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ALEKSANDER GOMOLA
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
a.gomola@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-3929-2210

TRANSLATING PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS: A CASE STUDY OF CHARLES TAYLOR'S *MODERN SOCIAL IMAGINARIES* IN ENGLISH-POLISH TRANSLATION

Keywords: Charles Taylor, contrastive grammar, linguistic competence, philosophical translation, translation errors

Abstract

The paper examines the challenges inherent in translating philosophical discourse, arguing that while specialist knowledge is important, a strong command of both source and target languages, along with an understanding of contrastive grammar and basic translation rules, is equally crucial. The study, preceded by a short overview of relationships between philosophy and translation, analyzes selected translation errors in *Nowoczesne imaginaria społeczne* – the Polish version of Charles Taylor's *Modern social imaginaries*. It demonstrates that these errors likely stem from a lack of understanding of the original's syntactical and lexical intricacies, rather than a misinterpretation of Taylor's philosophical ideas. The analysis highlights such errors as mishandled anaphoric references, incorrect case government, inappropriate word order resulting from interference, and problematic lexical and terminological choices. The paper concludes that successful translation of philosophical texts requires not only solid philosophical knowledge but also thorough linguistic preparation, including detailed knowledge of contrastive grammar and familiarity with translation principles. It emphasizes the need for future training of philosophical translators to focus on developing these linguistic skills, underscoring that subject expertise alone is insufficient without mastery of both source and target languages. The study also stresses the importance of proper editorial oversight and verification in specialist translation.

Introductory remarks

Translation of philosophical discourse represents one of the most challenging domains within specialist translation.[1] Philosophical texts not only demand mastering technical knowledge but often contain terminology regarded as hardly translatable or untranslatable. Furthermore, in contrast to texts with the high level of repetitiveness like medical or legal documents, philosophical writings are often unique, which situates them closer to literary texts. This leads to the question whether they should be translated by specialists (i.e. philosophers) or whether translators with the proper professional and linguistic background and the sufficient philosophical knowledge will be equally competent in dealing with them.

In this paper I argue that even if translating philosophical texts demands specialist knowledge (Arslan 2015), equally important seems to be the good command of the source language as the preliminary condition of the correct understanding of the source text, supported with the solid knowledge of contrastive grammar of the source and target languages and basic rules of translation. To prove it, I discuss selected examples of translation errors in the Polish version (Taylor 2010) of Charles Taylor's book *Modern social imaginaries* (2004) to demonstrate that they resulted most probably from the lack of understanding of the syntactical and lexical intricacies of the original on the more basic level on the part of the translators and not from their misinterpretation of Taylor's thought. I start with a few introductory remarks concerning the interconnection between philosophy and translation followed by a short characterization of philosophical texts and their (un)translatability including Taylor's language. I conclude that in translating philosophical texts, subject expertise alone is insufficient without mastery of both source and target languages. The case study I propose here should be seen as a reconnaissance of the wider and more complex problem of translation of philosophical discourse, whose detailed analysis goes beyond the space provided for the paper.

Philosophy and translation

The development and spread of philosophical ideas in the West has been inseparable from translation of texts that carried them. This process began with the translation of Greek philosophers into Latin in antiquity, continued through Greek-Arabic and Arabic-Latin translations in the Middle Ages, and extended into the early modern and modern periods with three dominant source languages of philosophical texts: French, English, and German. Throughout Western history, philosophical notions and concepts have been taken over and developed by successive thinkers, with translation serving as both the driving force and connective tissue of the Western philosophical tradition (Large 2019).

[1] During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude 3.5 Sonnet for language editing.

