Tomasz Olszowy

Culture and Translatibility.
Anna Wierzbicka's Theory of Concepts
in Culture-Determined Contexts

1. Introduction

In the present article we shall offer a brief discussion of the major problems relating to the issue of translation, with particular emphasis on culture-dependent aspects of conceptualisation. In the main, we shall concentrate on Anna Wierzbicka's (1991) views on translation in the context of the language-culture relationships.

Translation is one of the basic human activities. It has accompanied mankind since the very beginning. Indeed, it is hardly possible to imagine a civilisation that emerged on its own, without contacts with other civilisations. Contacts mean communication, and no communication is possible without translation. Translation can be said to take place at two different levels. First, in order to communicate we have to *translate* what other people say to us into our own idiolects. This process is usually called *understanding*. This is so because there are no two human beings who share the same experience, hence different people have different "views of the world". Then, there is the second level, which is generally recognised as the only instance of translation, namely translation from one language into another.

We shall use the term *translation* with respect to the second level, and reserve the term *understanding* to the first one. The difference between translation and understanding is the following:

„(..) translation requires a mapping from one language to another language. Understanding is something that is internal to a person. It has to do with his ability to conceptualize and to match those concepts to his own experiences, on the one hand, and to the expressions of the new language

on the other. Translation can occur without understanding, and understanding can occur without the possibility of translation." (Lakoff, 1987:312)

Non-linguists usually divide translation into two distinct groups: translation of literary works and translation for non-artistic purposes.[1] The latter is usually considered to be less "noble" than the former. Yet, both types of translation involve the same process: information and meaning are rendered from one language (source language - SL) into another language (target language - TL). (Catford 1965) Also the task of the translator is the same: to express the meaning of an original text as fully as possible. The only difference can be said to reside in the "artistic form". Translation of literary texts puts greater emphasis on the form of the target product. In some cases, e.g. poetry, the translator can "sacrifice" part of the meaning for the sake of the form.

The way we approach translation depends largely on our approach to language, i.e. whether we regard languages as basically the same, differing only with respect to form, or as divergent, exhibiting considerable semantic differences. The first claim has been advanced by Chomsky, while the second has been made by such scholars as Sapir, Whorf and Humboldt.

Thus, according to Sapir:

„Language is a guide to 'social reality'. Though language is not ordinarily thought of as of essential interest to the students of social science, it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. (...) No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached [emphasis added](Sapir, 1949: 142)

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[1] Although this type can be further sub-divided into translation and interpreting, we shall not be concerned with this division.

Whorf argues in the same manner:

[Language] is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade,(...) We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds we cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organisation and classification of data which the agreement decrees." (Whorf, 1956: 213-214)

Finally, Humboldt, addressing the issue, has this to say:

„(...) each language (...) contains a characteristic world view. As individual sound meditates between object and person, so the whole of language meditates between human beings and the internal and external nature that affects them (...)" (Humboldt, 1903-36, vol. 7: 60)

In contrast, Noam Chomsky, representing the opposing view claims that all languages share the same concepts and differ only with respect to „labels" attached to them. Basic concepts are determined by nature not language and only very few concepts are affected by experience:

"Language and thought are awakened in the mind, and follow a largely predetermined course, much like other biological properties. (...) Human knowledge and understanding in these areas ...) is not derived by intuition (...) Rather, it grows in the mind, on the basis of our biological nature, triggered by appropriate experience, and in a limited way shaped by experience that settles options left open by the innate structure of the mind." (Chomsky, 1987:25, quoted also in Wierzbicka, 1991)

2. Cross-cultural language differences

Since in this article we wish to claim that languages differ considerably, although not *completely*, we shall now present some examples which, in our view, will justify this point as well as some implications that arise from such an approach to language. In what follows we shall limit our presentation only to differences between Polish and English.

Among the linguists who have considerably contributed to our better understanding of language and thought Anna Wierzbicka occupies a particularly prominent position. In a number of publications, see for example Wierzbicka 1991, 1992, she has addressed the problem of cross-cultural language differences. Her approach to language can be characterised by the following statement:

'Every language is a self-contained system and, in a sense, no words or constructions of one language can have absolute equivalents in another. The idea that there might be some linguistic elements which are universal in the sense of having absolute universals in all the languages of the world is of course all the more fanciful" (Wierzbicka, 1991: 10)

Wierzbicka rejects both the extreme approaches to language, providing ample evidence which undermines either position. First, the claim that languages are incompatible hence meaning from one language cannot be translated into another is proved to be false by our everyday experience. In order to prove the fallacy of this statement Wierzbicka (1991) provides the example of the Bible, which has been translated into hundreds of languages. The other claim, i.e. that languages differ only with respect to labels attached to them, remains unsupported, too: any bilingual person will confirm that there are hardly any concepts in the two languages in question which can be said to be exact equivalents. This is rather a strong proposition and needs further elaboration.

