



*Theory and Practice in English Studies 3 (2005):
Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American
and Canadian Studies. Brno: Masarykova univerzita*

Strategies and Methods in Dealing with Culture Specific Expressions on the Basis of Polish-English Translations of Certain Administrative and Institutional Terms

Magdalena Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek

Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the complexity of problems which can be encountered by a translator in translation of administrative terms into English. Theoretical implications of the process of translation are discussed together with a variety of methods and strategies useful in dealing with culture specific expressions. At the end critical analysis and evaluation of English equivalents of selected names of Polish government bodies and official posts are provided.

In the case of countries such as Poland, which do not play a major role in global economics and politics, and moreover, speak a so-called “minor language”, the role of translations cannot be overestimated. Efficient communication with the outside world determines the speed of their political, economic and social transformation. As Susan Bassnett observed, “Marginal, new, insecure or weakened culture tends to translate more text than a culture in the state of relative centrality and strength” (1991: xii). The above statement holds true, not only with respect to the texts translated from English into Polish, but also in relation to translation from Polish into English. It is a fact (although we do not always want to admit it) that for the Western countries Poland (together with many other Central European states) is still “marginal, new and insecure” (Bassnett 1991: xii). Whether or not this picture will be changed depends largely on the quality of the translations that present these countries to the world.

Anyone who has ever attempted to translate a text knows that knowledge of the languages alone does not guarantee success. As Peter Newmark, a renowned translator himself, noted sharply but aptly: “any old fool can learn a language [...] but it takes an

intelligent person to become a translator” (1995: 79). Apart from an excellent knowledge of both the source and the target language, which comprises vocabulary and word formation, grammar, spelling and pronunciation, the translator also has to possess so-called “socio-linguistic competence” (Bell 1991: 41), which helps him to understand the text within its context, to determine its functions and predict who is going to receive it.

The knowledge of the customs and culture of people speaking the language into which a text is translated is indispensable. Life would be much easier for translators if languages were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, since then it would be very easy to translate from one language to another. Any source language concept could be easily replaced with a target language name.

All of the culture-specific concepts which occur in the source language but are totally unknown in the target language are the most notorious for the creation of problems with finding equivalents. There may be also a situation where the source culture and source language make different distinctions in meaning from the target culture and target language. The target language may also lack a more specific concept or term (hyponym) or a more general one (superordinate). Also a literal, word for word, translation would be completely undecodable: the speakers of English would neither understand the nature of this institution in reference to source language culture, nor associate it with any institution of a similar type present in their system.

Translators are always under pressure to “reproduce the exact meaning of the original in the translated text” (Korzeniowska, Kuhlczak 1994: 30). They have to bear in mind, however, that meaning is very often constructed by the readers. The way they read the text depends, to a large extent, on their social position, nationality, political preferences and historical context, i.e. a vastly understood cultural background. The translator has to decide what is the need, motivation and purpose of the translation. He/She must try to predict how the text is going to be received and by whom. In order to find the answers to these questions the translator usually resorts to his knowledge of the target language culture and to his previous experience with similar texts he has translated. Translators also have at their disposal a few useful strategies to implement in order to overcome various obstacles connected with the lack of equivalence, cultural untranslatability and with loss in translation (Baker 1992: 1-65).

Translation by generalisation is one of the most commonly applied strategies in dealing with various kinds of problems in translation. The translator usually uses a more general word (superordinate) or in the case of a whole concept replaces the more specific one with a more commonly known, wider one. Yet the possibility of relative ease of rendering a problematic specific concept with a more general one may result in excessive generalisation and eventually in oversimplification (loss in meaning) in the translated text.

The strategy of translation by a more specific term (hyponym) is the opposite of the above-mentioned strategy of generalisation. It is seemingly less popular, probably due to the fact that it is easier, and in a way more natural, to search for a more general word than for a more specific one. That it is rarely applied may also stem from the fact that it brings a real possibility of overinterpretation of the source language meaning, which in the majority of cases seems to be more dangerous than overgeneralization.