At the same time the reflection on what constitutes the good translation has been stimulated by difficulties connected with transferring philosophical concepts into a new linguistic and cultural milieu. Cicero considers the problem of terminological equivalents in his discussion of Greek philosophical schools in *De finibus bonorum et malorum* (Lefevere 2002: 47) while Bruni precedes his translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics* into Latin with the critical analysis and correction of mistakes made by earlier translators, being "distressed (…) at the sight of those books that are full of sweetness, elegance, and inestimable value in Greek, and (…) had turned out so vile and degraded in Latin because the translations are riddled with impurities" (Lefevere 2002: 82). Similarly, Dolet formulated his rules of translation drawing partly from his experience as a translator of philosophical texts. Historically, discussions about translating philosophy have centred on its exceptional challenges, with scholars often comparing it to the complexities of translating religious texts or poetry (Large 2014: 315).

Philosophers themselves have also addressed the issue of translation and reflections and observations proposed by Schopenhauer (Hermans 2019), Wittgenstein (Panizza 2019), Benjamin (Boase-Beier 2019), Gadamer (Foran 2019) or Quine (Roth 2019) occupy an important place in Translation Studies. Yet, their perspective on the nature and challenges of translation of philosophical and non-philosophical texts generally overlooks that of Translation Studies (as shown by Foran 2012). Venuti (1999: 106) goes as far as to say that many Anglo-American philosophers assume "the transparency of the translated text" and treat "the concepts [present in them as] unmediated by the domestic language and culture that is their medium". This, however, seems to be an extreme case that does not concern philosophers who translate texts from their discipline themselves and who are usually aware of complexities and difficulties of this type of translation (Large 2014). A good case in point may be Ingarden's introduction to his translation of Kant's *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* into Polish (Ingarden 1957).

That philosophical discourse is riddled with concepts that resist smooth translation has become something of a truism. From *logos*, through *haecceitas*, *Ding-an-sich, Aufhebung, Geworfenheit*, to *différance*, Western philosophy abounds with notions closely connected with the thought systems and language of the thinkers who promoted them and thus often not possible to be rendered neatly or precisely in another language. Even seemingly obvious words turn out to be deeply rooted in the soil of the source language and when eradicated from it, they no longer exactly mean what they originally were to mean (Steiner 1975: 172–73); the more so if they are used in a philosophical context. Take "stand" used by Taylor (1989: 27) to define our self-identity as "knowing where I stand". This apparently easily translatable term, due to the broad network of idiomatic expressions in which it is entangled in English makes it difficult to translate into other languages, especially when a new philosophical meaning is added to it (Montefiore 2014). Or consider the concepts of "porous self" and "buffered self" by means of which Taylor describes the historical transformation of human subjectivity from a pre-modern, permeable mode of experiencing the world where external spiritual forces could directly penetrate the self,

to a modern, insulated mode of experiencing reality where the self is imagined as an entity impermeable to such apparent forces (Taylor 2007: 27, passim). The first term of the pair – a "porous self" – can be rendered easily into Polish as 'ja porowate' (which is a literal, and precise, translation of the English phrase). Translating the other is much more difficult not because of the lack the equivalent of "buffer" in Polish but because of the different network of expressions in which it appears in this language. Therefore it has been translated as 'ja opancerzone' ('armoured self'), 'ja osłonięte' ('protected/covered self') or literally as 'ja obuforowane' (Taylor 2010: 34); the last one mirroring the original Taylor's phrase at the morphological level, but being at the same time unclear and murky term to Polish readers unless they know what the Canadian philosopher means by it. Which of these terms is to be used in Polish philosophical discourse depends often on individual preferences of a given author (Barnat 2019: 102).

Modern social imaginaries and its Polish translation

Modern social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) examines fundamental transformations in Western collective social consciousness that precipitated the emergence of modernity and traces how shifts in social understanding facilitated the development of modern institutions while simultaneously shaping contemporary notions of moral and social order. The Polish translation by Adam Puchejda and Karolina Szymaniak (Taylor 2010), generally succeeds in conveying Taylor's ideas and arguments. However, to employ Bruni's terminology, the target text exhibits numerous "impurities" regarding various linguistic nuances of the original. The analysis below examines select examples of these "impurities" focusing on problematic renderings likely stemming from inadequate comprehension of English syntax and/or phraseology, followed by an examination of lexical and terminological errors and instances of English-Polish interference. The last example illustrates a gross translation error whose presence is hardly conceivable in a specialist text.