In "Cross-Cultural Pragmatics" Wierzbicka (1991) presents many examples illustrating cultural differences between Polish and English. In her view, the difference between Polish and English cultures with respect to expressing opinions, for instance, is, basically, as follows:

„In Polish, opinions are typically expressed fairly forcefully, and in everyday speech they tend not to be distinguished formally from statements of fact.' (Wierzbicka 1991: 41)

In English, however, speakers tend to express their opinions more indirectly, often starting with 'I guess', 'in my opinion', etc. What is even more striking is that there seem to be no direct equivalents in Polish for English hedges[2].:

"There is no way of saying I *mean* in Polish, in any case no way of differentiating I *mean* from I'd say; there is no particle in Polish which would correspond to well; and there is no equivalent for *sort of* (except perhaps for *jakaś/jakoś*, but this is closer to *somehow than to sort of* (...)." (*Wierzbicka 1991: 44*)

Because in English speakers tend to avoid giving opinions that would be as forceful as statements, while translating between the two languages, we should pay special attention to whether the statement in either language is to sound as if it was conceived in the language in question or whether as if it was translated from the other language. In Wierzbicka's own words:

„When I translate my own writings from Polish into English, I find myself removing words such as *totally, utterly, extremely* or *always*, or replacing them with words and expressions such as *rather, somehow, tends to*, or *frequently*; and vice versa". (Wierzbicka 1991: 44)

Wierzbicka claims that languages serve as tools for expressing cultural values and attitudes. In „Semantics, Culture and Cognition' (1992) she compares different cultural implications which are hidden in various languages under concepts which, at surface, seem to be identical. Let us consider, for example, Wierzbicka's analysis of the concept of FATE in Russian, English and Polish.

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[2] Hedges are expressions that allow "the speaker to express the degree of category memberships (Taylor 1989 76). They allow the speaker to make comments on the language they use.

Under the entry of the Russian word "sud'ba", in most Russian - English dictionaries, one can find that there are two words in English ,at least in the dictionary entry, that correspond to "sud'ba", namely "fate" and "destiny".

It is hardly possible, says Wierzbicka (1992), to read a Russian novel without encountering "sud'ba" at least once (as a matter of fact, it is not difficult to find examples of Russian novels in which it is possible to come across "sud'ba" several times on the same page). This means, that the concept of "sud'ba" plays an important role in Russian culture.

"Fate" and "destiny", on the other hand, are not so deeply rooted in English culture. Moreover, it is not always appropriate to translate "sud'ba" either as "fate" or as "destiny". Takes for instance a Russian film "Sud'ba Celoveka" (based on a novel by Sholohov). The title has been rendered into English as "Life of Man", which is closer to the meaning of "sud'ba" (in this case) than "fate" or "destiny". However, even in the case of "life" something important has been lost, namely, the Russian folk-philosophy concept of human life. In Russian, attention is focused not on the span of life but rather on its course, which is (pre)determined (although generally and not specifically). "Sud'ba" differs from both "fate" and "destiny" in the way it approaches life. "Destiny" implies some positive overtones, and "fate" highlights some bad results. "Sud'ba" is different; it does not imply either good or bad outcomes, but it also is not neutral. It can be said to express the idea that "more bad than good things" can be expected in life; and life is incomprehensible (uncontrollable) for human beings. At the same time, life is not viewed as meaningless and tragic. "Sud'ba" differs from "fate" and "destiny" in some other respects, too. While "sud'ba" implies acceptance and resignation, the English concepts imply the existence of some external, IMAGINARY, OUT-WORLDLY controller. Whereas "sud'ba" implies the existence of some external controller, but the latter does not have to be some imaginary, out-worldly force. Human life ("sud'ba") can be controlled by other people (e.g. tyrannies). Thus, it can be claimed that "sud'ba" is more down-to-earth than "fate" and "destiny". it can also be used

with respect to animals and inanimate objects:

"sud'ba kota" – "sud'ba" of a cat
"sud'ba posylki" – "sud'ba" of a parcel.

