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TRANSLATING THE WORLD. SOCIO-TRANSLATION STUDIES ACCORDING TO ALICJA IWAŃSKA*

Abstract

The article focuses on cultural translation and its ethical consequences according to Alicja Iwańska (1918–1996), a Polish sociologist and writer. In her book *Świat przetłumaczony* [The Translated World] (1968) Iwańska uses the figure of the translator-traitor while trying to translate Mexico conquered by the Spanish to Poland ruined by the Nazis and Stalinists—the book was the literary aftermath of her fieldwork on the culture of the Indian Mazahua of a secluded Mexican village. The scientific aftermath of the same research was her anthropological monograph *Purgatory and Utopia. A Mazahua Indian Village of Mexico* (1971). The first book, written in Polish, was described by the author as "a fictionalised account", and a "literary output"; the second, written in English, was designed as "relatively free from the interference of extra-scientific emotional elements". For Alicja Iwańska, before the Second World War a philosophy student under Władysław Tatarkiewicz, translating a culture is an ethical problem; the complex relations between truth, falsity and fiction in intercultural translation are coupled with the issues of expressibility in a specific narrative (literary versus scientific) and a specific language (Polish versus English). Iwańska's books, read again 50 years after their creation, seem to be a forgotten link of Polish translation theory.

Keywords: Alicja Iwańska, Translation Studies, sociology, cultural translation, ethics of translation, Mexico

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Sociological studies versus sociotranslatology

Over half a century ago, Alicja Iwańska (1918–1996) – Polish sociologist, philosopher, poet and prose writer—was sent by an American university to pursue solitary field research among the Mazahua people in Mexico. Not completely assimilated and still cultivating their language and tradition, the Mazahuas lived in a secluded mountain village, five hours away from Mexico City.

The immediate result of Iwańska's research, conducted in the early 1960s, was her sociological treatise *Purgatory and Utopia. A Mazahua Indian Village of Mexico*, written in English and published in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1971 (Iwańska 1971). The title of the present article ("Translating the World"), however, alludes to another book by Iwańska: *Świat przetłumaczony* [The Translated World], published in Polish (Instytut Literacki, Paris 1968)[1] and also inspired by the above-mentioned research in Mexico (Iwańska 1968). In 1974, the book won the Kościelski Award for promising young writers. In addition, Iwańska wrote a memoir, *Potyczki i przymierza. Pamiętnik 1918–1985* [Arguments and alliances. A memoir 1918–1985], published in Warsaw in 1993 (Iwańska 1993).

A formal comparison of these three narratives alone presents ample material for literary study. Interestingly, Iwańska describes the earliest text (*Świat przetłumaczony*) as a "fictionalised account of field research" and a "literary output", while the second work, intended as an academic publication, was meant to be "relatively free from the interference of extra-scientific emotional elements" (Iwańska 1971: 4). Which one of the two accounts is more authentic? The first one, written in Polish and described as fictionalised, novel-like and emotional (or rather impressionistic), has the form of a diary composed of two related dreams. The narrative is patched, leaving open threads, metaphorical, composed of snapshots – "But these notes are for myself alone", the author declares (Iwańska 1968: 60).

The other account, written in English and for academic purposes, was meant to be free not only from emotional content but also from "literary descriptions of scenery and *fiestas*, so common in anthropological monographs" (Iwańska 1971: 4). The material is organised in thematic chapters and subchapters; it is held together by *El Libro Del Nopal* – a chronicle of the village inhabitants' past and present, quoted in its entirety at the end of the book. Recorded and transcribed by Iwańska in 1962, and subsequently

censored and approved by the local Mazahua community (or rather its male empowered representatives) after a series of public readings, the story is addressed to the Mazahua children, grandchildren and "those who come later".

In both books Iwańska uses a certain code. Both in the fictionalised and in the academic narrative, pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the interviewed subjects (or so the author declares in her sociological work).[1] The same village is referred to as Mbayo (in *Świat przetłumaczony*) and *El Nopal* (in *Purgatory and Utopia*); neither of these names is real.

At times, the same facts are represented differently in the two texts: in her sociological work, Iwańska describes her arrival in the village as a lucky coincidence, whereas in *Świat przetłumaczony* she presents it as a shameful "intrusion" (she went there accompanying a charity). In this case, the discrepancy between the two accounts can be attributed to pragmatism.