Syntactical and phraseological errors

(1) "The new gentleman required not principally a training in arms, but a humanistic education that would enable him to become a civil governor. The function was now **advising** and **persuading**, first **colleagues** and ultimately the ruling power" (Taylor 2004: 34): 'Nowy dżentelmen w pierwszej kolejności nie potrzebował już szkolenia wojskowego, ale edukacji humanistycznej, która pozwoliłaby mu zostać cywilnym zarządcą. Do jego funkcji należało teraz **doradzanie** i **przekonywanie** najpierw swoich **kompanów**, a ostatecznie rządzącej władzy' (Taylor 2010: 53)

This translation error exemplifies a significant difference between English and Polish concerning case government that is absent in English but required in Polish. The target text is syntactically faulty because "doradzanie" ['advising'] takes object in dative in Polish, not in accusative. However the translators, following the syntactical

structure and word order of the source text, ignored this and used an accusative case, "kompanów", that corresponds with the gerundial form immediately preceding it ("przekonywanie") but not with "doradzanie". Actually, since probability of such errors is high, students of English-Polish translation are constantly reminded of this syntactical difference between both languages.

A second problematic translation choice is rendering "colleagues" (which in this context refers to other officials) with 'kompanów' – a term carrying pejorative connotations that misrepresents the source text's meaning and at the same time creates stylistic discord within the target text (more on the lexical choices of translators below). Taking into account these objections, the Polish version of the problematic sentence might read as follows: 'Jako taki miał wspierać radą i przekonywać wpierw tych, którzy pełnili z nim podobne funkcje, a ostatecznie rządzących.'

(2) "The ideal of civility, and its norms of orderliness, polish, and refinement, have **alienated** the leading classes from these [earlier and unruly] practices" (Taylor 2004: 44): 'Ideał ogłady i wprowadzone przezeń normy porządku, wytworności i wyrafinowania **wykluczyły** elity z tych praktyk' (Taylor 2010: 67)

The translators' rendering of "alienated" as 'wykluczyły' ['excluded'] appears to stem from a surface-level correspondence between the English preposition "from" and its Polish counterpart 'z'. This decision reflects an insufficient recognition of the translation unit – specifically, the English collocation "alienate from", which conveys the meaning 'to make someone feel that they are different'. A more appropriate translation might be 'zraziły elity do tych praktyk' ['estranged the leading classes from these practices']. This error suggests inadequate awareness of the distinct prepositional patterns in English and Polish, where semantically equivalent verbs may require different prepositional complements – a crucial distinction emphasized in contrastive grammar studies and essential for accurate translation.

(3) "Many tribes hand down legends of a founding act, when a Lycurgus, for instance, laid down their laws" (Taylor 2004: 95): 'Wiele plemion przekazuje legendy o jakimś akcie fundacyjnym, na przykład o tym, że Likurg ustanowił ich prawa' (Taylor 2010: 134)

There are two problems with the target text. First, the translators ignored an indefinite article (**a** Lycurgus) failing to convey that "Lycurgus" serves here as an example of a generic law-giving figure rather than referring to the specific historical person. Second, it slavishly copies the typical syntactical structure of the source text (SVO) as if the translators were unaware that Polish, as an inflectional language, allows for greater flexibility in word order, with the subject often appearing at the end of a sentence, especially when we put a logical stress on it or when we want to introduce a new piece of information (theme/rheme structure). Therefore, the correct and more natural Polish version of the sentence might be: 'Wiele plemion przekazuje legendy o tym, czy innym akcie fundacyjnym, na przykład o tym, że ich prawa ustanowił jakiś Likurg.'

