"Sobiepaństwo wielmożów" vs. the Magnates' "Lordly Whims." Translation of Political Language in the English Version of Madame by Antoni Libera

The issue of politics in translation has come under translation researchers' scrutiny only quite recently. It can be argued that this has to do with the descriptive and cultural turn in translation studies, that is the growing interest in such issues as the relationship between the (at least) two cultures participating in the translation act; the changes of this relationship over time; the position of translators and translations within the target culture; the impact of a specific translation and of translation as a culture-forming phenomenon on the receiving culture (the role of translation as a medium of cultural change); the manipulations (refractions) incorporated in a translation with a view to adjusting the text to norms and ideologies of the target culture and the knowledge/expectations of the target readers; the norms themselves, especially insofar as they determine the criteria of selecting texts for translation and the role of the translator, the author (and his/her position/authority), editor, publisher, patron, etc., in that selection; the issues of agency, cultural assertion and cultural resistance; the question of translation and power, political control and censorship; and any other extratextual constraints that may come into play in the process of translation (cf. Tymoczko 2002, 2007; Bassnett & Lefevere 1990; Snell-Hornby 2006; Gentzler 2001). What all these questions have in common is that they boil down to the issue of ideology in and of translation, where ideology is understood in two ways: as a body of ideas reflecting social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture, and as a set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic, or other system (American Heritage Dictionary). It should also be emphasized that whenever descriptive and cultural translation scholars speak of "culture" and "system," they usually mean the target culture or system, that is the receiving end of the translation process, in line with the view of translations as "facts of the culture which hosts them" (Toury 1995: 24).
Such problems have attracted attention of several prominent scholars of translation such as Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Maria Tymoczko, Theo Hermans, Gideon Toury, Andrew Chesterman, Christina Schäffner, Lawrence Venuti, Michael Cronin, recently also Mona Baker, and obviously a group of scholars sometimes described as ‘postcolonial’ or ‘feminist,’ such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tejaswini Narajana, Harish Trivedi, Rosemary Arrojo, Sherry Simon, Barbara Godard and many others. This (by no means exhaustive) list shows that contemporary translation studies have moved away considerably from providing normative prescriptions as to the criteria of an accurate translation and equivalence or likeness between source and target texts, towards such aspects of translation as difference, otherness, uncertainty, ambiguity, etc.

The fundamentals of this approach have been expressed and developed in several groundbreaking books and collections of articles such as Theo Hermans’ (ed.) Translation as Manipulation and more recently Crosscultural Transgressions, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere’s (eds.) Translation, History and Culture, Maria Calzada Pérez’s (ed.) Apropos of Ideology and recently Maria Tymoczko’s Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators, as well as many others, devoted to specific texts, language pairs and problems.¹

In the article “Politics and Translation,” a welcome contribution to the comprehensive volume entitled A Companion to Translation Studies, Christina Schäffner draws attention to the view of translation as a political/ideological act; a view based on the observation that translation does not take place in a vacuum, but, being inherently culture-bound, is subject to various influences which have to do with the exercise of power in representing the other culture (2007: 135). She points out that the relationship between translation and politics can be analysed on three planes: politics of translation, translation of political texts and politicization of translation studies.

According to Peter Fawcett (2003), the politics of translation, or translational ideology as he calls it, covers the following aspects:

• the amount of work the translator expects the audience to do in order to receive the work;
• moral, legal and political concerns of the translator and/or translation commissioner;

¹ Important books on deconstructionist, postcolonial and gender translation are omitted from the list as these approaches fall outside the immediate scope of this paper.
• the translators’ changing perception of their task as communicators, mediators and authors and their attitude to their role in the translation process and responsibility for its various elements;

• the dominant discourse on a given type of translation.