While discussing Iwańska's narratives regarding the unidentified village of Mbayo/El Nopal, it is worth mentioning that, in the introduction to *Purgatory and Utopia*, Iwańska declares that she also wrote a couple of poems about the village, which so far had remained unpublished. It can, thus, be assumed that the majority of Iwańska's writings about the Mazahuas qualify as fiction—apparently, it was easier for her to represent the world through literary metaphors. Interestingly, the academic, non-fictional narrative[2] of *Purgatory and Utopia* is also based on exploring the titular metaphors as the key to understanding the Mazahua culture.

Nevertheless, the main goal of the present essay is not to speculate about the implications of applying various literary forms, but rather to try to determine what Iwańska actually does while "translating" the world (after all, in the title of her book she uses the perfective aspect of the verb, implying that the world indeed *has* been translated). In a way, she tries to translate Mexico conquered by the Spanish into Poland, devastated by the Nazis and Stalinists, measuring the Mazahuas, from a Mexican mountain village, against the pre-war farmers from the familiar Polish village of Mikorzyn. Consequently, the issue at hand concerns not only the methods and topics applied in sociology, but also individualised modes of perception, bringing the topic of translation into the very core of this debate:

[1] "I usually invent pseudonyms for villages and people whom I study in order to protect the privacy of my interviewees, as well as the culture of the village" (Iwańska 1971: 23).

[2] According to Henryk Markiewicz's definition (Markiewicz 1984: 79).

> In order to be really able to translate Mbayo into Poland, one would first need to imagine the United States of Europe with all the resulting monstrous bureaucracy and impersonality. Poland, of course, would belong to these United States of Europe, and after a "failed harvest" (each country would possess an autonomy permitting such local losses), Poles would migrate towards the European centre – to Paris, Brussels or Geneva – in pursuit of work, survival or simply better opportunities. Obviously, they would regard themselves as citizens of these new United States of Europe, but perhaps not to the core – such new loyalties need time to grow. Anyway, they would certainly identify as citizens in legal and intellectual terms. Yet despite that, in the West they would still be known as "Slavs" (rather than "Poles") – just as the inhabitants of Mbayo are referred to as "Indians" by the Mexicans, and not as the Mazahua (as is their wish, Iwańska 1968: 15).

From the perspective of the fifty years which have passed since the publication of *Świat przetłumaczony*, this thought experiment with the United States of Europe seems more effortless to carry out than before; this does not mean, however, that the translation postulated by Iwańska has become any easier (or more appropriate, for that matter).

Świat przetłumaczony is a Polish book written in a foreign country. Consequently, I believe it can be viewed as a part of Polish translation studies—and in this context it offers some new perspectives.

Iwańska's study quite naturally draws on the practices developed by Bronisław Malinowski, during his first research trips to New Guinea in the second half of the 20th century, which he described in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 2004). For Iwańska, Malinowski is a major role model – in her moments of doubt, she muses: "maybe it's just that I don't know how to ask the right questions (…) maybe somebody else (Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown – one of these Unquestionably Competent scholars) would know how to ask in order to learn" (Iwańska 1968: 110); "how can one, facing one's own history, just now being intertwined with their [the Mazahuas'] history, keep calm and dispassionately collect data? Maybe Malinowski could do this… (…) And who knows, maybe that's precisely what one should do to deserve the label of a 'true scholar'?" (Iwańska 1968: 101).

The tradition of Malinowski's research remains an important context for Iwańska; as she herself admitted, the "conventional anthropological technique of participant observation" (Iwańska 1971: 13) was her starting point, yet she found pure ethnology rather boring at times ("I'm wasting my time talking to Dona Genevieve about her skirts from forty years ago",

Iwańska 1968: 183). Instead, she pursues another goal: in *Purgatory and Utopia*, Iwańska purports to recreate the view of the world represented by the Mazahuas as a social group and her work is addressed at sociologists, social anthropologists and philosophers (Iwańska 1971: 8). The author mentions one more group of readers: educated Mazahuas living in El Nopal and other Mazahua villages, who within one or two generations may themselves become social scientists or philosophers (Iwańska 1971: 8–9). Her research, then, has a clear ethical aspect: Iwańska hoped that aside from making a contribution to science, her work would offer

> a detailed description of the culture of Mazahuas of El Nopal in the 1960s which possibly will allow the educated sons and grandsons of my Mazahua friends to plan more consciously the future of their people, and to decide more realistically and less painfully which elements of their culture they can and want to preserve, abandon or elaborate on (Iwańska 1971: 9).