The strategy of translation by cultural substitution involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression in the source text with a target language item which describes a similar concept in target culture and thus is likely to have a similar impact on the target readers. This device also has its stronger and weaker points. The obvious advantage of using this strategy is that it gives the readers a concept which they can identify and which is easy to understand, familiar and appealing to them. The translator then avoids the necessity of providing footnotes or lengthy explanations of the item in question. Whether the translator decides to apply this

strategy or not depends usually on how much license is given to him by the persons who commission the translation and by the purpose of the translation. With certain texts, e.g. those where historical background is very important, this strategy should not be employed as it may lead to overgeneralizations or simple misunderstandings.

Another strategy which is particularly useful in dealing with culture-specific items is the strategy of using a loan word. This also helps in the case of very modern, newly introduced concepts. The loan word can, and very often even should, be followed with an explanation (it can be a definition built into the text), which is extremely useful when the word in question is repeated several times in a text. Then, once explained, it can be easily used on its own, the reader does not have problems with understanding it and his attention is not distracted by other lengthy explanations. In journalistic texts those loan words are also very often additionally marked throughout a text by the use of italics. As in the case of cultural substitution strategy, the freedom with which translators use loan words depends on the purpose and the type of text. They are used particularly often in texts where the translator wishes to preserve and manifest some aspects of the original culture (usually for the purpose of promotion). It can also depend on the standards of translation prevailing in a given society. Polish and English seem to be much more tolerant of loan words than for example French or Arabic (Baker 1992: 35).

Translation by paraphrase is another of the possible ways in coping with problematic items in translation. When using it the translator has two possible solutions at his disposal. When the concept expressed by the source item is localised in the target language but in a different form, or the frequency with which a certain form is used in the source language is significantly higher than would be natural in the target language, the translator usually resorts to paraphrase with the use of related words. If the situation arises when the concept expressed by the source item is not lexicalized at all in the TL, the translator can try to paraphrase it with the use of unrelated words. The main advantage of translation by paraphrase (no matter whether with the use of related or unrelated words) is that it is possible to achieve a high level of precision in specifying the meaning of a word or concept that poses difficulties in translation. The main disadvantage of this strategy is that it usually involves filling a one-item slot with an explanation consisting of several items. Thus a striking disproportion in length of the source text and target text may occur, which is hardly ever a desirable effect.

Finally the strategy of translation by omission is considered to be the strategy of last resort, used only in the case of items posing extreme difficulties in translation. Yet, this is not always so. This strategy is rather drastic, but in some contexts it does no or relatively little harm to omit a word or expression in translation. If the meaning conveyed by a particular item or expression is not vital enough to the development of the text to justify distracting the reader's attention with lengthy explanations, the translator can sometimes simply omit the word or expression in question. Of course, some loss of meaning is inevitable then, but very often the advantages of producing a smooth, readable translation outweigh the value of rendering a particular meaning accurately in a given context.

Translation theory, of course, does not provide a set of hard-and-fast rules, which, when followed, will ensure that the translator will come up with a perfect translation. What translation theory can do, however, is to make the translator aware of various factors which are involved in the translation process and offer some principles and guidelines that will help the translator to make certain decisions and choices.

In the second part of this paper I would like to analyse and critically evaluate English equivalents of selected names designating Polish government bodies and political institutions. I will examine the features of a given Polish institution and its American or British counterpart, referring also to some generalisations drawn by linguists and experienced translators, including the principles of translation theory introduced above.

Sejm - existing translations:

1. Sejm
2. Seym
3. Diet
4. Polish Parliament

According to Article 20 of the Polish Constitution *Sejm* is the supreme body of state authority, which passes laws and exercises control over the functions of Government and Administration. It approximately corresponds to the American Congress and the British House of Commons. Nevertheless, a translator has to be very careful when he/she decides to translate the name using the strategy of cultural substitution. It must be remembered that only in certain contexts can this term be translated as “Polish parliament”, “the body resembling the American House of Representatives” (which would make the name more familiar to the American readers) or as “the Polish House of Commons” (which would make it more meaningful for the British readers).