The configuration of the above factors is not stable (historically) but fluctuating; yet, the researcher’s task is to look for regularities and patterns of translation choices, which, leading to the discovery of the “cumulative presence and repeated absence” of particular elements (Fawcett 2003: 163), allow to theorise on the norms adopted in the course of translation (cf. Tymoczko 2002: 16). This is very much in line with Maria Tymoczko’s view on the ideology of translation, which she describes as: “an amalgam of the content of the source text relevant to the source context, layered together with the representation of that context, its relevance to the receptor audience, and the various speech acts of the translation itself addressing the target context, as well as resonances and discrepancies between these two ‘utterances’” (2003: 182). Thus, a particular translation is hardly a harmonious equivalent of the source text, but rather a place of tension between the source text and culture and the target culture’s perception of and attitude to this text and culture. At the same time, a translation is a statement certifying to the receiving culture’s attitude to translation in general, to a given source text and its author, as well as to translation from a given language and culture. In other words, all translation events are socially and culturally conditioned, which is reflected in the linguistic structure of the texts.

For our purpose, which is an analysis of the strategies adopted by the English translator of Antoni Libera’s acclaimed novel Madame (Agnieszka Kołakowska) with reference to political language, it is Schöffner’s second plane that is of greatest importance. Speaking about the translation of political language and texts, she emphasises the fact that political concepts are strongly culture-bound, value-laden and historically conditioned, which means that, in line with what has been said above, the translator’s neutrality becomes a myth (2003: 142). The translation of such elements, be it single lexical items or larger ideological or political concepts, must necessarily involve application of some procedures of transplanting inherently foreign elements onto the familiar ground of the target culture, such as explication, clarification, etc.2 The result is usually a profound change of the communicative effect of the text: where

---

2 Cf. Tymoczko 2007: 228: “In cases when there is disparity between the subject matter and the audience, it is rarely sufficient for the audience just to transpose cultural material, implicitly presupposing, alluding to, or sketching the cultural background, because the audience is likely to be
the source reader found familiarity, the target reader may get the impression of distance and foreignness (cf. Nord 2003: 90; cf. Tymoczko 2007: 230–231).

The blurb on the cover of the English translation of Madame (2000) describes the book as, among other things, “a portrayal of recent realities in the Polish People’s Republic – skeptical, realistic, and grotesque, at times irresistibly funny, at others irresistibly sad.” Politics is indeed one of the key themes of Libera’s excellent novel, pervading the main characters’ everyday life and providing a superb contrasting background for the novel’s subtle and engaging story of passion and self-discovery. Here I suggest that the political language of the novel can be analysed on two interconnected planes:

• the plane of symbolic representations of the political reality in narrator’s and characters’ utterances (with a particular focus on references to the grim reality of Polish People’s Republic and the ominous presence of politics in people’s everyday lives)

• the plane of intertextual references to ideological discourse (communist newspeak).

The main criterion for selecting representative passages to investigate (cf. Toury 1995: 77–79; Tymoczko 2002: 18; Hermans 1999: 70) has been their relevance to the hypothesis posed in this article, namely that the translator’s interventions aiming at the clarification of certain elements of the cultural context shared by the writer and the source readers and encoded in the subtle emotive and connotative nuances of the verbal texture of the novel, have resulted in foregrounding of the informative content of the text.

**Passage 1**

Inną kwestią skupiającą uwagę i żywo dyskutowaną była jej domniemana przynależność partyjna. Co prawda, podobnie jak z wiedzą o jej stanie cywilnym, znów nikte nie miał dowodów, jednakże w tym wypadku wątpliwości wydawały się nikłe. Prawie się nie zdarzało, aby dyrektor szkoły nie należał do partii. Była to niemal reguła.