This goes beyond Iwańska's commentary on Malinowski's theses:

> Does the anthropologist studying "primitive" islanders of the Southern Pacific try first of all to help them with their problems or does he try to help his own "civilised" countrymen or fellow men to understand better their self-destructive prejudices by providing them with a comparative frame of reference? (Iwańska 1971: 8).

A side comment: Iwańska's *Świat przetłumaczony* was written before the publication of the English translation of Malinowski's controversial journal (Malinowski 1989), while *Purgatory and Utopia* was published later.

But what is more important in terms of translation history, is that there is a lot in common between Malinowski's reflection on translation and Iwańska's diagnoses. Still, confronted with the fundamental untranslatability of certain elements of the cultural reality which she studied, Iwańska searched for different solutions than those proposed by Malinowski. While Malinowski postulates translating linguistic elements of a studied foreign culture through detailed contextual explication[3], Iwańska prefers to look for parallel elements in another cultural context (namely one that is closer to herself); still, both scholars include handy glossaries at the end of their works. Such practice, ostensibly

[3] "The translatability of words or texts between two languages is not a matter of mere readjustment of verbal symbols. It must always be based on a unification of cultural context" (Malinowski 1998: 257).

similar to functional translation as defined by Eugene Nida, brings Iwańska's reflection close to the postulates of Translation Studies scholars in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as much later findings of socio-translation studies or cultural-studies-oriented translation studies.[4]

Indeed, one could say that Iwańska is concerned with translating cultural constructs, or the textual grid lining the foreign culture, with translating this "collection of acceptable ways in which things can be said" (Bassnett, Lefevere 1988: 5) – in other words, with translating one culture into another.

As Iwańska explains, the culture of the Mazahua Indians belongs to the cultural universe of Central American Indians; however, Mexican culture in the second half of the 20th century – despite the country's pro-Indian national ideology – actually resembles the European-type Western civilisation, whose institutions are often "foreign and often incomprehensible to the Indian population" (Iwańska 1971: 26). Obviously, the textual grids used by the Mazahua and the Polish culture are not always compatible. For instance, marked contrasts can be observed in the perception of everyday reality and the sphere of sacrum:

> Sacred food does not always need to be associated with some special occasions. In my country, let's say, bread is a good example. Whenever a piece of bread would fall to the ground, it would be picked up and kissed; some people would also cross themselves and ask Virgin Mary for forgiveness. Conversely, the Mazahuas perceive bread as celebration food which is not sacred. The people from Mbayo treat bread just like we treat cake. Who amongst us would want to eat cake every day instead of bread? And in Mbayo, who would ever want to eat bread instead of their corn tortillas? (Iwańska 1968: 43)

This synchronic incompatibility is one thing; however, the most interesting aspects can be observed in the diachronic perspective:

> I have been paid a visit in my hut by *los señores*, the gentlemen from Mbayo – married men with important jobs. They came to me on a cold morning, wearing brown *gavans*, woolen ponchos adorned with geometric patterns. These patterns are usually based on some motifs from their far-away ancient ruins, unknown to most. "The gentlemen from Mbayo, these medieval knights", I thought to myself, once again struck by their ancient air of which they are completely unaware, and at the same time realising that in doing so I was falsifying their unique,

[4] See Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz 2004: 307 and 316; Chesterman 2006 and Leppihalme 1997.

> original existence. Why would I conjure these "knights" and the "Middle Ages"? Wasn't such a translation of their foreignness into my own language painfully superficial and utterly unforgivable? Still, these "medieval knights" in geometric *gavans* got stuck in my head, while in fact they weren't knights but peasants, and not medieval but contemporary! (Iwańska 1968: 12–13)

In Iwańska's narrative, this huge difference as far as social history is concerned can provoke surprising comparisons of historical experience, which is also a human one:

> There are four men sitting on two chairs, six more on the bed, and I am squatting alone on my suitcase. I offer them some cigarettes. Smoking, they cough a bit and ask me, as usual, about my family and my "land". One of them forgot, again, the name of this land. "Polonia?", he repeats in astonishment. "Just like my wife, Apolonia…" And then they all begin to ask me how the harvest is going in "my land across the sea".
>
> "Because we have just lost our harvest", adds one of them in a low and monotonous voice.
>
> Now the conversation moves on to the river which flooded their corn *milps* and to the fact that the engineers are doing everything in their power to stop the flooding, but "what do they know?" And then again someone nods: "Yes, we have lost our crops, all our corn has been flooded…" And this is it, nobody will mention the topic again. They don't like it here, talking about recurring catastrophes. Sure, there will be hunger, just like three years ago. They will just have to push through. Things will be fine, somehow.
>
> They are no longer "medieval knights" in their dark *gavans*; now they are us in uniforms taken from the Germans, they are us several weeks into the Warsaw Uprising, when all hope started to vanish. We knew there would be bombs the next day and new fires, just like in 1939, only louder and bigger. And then? The survivors would go on living… And things would be fine, somehow… (Iwańska 1968: 13)