In the latter example "sud'ba" can be said to refer to a "sequence of events which happen to something, which is not determined by the will of the person involved (here the sender of a parcel) and which are likely to be bad." (Wierzbicka, 1982:113)

Now we can state, following Wierzbicka, major elements of the folk-philosophy entailed by the concept of "sud'ba";

a) "different things happen to people
b) not because they want it
c) one can think this: more bad things will happen to me than good things
d) one cannot think: these things will not happen to me if I say: „I don't want it"
e) one cannot say: „I don't want it"
f) I imagine I know that things happen to people because someone says: „I want it"
g) I imagine this someone can say things about people that other people can't say
h) I think of good and bad things that happen to a person as parts of one thing (Wierzbicka, 1992: 68)

Before we present elements of the folk-philosophy entailed by English "fate" and "destiny", let us take a brief look at Wierzbicka's discussion of these concepts. First of all, these two concepts are polarised along the dimension of MERIT: "fate" is bad and "destiny" is good. This dichotomy can be justified by the influence of religion (or more precisely Calvinism), the concept of predestination and capitalism. Thus, only good people can have "destiny" while others can only have "fate". (While everyone can have "destiny" while others can only have "fate". (While everyone can have "destiny", not everybody "can have" "fate" or "destiny".) Nowadays, however, these two terms have lost their religious connotations, or, rather more exactly, have acquired more secular dimension. "Fate" can be said to

be a "deterministic concept" (Wierzbicka, 1992) as it does not suggest any mystery behind events and connections with out-worldly powers are rather slight. "Fate" has now acquired the meaning of "casually explicable" and it also suggests that what has befallen to a person did not have to be inevitable, as it could have been avoided. Nonetheless, it is irreversible.

"Destiny", on the other hand, places more emphasis on "self", i.e. people can speak of destiny if, and only if, the success can be attributed to their activities. The definition of "fate" and destiny can be presented as follows:

"destiny"

a) different things can happen to different people
b) different people can do different things
c) some people can do things that other people can't do
d) I imagine I know someone wants it
e) this someone is not part of this world

"fate"

a) different things happen in the world that are bad for people
b) these things happen because some other thing happens
c) if those other things happen these things cannot not happen
(Wierzbicka 1992:82)

The Polish "los" differs both from the Russian "sud'ba" and the English "fate" and "destiny". It evokes an image of a lottery of some sort and can be positioned in the very middle of the scale of MERIT. "Los" stresses that events are unpredictable, rather than uncontrollable. From the point of view of "los", everything is indeterminate (while from the point of view of "sud'ba" everything is determined), there is no controller. "Los" can refer both to good and bad things (for example:

"Zmienne koleje losu' - Changing fortunes, ups and downs.
The definition of "los" can be presented as follows:
"los"

a) different things happen to different people

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b) sometime good things, sometimes bad things
c) more good things happen to some people than to others
d) more bad things happen to some people than to others
e) not because someone wants it
f) a person cannot think: I know what things will happen to me one cannot know this (Wierzbicka, 1992:84)

All the examples suggest that the concepts of FATE, DESTINY, SUD'BA and LOS are closely culture-related. How should we, then, translate sentences such as:

1. „The fate of our children is at stake."
2. „Oni s Sarokom versat sudgby i zizni" - Sorok and his likes decide people's lives and „sud'ba" (Rybakov 1987, p. 2: 13)
3. „Los chciał inaczej" - „los" wanted otherwise.

Any of the three sentences can be translated into other languages, but in each case something will be lost. It seems that it is up to the translator which aspects he will regard as the most important in a given context and will use such an equivalent from the target language whose traits will be as close as possible to that of the original expression. But let us consider whether or not it is possible to define the limits of translatability, at least from the linguistic point of view.

3. Limits of translatability

There are two predominant views on the issue of translation, corresponding to the two approaches to language presented in the above paragraphs. The first view holds that meanings cannot be transferred at all between languages, and the second view, that meanings can be fully transferred. Although it seems obvious that translation is, after all, possible, at the same time everyone who has ever tried to translate has to admit that each translation is in way a betrayal of the original. Thus, according to Wierzbicka, it appears that we should not ask whether translation is possible, but rather to what extent it is.

Although the claim that languages differ considerably and are culture-

dependent is rather uncontroversial it seems that there are (or to put it more accurately, there must be some) basic concepts among all (or, at least, almost all) languages³. Such concepts, in Wierzbicka's view, can be used to transfer meaning from one language into another. Before we can use these universal concepts to explain the meaning of a given expression we must realise that the meaning of the expression is (totally) different from our concepts. Thus, if we want to explain the meaning of an expression (which is untranslatable), we have to define it by means of a **universal metalanguage**, i.e. a language having basic metalanguage concepts which are shared by all languages. We come up with a version of the original expression and, as Wierzbicka (1992) puts it:

"each such version can be regarded as a NATURAL semantic metalanguage, intelligible, in principle, to native speakers of the language in question. Nonetheless, each such version represents a standardised and non-idiomatic METALANGUAGE rather than a natural language in all its richness and idiosyncracity. This difference between a natural language and a natural semantic metalanguage derived from natural language, defines the limits of precise translatability; [emphasis added]"

Wierzbicka's approach to the problem of translation, however, may seem to be in a sense too radical: the Bible translated into the natural metalanguage would hardly (if at all) satisfy the requirements of an ideal translation. This is due to the fact that natural metalanguage is not intended to be used for such a purpose: it is a powerful tool for accounting for cultural differences among different cultures. It also is the tool which, in our view, sets the limits of precise translatability.