Distorted theme/rheme structure of the target text resulting from the copying English SVO order is visible also here:

(4) "[The axial age is the period] when various "higher" forms of religion appeared seemingly independently in different civilizations, marked by such founding figures as Confucius, Gautama. Socrates, and the Hebrew prophets" (Taylor 2004: 57); '[Wiek osi to okres], kiedy różne wyższe formy religii pojawiły, się jak się zdawało, niezależnie w różnych cywilizacjach, z postaciami takimi jak Konfucjusz, Budda, Sokrates i hebrajscy prorocy' (Taylor 2010: 83)

There is also an interference error at the end of the sentence ("hebrajscy prorocy"); such errors are discussed in the second part of my analysis. Both errors might have been avoided by a simple rearrangement of the elements of the target sentence: '[Wiek osi to okres] kiedy w różnych cywilizacjach pojawiły, się jak się zdawało, niezależnie, różne wyższe formy religii z postaciami takimi jak Konfucjusz, Budda, Sokrates i prorocy hebrajscy.'

(5) "In a functioning public sphere, action at any time is carried out within structures laid down earlier. (…) But this arrangement doesn't enjoy any privilege over the action carried out within it. The structures were set up during previous acts of communication in common space, on all fours with **those** we are carrying out now" (Taylor 2004: 95): 'Działanie podjęte w dowolnym momencie w danej sferze publicznej jest przeprowadzane w ramach struktur istniejących już wcześniej. (…) Struktury te zostały ustanowione w toku wcześniejszych aktów komunikacji, mają taki sam status jak **struktury** ustanawiane w aktach dokonujących się teraz' (Taylor 2010: 134–35)

This mistranslation results from misidentified anaphoric reference. Even though Taylor's language is a bit complicated here, the fact that the demonstrative pronoun "those" is followed by "carrying out now" makes it clear that its antecedent must be "acts of communication" not "structures" because only the former can be "carried out". The Polish translation incorrectly interprets this reference as pointing to "structures", thus disrupting the cohesive links present in the original text and significantly altering Taylor's intended meaning. A better solution might be: 'Struktury zostały ustanowione podczas poprzednich aktów komunikacji we wspólnej przestrzeni będących na równi z obecnymi aktami.'

(6) "Masses of people responded to the **calling** of the Estates General, with their *cahiers de doléance*." (Taylor 2004: 114): 'Rzesze ludzi odpowiedziały na **wezwanie** Stanów Generalnych, wyrażając swoje bolączki w *cahiers de doléance*.' (Taylor 2010: 159)

The target sentence is a classic example of what is sometimes called "a dictionary equivalent error" resulting from choosing the most common dictionary equivalent for a given translation unit, which may not be the appropriate solution given the context (Hejwowski 2004: 203). In this case a polysemous "calling" whose meanings include 'calling of an assembly' was wrongly rendered into Polish by its more

popular equivalent as an 'act of calling' or urging to do something. Here however, given the historical context, the correct Polish translation should read: 'To prawda, że rzesze ludzi odpowiedziały na **zwołanie** [przez króla] Stanów Generalnych.'

(7) "The revolutionaries separated themselves off from other Englishmen, even the Tories in their midst, by this decisive political option." (Taylor 2004: 177): 'Rewolucjoniści oddzielili się od innych Anglików – nawet torysi w ich szeregach – dokonując zdecydowanego wyboru politycznego.' (Taylor 2010: 237)