(47)

---

 ignorant of the cultural assumptions in the resulting text and will be unable to make necessary and relevant inferences about meaning. Translation in most situations must contend with these issues.”
Another urgent issue, and the subject of much lively debate, was her membership in the Party. Of this, as of her single state, we had no evidence, but it was virtually unheard of for a school head not to belong to the Party; Party membership was almost a *sine qua non* for such a post. And here another series of pressing questions presented itself. Did she join the Party from true conviction or for the good of her career? If it was for her career, what did she expect to get out of it? Money? Position? Or privilege — the main privilege of Party membership being the chance to go abroad, to the West — to France perhaps, to Paris, where she could stock up on good clothes? (48)

The source text describes the narrator’s and his colleagues’ doubts and hesitations as to Madame’s moral standards, amidst the speculations as to her alleged membership in the communist Party. The theme of dubious, opportunistic, self-interested motives for the membership in the Party, identified with terror and oppression, is perfectly familiar to the Polish reader and evokes a predictable emotional response. Significantly, in the target text, the expression “Party membership” (or a similar phrase) is used five times, compared to three in the source text. The two additional uses of the phrase: “Party membership was almost a *sine qua non* for such a post” and “the main privilege of Party membership being the chance to go abroad, to the West” may be seen as employed for the purpose of explicitation and clarification, the latter defined by Andre Berman as

... a corollary of rationalization which particularly concerns the level of “clarity” perceptible in words and their meaning. Where the original has no problem moving in the *indefinite*, our literary language tends to impose the definite. (2002: 289)

Thus understood, clarification can manifest itself in two ways:

(1) “explicitation can be manifestation of something that is not apparent, but concealed or repressed, in the original”

(2) “explicitation aims to render ‘clear’ what does not wish to be clear in the original.” (2002: 289)

While the idea of privileges and benefits for Party members and corresponding persecution and victimization of those who resisted is obvious and familiar to the source reader, the translator has decided to emphasise it for the sake of the target readers for whom it may be unfamiliar and/or dissonant with their image of the world. Thus, the additional uses of the phrase serve the function
of providing background information about a cultural situation which the target readers would allegedly lack.

In other words, because of different background knowledge and resulting emotional attitude on the part of the source and target readers, the reference to a particular set of circumstances is encoded differently in both texts. As a result, an idea which evoked familiar emotions in the source reader, gives the target reader, due to explanatory interventions, an impression of examining an unfamiliar world through a looking glass in an effort to disentangle and understand its peculiar logic. The target reader cannot, by definition, join the source reader in the emotional experience, but he/she is given the possibility to understand and rationalize the narrator’s attitude, and in this way broaden his/her knowledge of the history of the other culture.

Passage 2

No, i zaczęło się, niemal od pierwszej lekcji.
Wszystko, o czym dotychczas zadeźwiewmy słyszały, stało się konkretnie, wymierne. Problemat jej panieństwa i życia osobistego, mający dotąd charakter jakby akademicki, stał się palącą kwestią życiową. Podobnie sprawa przynależności do partii. – Jak ta wykwintna piękność, o takim glosie, manierach, o rękach jak z alabastru i nogach jak Wenus z Milo może należeć do partii... robotniczej? Do partii górników i chłopów, do partii proletariatu? Przecież wszyscy wiedzieli, jak oni wyglądają. Wiedzieli z socrealistycznych rzeźb wokół Pałacu Kultury i z arkad MDM-u, z małej galerii portretu, jaką były banknoty w tym czasie, ukazujące archetypowe oblicza głównych przedstawicieli narodu (górnik, robotnik, rybak i traktorzystka w chustce), wreszcie – z setek plakatów propagandowej treści. Monstrualni tytani o zaciętych, brutalnych twarzach, trzymający wielkimi łapami kilofy, młoty lub sierpy, o klocowatych nogach obutych w straszliwe kamasze.

(48–49)

That was when it began, almost from the first lesson. All the things we’d heard about suddenly became concrete and very real. Her private life, her single state, her Party membership – subjects which up to that moment had evoked no more than a vague, theoretical curiosity suddenly became burning issues. The last of these, for example, was now seriously disturbing. How could a creature so splendid, so breathtakingly gorgeous, belong to a workers’ party? That voice, those manners, those alabaster hands, those Venus de Milo legs – in a party of miners and peasants, a party of the proletariat? Everyone knew what they looked like: you could see them in the socialist-realist sculptures around the Palace of Culture and within the arcades of that other lugubrious 1950s monolith, the Young People’s Housing District; in the gallery of portraits on the banknotes, which displayed archetypal
images of prominent national representatives: the Miner, the Worker, the Fisherman, the Peasant Woman in a headscarf; in the hundreds of propaganda posters that littered the city. They were creatures of monstrous size, with hard, brutal faces and trunklike legs, their feet rammed into hideous clumpy boots, their huge, clumsy paws clutching pickaxes, hammers, and sickles.