Sejm is a very good example of how a term of this kind can be translated in various types of texts. In case of expressive or authoritative texts, which are translated at the author’s level and preserve the source language culture, the loan word *Sejm* or *Seym* seems to be the solution; in case of informative texts, which are translated at readers’ level and make use of the overlapping cultures of the source and target languages – Polish Parliament seems to fit. When the text is persuasive or directive, and translated at the readers’ level and follows the target language culture, one could attempt solutions such as “Polish House of Commons”. The third option is the most risky as the translator must take into account the associations that American or British native speakers may have and he must consequently try to avoid false identifications resulting from a translation oriented too much towards dynamic equivalence, as in the case of “Polish House of Commons” or “Polish House of Representatives”.

The English language often adopts local names of institutions which are national representations, for example the Swedish *Riksdag* or the German *Reichstag* or *Bundestag*. Following this tendency translators have endeavoured to introduce the term *Sejm*, or sometimes for phonological considerations *Seym* to the English terminology. The transference of the terms *Rikstag*, *Reichstag* or *Bundestag* is easier and in a way more justified due to their Germanic origins, which enables an English native speaker to decode them easily without additional commentary as to their function or structure. This, however, does not apply to the term *Sejm* (*Seym*) which is of Slavonic origin, and consequently has not been so firmly established in English as the above mentioned terms. As a result it may not elicit any associations with the institutions of this type known to the native speakers of English.

The term *Diet*, however, could be a good way out of the problem. According to *Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary* it can be used to designate “the law-making assembly of certain nations” (1988: 258), that is, an institution which has similar functions and structure to the Polish legislative body. Moreover, this choice could also be justified by the fact that the term is firmly established in the English language (though not so much among those who acquired it as a second language). Thus, it could be an appropriate solution, in those contexts where the term cannot be rendered successfully through paraphrase or cultural substitution, to use the loan word *Sejm* followed by *Diet* in brackets, as it would alert the target language reader to foreign vocabulary. When introduced in such a way, *Sejm* could be used later on throughout the text without additional comments or explanations.

Rada Ministrów – existing translations:

1. Council of Ministers
2. Cabinet
3. Government

According to the Constitution *Rada Ministrów* is the supreme executive and administrative organ of State authority. It co-ordinates the activities of the Ministries and other organs under its jurisdiction, and gives directives regarding their work. It also exercises general guidance in the sphere of relations with other countries. The Constitution identifies the term *Rada Ministrów* with the Government, as it actually decides in major issues of State policy. Thus, in many cases, this problematic term can be translated merely as government, especially when the context indicates functions of this body as mentioned above. However, *Rada Ministrów* is a formal name, and thus, in certain contexts, its formal equivalent has to be used. *Council of Ministers* seems to be the best equivalent for the name of this Polish body. The term “council” denotes “a group of people appointed or elected to make laws, rules, or decisions, or to give advice” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 1989: 233), which are also the essential features of this particular Polish body.

Of the other existing translations available, the term *Cabinet* is an attempt of translation by cultural substitution, but I have doubts whether in this case it can be considered as a proper equivalent of the Polish term *Rada Ministrów*. It may lead to false identifications on the part of both the British and the American readers. The British would associate it with the British Cabinet as “a group of most senior or powerful ministers in a government who meet regularly to discuss and decide policies” (*Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* 1990: 194). The Americans could also associate the word with “an advisory group selected by the President to aid him in making decisions. The cabinet remains an informal group, with its members determined by tradition and presidential discretion” (Plano and Greenberg 1989: 164). Therefore, the translation of *Rada Ministrów* as *Cabinet* should be restricted to very specific contexts.

Marszałek Sejmu – existing translations:

1. Sejm Speaker
2. Sejm Marshal
3. President of the Polish Sejm

Marszałek Sejmu is elected from among *Sejm* members. He presides over the debates, recognises members wishing to speak and supervises the course of the work of the *Sejm*. He also presides over the meetings of the State Assembly and announces the term of the presidential election. In the event of the death, removal, resignation or disability of the President, *Marszałek Sejmu* is the person who takes over the presidential duties.