The target text distorts the source text by rendering "Tories" as 'torysi', i.e. in the nominative case, which suggest to Polish readers that "torysi" is a subcategory of the subject and that "Tories" belonged to "the revolutionaries". This, of course, contradicts historical facts and results – like in the example 5 – from the wrong identification of the antecedent; this time the translators connected wrongly "their" with "the revolutionaries" not with "other Englishmen". The correct translation should read 'nawet torysów w ich szeregach', with "torysów" in genitive case, thus creating a proper deictic connection between "torysów" and "innych Anglików" (a preceding phrase in genitive case). Is it possible to defend translators' solution by arguing that it is not clear from the source text to which antecedent "this" refers to? Such argument is untenable for two reasons: 1) historical facts; 2) the translation of 'torysi'(nominal case) would be possible only if Taylor's intrusion was the part of the subject ("the revolutionaries, even the Tories in their midst, separated themselves…"). Yet because the intrusion is a part of the object, this means that "Tories" cannot be translated into Polish as 'torysi' (in the nominal case).

Lexical and terminological errors

Another category of translation errors includes lexical and terminological choices of the translators. Like in the previous category, only selected examples will be discussed.

(8) "But in the fullness of time, this would be the order of those **gathered** around God in the final dispensation" (Taylor 2004: 6) : 'Jednak gdy wypełni się czas, tak będzie wyglądał ostateczny porządek **skupionych** wokół Boga' (Taylor 2010: 15)

While "skupionych" ['concentrated'] might serve as an acceptable translation of "gathered" in certain contexts, here this particular solution seems inadequate. The source text implicitly alludes to biblical passages that describe God gathering nations at the end of time (e.g. Isaiah 60:4: 66:18; Matthew 24:31; Revelation 7:9) and this intertextuality has been lost in the target text. The correct Polish equivalent should be 'zgromadzonych' ['gathered'], since this term appears in most Polish translations of these biblical passages.

(9) "The complementarities of the older enchanted world: between **worldly life** and **monastic renunciation**" (Taylor 2004: 49–50): 'Komplementarności dawnego zaczarowanego świata rozpiętego między **światowym życiem** a **klasztornym wyrzeczeniem**' (Taylor 2010: 73)

Both source text phrases are rendered at least imprecisely in the target text. What concerns the first one, it should be understood, according to the medieval Christian perspective adopted by Taylor in this passage, as living a secular life, or "living in the world" and such should also be its Polish equivalent, i.e. 'życie w świecie'. The phrase 'światowe życie', being a literal translation of the original, means in Polish a life of luxury and pleasure that had little to do with the existence of the overwhelming majority of the medieval Western population. The second imprecision appears in the translation of "monastic renunciation". In the source text, while "renunciation" does not explicitly include "the world" as its object, this meaning is clearly implied within the medieval Christian framework, where becoming a monk entailed leaving and renouncing the world. The Polish translation 'klasztorne wyrzeczenie' ['monastery renunciation'] employs a metonymic shift that obscures this crucial connection between monastic life and renunciation of the world and severs the fundamental opposition Taylor seeks to establish between secular life and the monastic rejection of worldly existence.

(10) "Action of trickster figures" (Taylor 2004: 56) : 'Działania oszustów' (Taylor 2010: 82)

Rendering the technical term "trickster figures" as 'oszuści' ['swindlers'] is an example of a serious terminological error; this term functions in Polish as a borrowing and the correct translation should be 'działania tricksterów'.

(11) "Objectifying" and "objectification" (Taylor 2004: 77, passim): 'obiektywizujący' and 'obiektywizacja' (Taylor 2010: 108, passim)

This is the wrong terminological translation for two reasons: 1) the original terms inform the reader that economy and other elements of social and political thought in the modern Western world are treated like "objects" (things) while their target language equivalents are most often used in Polish as opposites of something "subjective" (biased) and suggest impartiality of perspective not reification of abstract entities; 2) even if the proper meaning of these terms might be deduced from their context, the translators ignored the already existing correct solution – i.e. 'uprzedmiotowienie' – that had been adopted in Taylor 2001 – the Polish translation of Taylor (1989) that was published nine years before the Polish translation of *Modern social imaginaries*. Such terminological inconsistency in consecutive translations of the same philosopher should be avoided unless a new solution is justified by some reasons.