This was not the only time when the fall of the Warsaw Uprising – a formative experience for Iwańska – became an important point of reference in her narrative. The failure of the Uprising and its consequences for the shaping of post-war Polish society provide Iwańska with a frame of reference for characterising the Mazahuas, or, more broadly: all Mexicans, marked by the fall of Tenochtitlán besieged by Cortés.

> People who wouldn't appear in the wildest fantasies of Cuauhtémoc [the last ruler of the Aztecs – E.R.] (and the young emperor was an intellectual, after

> all) erected a monument for him and now, so many years later, they keep saying that their Doomed Defence had a "symbolic meaning"… We also have our monument in Warsaw. Each year, on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, we lay a wreath. Every year, on the anniversary of the fall of Tenochtitlán, there is a wreath for Cuauhtémoc. 1 August 1944, 13 August 1521. Why should it be the fall here and the outbreak there? Does it even matter, this irregularity of history? Does it matter at all? (Iwańska 1968: 10)

There seems to be a peculiar feedback loop here:

> The Mazahuas need me (…) to understand, sustain and transmit their social truths. And I need them, I think, for a similar reason: to translate and elaborate, so to sustain and transmit my social truths… (Iwańska: 1968: 195)

Yet it appears that Iwańska's "social truth" is not so easy to transmit.

Don Edmundo, a representative of the local elders, talks to the narrator of *Świat przetłumaczony* about the colonial history of Mbayo. The Mazahuas, forced to labour in a vast estate belonging to a descendant of the Spanish conquerors, had to walk dozens of kilometres each day to get to his mansion from their households situated high up in the mountains.

> But the Spaniard's daughter came to him one day and said: "Father, how can you treat these people like this! (…) You must help them. They should live somewhere close and have some land to farm. And the Spaniard agreed. He let his daughter select the land for settlement and she chose these hills for us. They permitted us to settle here. And that was the beginning of Mbayo (Iwańska 1968: 25).

In return, the narrator shares with the storyteller a legend about the origins of Mikorzyn, a village in her parents' estate. But she purposefully evades his straightforward question concerning her family background:

> I didn't answer Don Edmundo's question, because I knew this would have been the end of my research in Mbayo – goodbye my promised village! Besides, would my translation be accurate? After all, if I'd told him that my father was a land owner, he would have immediately taken me for a colonial Spanish, a daughter of a conquistador! But I could not openly lie to him either (Iwańska 1968: 27).

And here we arrive at the heart of the issue: namely, the question of the accuracy – and truthfulness – of Iwańska's translation choices.

The translator's imperatives and the "troubles with the truth"

Let us now go back to the beginning, namely the year 1961 when Iwańska was a political asylum seeker with a fresh doctorate from Columbia University (her dissertation discussed Polish intellectuals in Nazi concentration camps), starting her solitary field research on the Mazahua Indian culture, based on a particular community who preserved their singular identity, inhabiting a small village in north-west Mexico, about 100 miles from the capital. The research took her several months with intermissions (late October – early November 1961, February–May 1962, July–October 1962, the summer of 1963–the summer of 1965). Initially, Iwańska stayed in a nearby Mexican town and every day walked a few kilometres to "her" village; subsequently, upon an invitation from befriended locals, she moved to the village, utterly undaunted by the lack of facilities such as electricity, running water or sewage.

Conversely, ethical concerns alarmed her almost immediately. She expresses her doubts in her journal. "This research I've been doing is, after all, nothing but the least risky (and therefore the worst!) form of espionage! Who cares that I do not 'tell' on anybody? Besides, isn't it better to snitch than to deceive?" (Iwańska 1968: 40), she writes, alluding to her wartime experiences in the Home Army intelligence and counter-intelligence.