In the passage the narrator and his classmates still cannot overcome their doubts as to their French teacher’s alleged political affiliations. The translated text contains several noteworthy interventions. The expression “seriously disturbing,” absent from the source text, emphasises the feeling of uneasiness experienced by the characters, and thus clarifies and intensifies the attitude expressed in the preceding sentence. The sentence marked with the double underline becomes two sentences in the translation, with a corresponding change in the arrangement of semantic elements. The semantic pattern of the original sentence is a contrast between two ideas, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jak ta wykwintna piękność, o takim głosie, manierach, o rękach jak z alabastru i nogach jak Wenus z Milo może</th>
<th>należeć do partii... robotniczej? Do partii górników i chłopów, do partii proletariatu?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>[BEAUTY OF A WOMAN]</strong></td>
<td><strong>[HIDEOUSNESS/MONSTROSITY OF THE PARTY]</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(expressed metonymically as the implied uncouthness and crudity of the Party’s archetypal members)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the target text, the contrast is intensified by means of the structure presented in Table 2.

The original semantic pattern is doubled and, as a result, the meaning is expressed more emphatically. This modification confirms that emotional connotations of the idea expressed in the original sentence might be unfamiliar to the target readers due to their different cultural and historical background and experiences.

Another instance of a clarificatory intervention which also serves the purpose of intensifying the idea of hideousness of the Party and the whole system and making the beauty/evil contrast more cogent and tangible to the target reader can be observed in the description of Warsaw’s MDM district as “that other lugubrious 1950s monolith, the Young People’s Housing District.” Apart
Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How could a creature so splendid, so breathtakingly gorgeous,</th>
<th>belong to a workers’ party</th>
<th>That voice, those manners, those alabaster hands, those Venus de Milo legs –</th>
<th>in a party of miners and peasants, a party of the proletariat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[BEAUTY OF A WOMAN]</td>
<td>[HIDEOUSNESS/MONSTROSIETY OF THE PARTY]</td>
<td>[BEAUTY OF A WOMAN]</td>
<td>[HIDEOUSNESS/MONSTROSIETY OF THE PARTY]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from replacing the name of the district by an English expression which is at odds with the original meaning (MDM stands for “Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa”), the translator has decided to clarify the reference by means of the phrase “lugubrious 1950s monolith,” where the pejorative adjective makes the narrator’s attitude clearer for the reader. A similar instance of the use of a value-laden word to elucidate the narrator’s meaning and, in this way, guide the reader’s perception and interpretation of the situation can be seen in the expression “posters that littered the city” (my emphasis – AS).

Omission can also be classified as a clarificatory intervention, as is the case with the expression “w tym czasie.” No corresponding element can be seen in the target text. In the source text, the phrase reminds the reader of the general context of the narrative, that is the temporal distance between the narrator who tells the story and the events and circumstances described. The reason for the omission of the phrase in the target text might have had to do with its immediate context in the source text: since it can be reasonably assumed that target readers lack the knowledge of different banknotes in Poland at various points in history, the time reference would be opaque for them anyway, and explaining it by means of additional information would probably give it unnecessary prominence in the passage.

Thus it can be seen that on the plane of references to the reality of the communist Poland and its interpretation by the narrator and other characters, the translator has decided to make manifest what in the source text is implied but clear enough for the source readers thanks to their cultural experience (another possible strategy would be not to explain/emphasise such references, and thus make them more marked by their opacity, cf. Tymoczko 2007: 230–231). The translator’s decisions as shown above can be interpreted as an attempt to guide the target readers’ interpretation of the situation by providing them with explicit
verbal clues as to possible connotative associations that the situations described may evoke in the source readers. Looking at what has been explicitated, we may draw conclusions as to what, in the translator’s view, might have appeared foreign to and difficult to comprehend for the target reader. In other words, the translator’s clarificatory interventions are employed at points when subtle emotive and connotative nuances of the text may be lost in translation.