There are three existing translations of this name. The first one *Sejm Speaker*, which is an example of translation by cultural substitution, seems to be the best rendering of *Marszałek Sejmu*. According to the definition provided by the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, Speaker is “the person who presides over meetings of law making bodies in many countries, for example in Britain, the US and Australia” (1990: 1398). Thus, we have the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the States and the Speaker in the House of Commons in Britain. Thanks to that, the target language readers should not have particular problems with adjusting the term *Sejm Speaker* to their own frame of knowledge and with understanding the character of the office.

An attempt of word-for-word translation of *Marszałek Sejmu* as the *Sejm Marshal* would probably be meaningless, if not misleading, for native speakers of English. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English lists several different definitions of the word marshal: “(1) an officer of the highest rank in certain armies and air-forces; (2) an official in charge of making arrangements for an important public or royal ceremony or event; (3) in the US an official who carries out the judgements given in the court of law or one who has the duties of a sheriff” (1989: 642). It is evident that none of the three meanings has anything in common with the Polish word *marszałek* as used in this context.

Also the third name, the *President of the Polish Sejm*, listed in the *Great Polish English Dictionary* by Jan Stanisławski (1992: 345) and *Polish-English Kosciuszko Foundation Dictionary* (2003: 429) as the equivalent for *Marszałek Sejmu*, does not seem to be the best solution either, since the word *President* may give rise to various connotations in the minds of the readers who may not be aware of the functions and role of the *Sejm* in Poland. They could either associate the word *President* with the person who occupies the highest political position and is the head of the State or with the person who has the highest position in some organisation, society or company. The term *president*, in connection with the post of *Marszałek Sejmu*, actually does imply that it is the highest and most important position in the *Sejm*, but it does not denote the functions and duties connected with the post, and thus, I do not think it could be considered as the proper equivalent of the Polish term.

Three examples presented above by no means exhausts the subject, as there are thousands of similar problematic terms. On the basis of them, however, it becomes clearly visible that the old translators' saying: "Everything is translatable. The question is whether it can be translated well" (Pieńkos 1994: 176) really holds true. Many such problems could of course be avoided, had there existed in Poland a uniform terminological system of standardised translations of names from the field of law. Then, once a legal institution (within the broad meaning of this term) was given an official name, there would be a good chance that such a name would appear in identical form throughout the majority of texts. A translator using a standard name would be certain that it had been examined by a group of specialists in the field and that he/she follows a certain well-established pattern. The task of preparation of uniform and recognised systems of standardised terms has been taken by the Polish Society of Economic, Legal and Court Translators, where teams of experienced Polish translators, in co-operation with native speakers of target languages, prepare glossaries in which translators can find official translations of organisational and institutional terms. Yet, the main problem remains that as preparation of such glossaries is a very arduous and time consuming process, the experts are always behind with translator's needs.

References

- Baker M. (1992) *In other Words*, London: Routledge.
- Bassnett, S. (1991) *Translation Studies*, London: Routledge.
- Bell, R.T. (1991) *Translation and Translating*, London: Longman.
- Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1990), London and Glasgow: Collins.
- Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (1992) Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe.
- Korzeniowska, A. and Kuhiwczak, P. (1994) *Successful Polish-English Translation*, Warszawa: PWN-Polish Scientific Publishers.
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1989) Warszawa: PWN – Polish Scientific Publishers.
- Newmark, P. (1995) *Paragraphs on Translation*, Clevedon/Philadelphia/Adelaide: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Plano, J. and Greenberg, M. (1989) *The American Political Dictionary*, Chicago: Holf, Reinhart and Wilson Inc.
- The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1988) New York: Lexicon Publications.
- The New Kościuszko Foundation Dictionary – Polish-English* (2003) Kraków: Universitas
- Stanisławski, J. and Szercha, M. (1992) *The Great Polish-English Dictionary*, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna