

TERESA BAŁUK-ULEWICZOWA (1951–)

“Beyond cognizance: Fields of Absolute Untranslatability” (1997)

Key words:

absolute untranslatability, domestication, foreignization, historical/mythological figures, inter-ethnic relations, intercultural barriers, interpersonal relations, intertextuality, metaphors, Polish cultural heritage and language, proverbs, religious aspects, symbols

## 1. Author information

Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa used to be an academic tutor in the Institute of English Philology of the Jagiellonian University in the years 1979-2011. She conducted classes and seminars in translation studies and practical translation from Polish into English. She is also a freelance translator, interested in translation studies (especially untranslatability), and also in Renaissance studies as well as history of political ideas. As far as a field of untranslatability is concerned, Bałuk-Ulewiczowa is the author of several articles concerning this problem, such as: “The Iron Transfer: Untranslatability in Totalitarian Propaganda”, “Black Madonnas and White Eagles: Religious Hermeticism, Proselytism, and Untranslatability”, “Dzieje innych miłości, czyli o nieprzekładalności bezwzględnej w tekstach o wartościach w sztuce” and “Beyond Cognizance: Fields of Absolute Untranslatability” which is going to be analyzed in this paper.

## 2. Abstract

“Beyond Cognizance: Fields of Absolute Untranslatability” aims at demonstrating and proving the existence of absolute untranslatability. The author begins with denying that every utterance is translatable, and presents her own, reasonably explained and justified definition of the phenomena. Then Venuti’s concept of domestication is mentioned, which Bałuk-Ulewiczowa finds as “welcome tool” to her study, but she criticizes a limitation this very method results in, by indicating natural barriers between cultures and languages, as well as by presenting her own experiences, namely translation of the political propaganda of totalitarian regimes that proved to be untranslatable. The author claims that the untranslatability phenomena give rise to transmutations in translations. In

order to support her statements, she chooses the Noel Clark's translation of Polish *Wesele* into English. Through an in-depth analysis of particular aspects of the work (Polish symbols, metaphors, religion, native problems, intertextuality, Polish society, Polish relations with Ukrainians and Jews, and Polish figures) Bałuk-Ulewiczowa demonstrates the very existence of absolute untranslatability.

### 3. Terminology

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
Cognizance	conscious knowledge; recognition	wiedza, świadomość
Untranslatability	a phenomenon occurring whenever a text cannot be transferred into the target language, and comprehended by the target receivers, without application of some extra-textual subjective information	nieprzetłumaczalność
Domestication	minimizing the strangeness of a source language text by using a transparent, fluent style	udomowienie
Foreignization	opposite of domestication; preserving the strangeness and foreignness of the translated texts	egzotyzacja
Intertextuality	the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or	intertekstualność

	interpretation of the text	
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#### 4. Methodology

The presented research into a field of untranslatability is conducted in an interdisciplinary way. Firstly, the author mentions her own observations and practical experiences at translating, using a particular example from her own work. Then she analyzes the source Polish text and its English translation using a comparative model. By this detailed comparison of selected examples, Bałuk-Ulewiczowa comes to sharp and justified conclusions in favor of the untranslatability phenomenon.

#### 5. Links with other publications on the subject

Alexandrow, V. A. 2004. *Limits to Interpretation. The Meanings of Anna Karenina*. London/Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Berman, A. 1985. "Translation and the Trails of the Foreign". *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Venuti, L. London and New York: Routledge, 284-297.

Katan, D. 2004. *Translating Cultures*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

Tomaszkiewicz, T. 2006 b. "Areas of Untranslatability in Audiovisual Transfers". *Perspectives on Audiovisual Translation*. Ed. Bogucki, Ł. & Kredens, K. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 93-106.

#### 6. Critical commentary

In this article Bałuk-Ulewiczowa declares herself a supporter of total untranslatability and presents an extremely opposite point of view to most translation studies academics and scholars, which makes this article intriguing and worth attention. She describes her own definition of untranslatability, stating that due to natural barriers or some special phenomena the original message cannot be fully transferred into the target language without application of some extra-textual subjective information. Consequently, a message is transmitted across these barriers and results in transmutation. Pondering upon this very problem can lead to a question if in such a difficult situation two people born in

different cultures and speaking different languages can understand each other at all. Bałuk-Ulewiczowa tries to answer this question by a detailed analysis of particular examples from *Wesele* and its English translation.

This approach corresponds with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, especially with the strong version of the principle, which claims that “(...) 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...(...)” (Ash, 1999). Consequently, since people live in two different worlds, they speak different languages, and in this case the existence of complete untranslatability cannot be undermined.

#### 7. Quotations to remember the text by

“Absolute untranslatability occurs whenever a text is presented for translation the full comprehension of which by its source-language recipients requires the application of extra-textual subjective information, or more generally, extratextual emotional experience which is inaccessible to the recipients of the target language for the translation” (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, in Kubiński [eds] 1997).

“The field of absolute untranslatability is much wider, and it includes national literature, especially national epic; religious and devotional scriptures; philosophies and ideologies; and writings which involve distinctive codes of aesthetic values. All of these spheres of human communication are different depending on whether you read them as an *inside man* or as an *outsider*, as one of *us* or one of *them*” (Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, in Kubiński [eds] 1997).

#### 8. References

Bałuk-Ulewiczowa, T. 1997. “Beyond Cognizance: Fields of Absolute Untranslatability”. in *Przekładając Nieprzekładalne*. Kubiński, O. W. (eds) Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 173-182.

Ash, R. 1999. *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*. Retrieved November 28, 2012, from:  
<http://www.angelfire.com/journal/worldtour99/sapirwhorf.html>