When dealing with intertextual references to ideological discourse the translator was again faced with the problem of easy recognition of particular quotes by the source readers and potential ambivalence of some expressions in the target text. Let us look at the following example:

Passage 3

Rewolucja rosyjska była “przełomem w dziejach.” Uzdrawiając cudownie wielki naród rosyjski, przeobrażając go rychło z najbardziej zacofanego w najbardziej postępowy, niosła jutrzenkę swobody innym narodem świata. To właśnie dzięki niej ucięczone ludy jąły podnosić głowę i walczyć o swoje prawa, a Polska odzyskała państwowość i niepodległość, którą, poniekąd słusznie, straciła była na skutek “sobiepaństwa wielmożów” i “rozwydrzenia szlachty,” czyli przez złe z istoty “klasy posiadające.”


The Russian revolution was a “turning point history [sic! – AS],” a miraculous event that cured Russia of her ills, transformed her, within a short space of time, from the most backward to the most progressive of societies, and heralded the dawn of freedom for all the nations of the world. Thanks to it, the oppressed peoples of the world arose and began to fight for their rights, and Poland regained the independence she had earlier (and quite rightly) lost as a result of giving “magnates” and “the nobility” free rein to indulge their lordly whims and allowing the “propertied classes” the run of the country.

But such is the way of this best of all possible worlds that all good is immediately countered by evil. At once, the Promethean fire that the “great Russian nation” had gone to such efforts to kindle became the target of vicious attacks from forces hostile to humanity. Unfortunately our own country, too, was among them, and played a truly despicable role in the drama. “The Polish aristocrats, under the
leadership of Joseph Pilsudski, a bourgeois nationalist and counterrevolutionary,” instead of being grateful to the Soviet Union for overthrowing the rule of the tsars, waged a war against it, which by a regrettable stroke of pure luck they won – to the detriment of all: their own nation as well as the other nations of the world.

In the source text the intertextual references are of two kinds: overt, marked by quotation marks, and covert. The quotation marks seem to serve a double purpose: first, they identify a given expression as a part of a different discourse; and second, they suggest that whatever is enclosed by them is contradictory to the narrator’s own beliefs and worldview. In other words, the quotation marks emphasise and intensify the narrator’s negative attitude to the discourse he quotes.

Apart from the overt references, the passage also contains a few less evident intertextual references in the form of set phrases which the source reader, again thanks to his/her experience and background knowledge, recognizes, in the context, as elements of the discourse of communist propaganda, such as “jutrzęskę swobody,” “ucięściłone ludy,” “podnosić głowę” and “wrogich ludzkości sił.”

The characteristic features of the communist newspeak as exemplified in the passage are: the use of semantic and connotative opposites to express the political ideology of the communist authorities based on the irreconcilable opposition between the communist regime and its objectors and dissenters (e.g. “uzdrowiają swój cudownie,” “wielki naród,” “przeobrażając ... w najbardziej postępowy,” “prometejski ogień, wzniecony ...” versus “rozwojzenia,” “złe z istoty,” “zaciekłego ataku,” “wrogich ... sił,” “haniebną rolę,” “psim swędem”); the use of semantically neutral words in a context that gives them a strongly negative overtone (e.g. “wielmożów,” “szlachty,” “klasy posiadające”); and the use of peculiar neologisms (“sobiepaństwa,” “jaśniepanowie,” “kontrrewolucjonisty”). Again, such discourse has a special potential of evoking a particular emotional response on the part of the reader, for whom the official discourse is not only a historical fact but also a deeply felt part of his/her own immediate experience.