Moreover, the otherness of these people, with whom she was becoming closer each day, soon becomes almost unbearable; not to mention the fact that it also produces translation problems: "isn't (…) translating their otherness into my language ridiculously superficial, and unforgivable too?" (Iwańska 1968: 12). Confronted with essential cultural untranslatability and an obvious risk of false conceptualisation, Iwańska is rather quick to forgive herself: "'One needs to come into terms with otherness – if not authentically, then falsely at least', I thought" (Iwańska 1968: 13). In *Purgatory and Utopia* also, the concept of research ethics is presented as important; nevertheless, Iwańska advocates for the "frank subjectivity" of an individual researcher, relatively more trustworthy than the total sum of subjectivity of a large research team (Iwańska 1971: 11); she also declares that her goal is "being as much myself as possible, which meant being as truthful as possible, within the natural limits of a given cultural context" (Iwańska 1971: 13).

According to Iwańska, retaining a single perspective, even at the cost of a certain distortion, is a necessary condition of translation:

> maybe there are such "scholars" who can put their lives completely aside while doing such research… maybe… But even if this permits them to avoid misrepresentation, don't they lose once and for all the capacity for translating one world into another? I don't know… (Iwańska 1968: 113)

Thus Iwańska makes the following decision: "In my diary [i.e. in *Świat przetłumaczony* – E.R.], I will write down my lies. The necessary lies, cowardly lies, compassionate lies… And some day I will write an article about them. I already have the title: *Las mentiras en la investigación sociológica*, *Les mesonges dans les recherches sociologiques*, *On Sociological Lies*" (Iwańska 1968: 27).

As we are now well aware, instead of that article, she wrote a whole book: *Świat przetłumaczony*, an intriguing testimony of a traitor-translator. For Iwańska, a pre-war student of Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Władysław Tatarkiewicz, a close friend of the theoretician and sociologist of morality Maria Osowska, translating cultures poses an ethical problem; the complex relations between truth, falsehood and fiction in the broadly understood intercultural translation are further complicated by adding the issue of expressing meanings through different narratives (literary and academic) and in different languages (Polish and English) – not to forget Mazahua and Spanish.

To give one example, this is how Iwańska tells her own story to the Mazahuas (the quote below, coming from Iwańska's sociological work, is in English but actually the story must have been told in Spanish – a language that she had just started to learn intensively for the purpose of her research. Despite her many efforts, Iwańska never managed to learn the Mazahua language):

> I told them that I was from a distant country, Poland, and that I had been brought up in a little village like El Nopal. I explained that since my country has a "bad government", I had to escape and for some time I had been living in the United States, who had offered me her hospitality. I continued by saying that I had just received "American papers" so I could stay in the United States as long as I wanted. I added that I lost my Polish husband during the great war in Poland and then married an American, a Gringo (using the term by which they referred to Americans), but a good one, who spoke Spanish and loved Mexico. We were both teachers, I explained, but in our school we taught "only grown-up people like you" – no children at all, and we taught them about other countries, so I had come to Mexico to find out about Mexican villages and about Mazahuas in order to teach my students about it (Iwańska 1971: 13).

This private story, translated into cultural categories that were available to the Mazahuas, is heavily simplified, perhaps even infantilised. It would then seem reasonable to assume that things were similar when translation was done in the opposite direction? Especially given that the Mazahuas from Mbayo/El Nopal, who were almost all bilingual, spoke with Iwańska in Spanish but they definitely were not always able to find equivalents (Iwańska 1971: 90).

In his now canonical article on translation ethics, Andrew Chesterman presents four main principles governing the activity of a translator; one of them is "the accountability norm", stipulating that "a translator should act in such a way as to be accountable to all the parties involved" (Chesterman 1997: 149). But whose expectations are to be met by Iwańska's translation, ostensibly done for her own benefit ("these notes are for myself alone")? The Kościelski Award won by *Świat przetłumaczony* proves that at least some readers (the readers' community?) were satisfied with her translation. Chesterman puts emphasis on "the general concept of loyalty, to the various parties concerned" (Chesterman 1997: 147); in Iwańska's case this loyalty should be viewed as the translator's loyalty to herself:

> this image should be reconstructed as soon as possible and compared with that other one, but I still don't know if it's real. Add things, deduce. Confront, check. For science? For sociology? Of course not! First and foremost for my own life, and indirectly for sociology as well, since now I am using it to talk about life… a life understood, I must add, as a conscience. So these troubles with the truth are nothing else but clearing my conscience. After all… now I'm sure this will sound rather naïve, but how can one write anything without a clear conscience? (Iwańska 1968: 49)

Perhaps this is what Iwańska's research can contribute to our contemporary understanding of translation – and to Translator Studies.

Translated by Aleksandra Kamińska

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