude may be explained with reference to the child development. As Heydel concludes, "one does not blame a child for its helplessness and its need of being kept warm, covered and fed" [10, 3]. Such an interpretation seems to alter the original poem, which is more complex – both psychologically and philosophically.

As a result, Heydel criticises Miłosz and Piotrowski, complimenting two other translators, Niemojowski and Boczkowski, who have escaped the childhood connotations with reference to the plants. As the critic notices, "in these two versions "little" means "what remains, what is poor, old, declining" [10, 4]. This reading is closer to the original, as it well renders the axiological clash between winter's feminine tenderness and the objective consequences of such behaviour. "Covering" and "feeding" the plants, the season does not encourage their growth outside the dead land. On the contrary, the lilacs are sustained in their sleep and immobility. The paradox is clearly present in the passage. Any efforts aiming at shifting or explaining its mechanism result in the alternation of the original poem.

Concluding our discussion about gender translation problems, we may formulate several observations. English and Polish attribute grammatical and cultural gender to nouns and verbs on a different basis, which often leads to translation difficulties. In the case of such literary works as *The Waste Land*, the situation is even more complex when we realise that Eliot openly departs from traditional imagery along with its evaluation. The Polish translations demonstrate the traps of the trade very clearly. What seems to be encouraging, however, is that although translators have to respect the grammatical and cultural habits of their readers, they may still try to express gender intricacies on the level of imagery, constructing complex yet coherent figures or scenes.

APPENDIX – Polish Translations of the Analysed Passage *Jałowa ziemia*, Czesław Miłosz (1946)

*"Najokrutniejszy miesiąc to kwiecień. Wywodzi
Z nieżywej ziemi łodygi bzu, miesza
Pamięć i pożądanie, podnieca
Gnuśne korzenie sypiąc ciepły deszcz.
Zima nas otulala i kryła
Ziemie śniegiem laskawym i karmiła
Maleńkie życie strawą suchych kłaczy."*

Kraj spustoszony, Jerzy Niemojowski (1978)

*“Kwiecień – miesiąc najokrutniejszy, dobywa
Bzy z ziemi martwej, miesza
Pamięć i żądzę, pobudza
Głuche korzenie wiosennym deszczem.
Zima w ciepłe tuliła nas, kryła
Ziemię śniegiem zapomnień, żywiła
Tę trochę życia zeschlą bulwą.”*

Ziemia jałowa, Andrzej Piotrowski (1996)

*“Najokrutniejszy miesiąc – kwiecień. Wywołuje
Z ziemi umarłej gałąź bzu. Kojarzy
Pożądanie z pamięcią. To on budzi
Korzeń leniwy pierwszym deszczem wiosny.
Zima przed chłodem strzegła nas i kryła
Śniegiem niepamiętliwym ziemię, i żywiła
Drobniutkie życie wysuszonym pędem.”*

Ziemia jałowa, Krzysztof Boczkowski (1990)

*“Najokrutniejszy miesiąc to kwiecień – spod ziemi
Martwej – wyciąga gałęzie bzu, miesza
Wspomnienie z pożądaniem, niepokoi
Wiosennym deszczem zdrętwiałe korzenie.
Zima nas ochraniała, otulała
Ziemię w śnieg zapomnienia, karmiąc
Tę resztkę życia suchymi bulwami.”*

Ziemia jałowa, Krzysztof Boczkowski (2001)

*“Kwiecień – miesiąc najokrutniejszy, rodzi
Z ziemi umarłej gałązki bzu, miesza
Wspomnienie z pożądaniem, niepokoi
Wiosennym deszczem zdrętwiałe korzenie.
Zima nas ogrzewała, otulała
Ziemię w śnieg zapomnienia, karmiąc
Tę resztkę życia suchymi bulwami.”*

SUMMARY

The article touches upon gender translation problems, which arise on the level of grammar, culture and imagery. The problem is signaled with reference to five Polish translations of the opening passage of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The analysis concerns the following translations: Czesław Miłosz's *Jałowa ziemia* (1946), Krzysztof Boczkowski's *Ziemia jałowa* (two translations – from 1990 and 2001), Andrzej Piotrowski's *Ziemia jałowa* (1996) and Jerzy Niemojowski's *Kraj Spustoszony* (1978). Eliot's poem introduces an axiological paradox: spring appears as life-giving and cruel at the same time, while winter seems protective, because it encourages immobility and sleep. In this model, the seasons are attributed female qualities and roles. The Polish translations are not always successful in rendering the gender aspect of the English original with adequacy, as grammatical and cultural habits of target readers differ from those of the original audience. Thus, the category of gender constitutes a perilous trap for the translators of the poem – it cannot be escaped; however, its danger might be neutralised thanks to the sensitivity to the imagery of the original poem.

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