³ Wierzbicka proposes a set of such concepts including the following: "I, you, someone, something, this, say, want, don't want, (or: no), feel and think. In addition I would now strongly postulate as vivid the following three: know, where, and good. Other elements which are currently being investigated as possible candidates include when, can, like, the same, kind of, after, do, happen, bad, all, because, if and two. Four older candidates, part, become, imagine, and world, are at present regarded as problematic but have not been definitely abandoned." (Wierzbicka, 1992, 10)

4. Conclusion

As has been already stated, the way we approach language determines our approach to translation. We have pointed to the shortcomings of the two extreme positions, represented on the one hand by Noam Chomsky, who claims that languages are basically the same and so that the process of translation can be fully achieved, and by Sapir, Whorf and Humboldt, on the other hand, who claim that languages differ considerably and thus any adequate translation is hardly possible. Rather, it seems to us that an adequate theory of translation should be designed very much along the lines proposed by Anna Wierzbicka. In Wierzbicka's view, languages, except for some universal concepts, are deeply rooted in respective cultures. Thus, while translating any expression, we have to take into account all the possible cultural implications connected with it. Once again, it has to be stated that the limits of precise translatability are set by the possibility of translating a given concept into a natural semantic metalanguage. However, it should be stressed that reducing a theory of translation solely to this method will not make it possible for us to create an *adequate* and *universal* theory of translation. What is clearly needed is finding solutions that will be most convenient for the purpose of translating a text which originated in the SL culture into the language of the TL culture.

At present it appears that if we want to create a variable translation theory, we would have either to incorporate in it a natural semantic metalanguage of the kind proposed by Anna Wierzbicka or, alternatively, adopt an equally promising approach represented by cognitive grammar. With its powerful concepts of Idealised Cognitive Models (ICMs) and radial categories, a cognitive grammar approach can provide a means of finding translation equivalents in a given context which would profile the most important characteristics of the SL text in the TL text. This, however, is a subject for another paper.

Tomasz Olszowy

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Magdalena Wakuluk

La chaîne thématique de Colin dans le roman *L'écume des jours* de Boris Vian

L'analyse du fonctionnement du langage dans une oeuvre littéraire implique l'étude linguistique. Elle s'avère nécessaire pour décoder le texte, pour saisir sa beauté. Elle facilite la lecture des différents niveaux du texte, aide à comprendre comment le texte se construit au sein de lui—même, ainsi que ce qui constitue son unicité et sa progression.

L'histoire du concept de reprise linguistique assurant la cohésion prend ses racines dans l'antiquité. Déjà les Grecs anciens se servaient du terme *anaphora* pour désigner un mouvement de bas en haut, et du terme *kataphora* pour désigner un mouvement de haut en bas. Cette terminologie était appliquée relativement à l'eau. Depuis longtemps d'ailleurs, le texte écrit était comparé à la rivière, et la lecture à un écoulement au fil de l'eau accompagné de nombreux retours vers l'amont et de descentes vers l'aval. Lorsqu'il faut remonter le texte pour trouver la source[1] d'une expression[2], nous parlons d'anaphore. Chaque fois qu'il y a la nécessité de descendre le cours du texte pour identifier la source d'un terme, nous avons la cataphore.

Un grand pas dans les travaux sur les relations textuelles a été fait grâce à *Cohesion in English* du couple Halliday—Hasan[3]. Parmi les

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[1] Terme de L. Tesnière, *Éléments de syntaxe structurale*, 1965, p. 87. Nous l'avons trouvé dans M. Kęsik, *La cataphore*, 1989, p. 37.

[2] Dans la suite de l'article, en parlant de cette partie de la relation cohésive nous utilisons le terme *diaphorique* proposé par M. Maillard, 1974, pour embrasser le référant de l'anaphore et de la cataphore, c'est—à—dire le segment qui pour être interprété doit être mis en rapport avec une autre partie (respectivement antécédente ou subséquente) de la chaîne énonciative.

[3] Cf. M.A.K. Halliday et R. Hasan, 1976.