The response of the target readers will inevitably be different: first of all, the passage will serve the function of informing them about how the communist propaganda presented certain events, which is obviously not the case with the source readers, who in most cases already possess the necessary knowledge. Also, the target language may lack lexical resources that would unambiguously trigger similar associations with a specific discourse as in the source language. This issue is mentioned by Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa (2000), who, in line with her view on the translation of culture, speaks of “the untranslatability of
totalitarian propaganda" due to the "strangeness' of the verbal and conceptual fixtures and fittings" for the target readers. In such cases Bałuk-Ulewiczowa recommends "describing it [i.e. whatever cannot be expressed with a similar emotional sonorousness as in the source text due to different group experience – AS] in a history-book manner" as "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" (2000: 175; cf. Tymoczko 2007: 230–231).

Thus the translator had two potential options: she could either focus again on expanding the readers' knowledge and try to explain, overtly or covertly, the response the discourse might have evoked in the source readers, or resort to "straight translation," risking ambiguity and opacity. Unlike in the passages analysed above, here Kołakowska decided not to introduce any explanations, with one remarkable example: "J. Piłsudski" from the source text has been un-ambiguously identified as "Joseph Piłsudski." This is in line with her strategy of expanding the target readers' knowledge of the factual, historical circumstances surrounding the events described. The result here is some modification of the connotative value of the text: the source text gives the impression that in the communist discourse Piłsudski’s name did not even deserved to be quoted in its entirety; yet, in the translation the informative message of the text is more important than the culture-specific emotional aspect, which to a large extent would probably be lost anyway (cf. Bałuk-Ulewiczowa’s concept of “absolute untranslatability,” 2000). Also, it is worth noting that the name of the historical figure has been anglicised, which may be seen as another technique of effacing the foreignness of the target text.

Obviously, the effect of the target text is different from that of the source text: it may be claimed that the former is perhaps less expressive and emphatic than the latter, a feature of translation that Antoine Berman defines as "qualitative impoverishment," that is "the replacement of terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures that lack their sonorous richness or, correspondingly, their signifying or 'iconic' richness" (2002: 291). For example, by analogy with Berman’s examples, such words as "sobiepanstwa" and "jaśniepanowie," when translated as "lordly whims" and "aristocrats," lose some of their expressive value encoded in their unusual linguistic form (i.e. become neutralised).

3 Berman gives the example of the Peruvian word chuchumeca which can be translated as pute (whore): in such cases "the meaning can certainly be rendered, but none of the word’s phonetic-signifying truth" (2002: 291).
It is clear that when translating cultural references, sameness of effect is a utopia, and as such cannot be treated as the criterion of evaluation. As can be seen from the above analysis of Kołakowska’s translation, the expressive function of the original text is to a large extent replaced by the informative function. When dealing with the representations of life in the communist reality, the translator has decided to clarify elements that may be unfamiliar to target readers due to different historical knowledge and experience, and emphasise them by means of additions and syntactic and semantic rearrangement; while when translating intertextual references to communist ideological discourse, she focused on rendering and/or explaining the semantic content, i.e. on informing the reader how the propaganda presented certain facts and events. All this results in a notable change of perspective: in the translation, target readers are positioned as observers who examine rather than experience the circumstances described, in an attempt to rationalize and understand their logic. In this sense, the didactic role of translation is intensified: the readers are supposed to learn about an unfamiliar reality (cf. Tymoczko 2007: 230).

In Toury’s view, the majority of translators’ decisions are motivated by the desire to secure the acceptability of their text in the target context, which he understands as the set of norms that, if subscribed to, warrant that the translation will be accepted as a successful text in its own right. Thus, on the basis of the above analysis, a hypothesis may be posed that the dominant target norm for translation of contemporary fiction dealing with actual historical circumstances is to explain and clarify the facts, ideas and patterns of thinking that the target reader may find strange and unfamiliar. In effect, the culture-formative role of such translation would consist in developing the target readers’ objective knowledge of the source culture’s reality and the subjective attitudes it evokes in its members.

---

4 Acceptability is to be distinguished from adequacy, that is the set of criteria governing the target text’s relation to source text norms and its subsequent acceptance as a successful rendering of the source text (Toury 1995: 56–57).
REFERENCES