Word order interference

In English, a modifier generally precedes the noun in a noun phrase, regardless of whether it describes a property of a referent (e.g. "a red bike") or indicates a category to which it belongs (e.g. "a mountain bike"). In Polish, the position of the adjective serves to distinguish these two functions: a prenominal adjective typically indicates a property of the referent (e.g. "czerwony rower" – 'red bike'), while a postnominal adjective typically indicates a category (e.g. "rower górski" – 'mountain bike'). This distributional pattern in Polish may be overridden for stylistic reasons, however in many cases, especially in English-Polish translations, the prenominal position of an adjective results from word-order interference and should be regarded as a translation error. Puchejda and Szymaniak (Taylor 2010) often make this error, placing adjectives incorrectly before nouns, e.g.:

(12) "Wojskowe szkolenie" (Taylor 2010: 69); "kulturalno-religijny rozwój", (ibid.: 74); "militarna porażka" (ibid.: 232); "polityczny wybór" (ibid.: 237); "łacińskie chrześcijaństwo" (ibid.: 240); "publiczna przestrzeń" (ibid.: 248).

Finally, a gross translation mistake that is yet another example of the wrong "dictionary equivalent", this time resulting from ignorance, not enough attention given to the source text and insufficient command of English. Discussing tolerance towards prostitution in the Middle Ages, Taylor, referring to the Council of Konstanz (1414–1418), writes:

(13) "Even the Council of Konstanz organized temporary brothels for the large numbers of participants who flooded into the town" (Taylor 2004: 41): 'Rada Miasta Konstancji zorganizowała nawet tymczasowe domy publiczne dla wielkiej liczby chętnych, którzy dosłownie zalewali miasto.' (Taylor 2010: 63)

Supposedly due to the insufficient historical knowledge the translators did not notice that "council" means here an ecclesiastical meeting and following more common, "municipal" sense of the term rendered it as 'rada' ['town/city council']. They may have avoided the mistake, had they known that in the case of a city council, a standard phrasing in English would be 'the Konstanz Council' not 'the Council of Konstanz'. Of course, translators are not walking encyclopedias (even if they should be) and some nuances of the source language may elude them (this, however, leads us to the main question posed in this paper concerning linguistic versus knowledge competences of translators of specialist texts), yet there are other elements in the source sentence that should have alerted them, namely "temporary" and "participants". The adjective suggests that the brothels were not meant to be a stable element of the city life (why then "the city council" decided to "organize" them in the first place?); the noun directs to some event. The translators kept the adjective in their translation but rendered wrongly the noun as 'chętnych' ['willing ones in genitive case'], apparently to salvage the logic of the sentence. They also decided to strengthen this faulty logic by adding an adverb 'dosłownie' ['literally'] that does not appear in the original. The sentence in question might be rendered as:

'Nawet podczas Soboru w Konstancji zorganizowano tymczasowe domy publiczne dla jego uczestników, tłumnie napływających do miasta'.

The last discussed example points also to the importance of the target text verification. Professional translation, especially specialist translation, is a collaborative process and the fact that the error was not noticed and corrected may indicate insufficient editorial oversight of the translatum.

Conclusion

The analysis of translation errors in the Polish version of Taylor's *Modern social imaginaries* demonstrates that successful translation of philosophical texts requires more than just familiarity with the subject matter. The selected errors found in the translation – ranging from mishandled anaphoric references and incorrect case government to inappropriate word order and terminological inconsistencies – result from insufficient command of English rather than misunderstanding of Taylor's philosophical concepts.

These findings suggest that the ideal translator of philosophical texts should possess not only solid philosophical knowledge but also thorough linguistic preparation including detailed knowledge of contrastive grammar and familiarity with translation principles. Future training of philosophical translators should therefore emphasize the development of these skills. Moreover, as specialist translation is a collaborative process, proper editorial oversight and verification of the target text are crucial steps in ensuring translation quality.

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