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TRANSLATING NICKNAMES: THE CASE OF *LUBIEWO* BY MICHAŁ WITKOWSKI

ABSTRACT

Based on theatricality, humour and *camp* aesthetics, the novel *Lubiewo* (2005) by the Polish writer Michał Witkowski recounts the tragicomic lives and adventures of Polish queers under Communism. One of the main features of the novel is the meaning-bearing nicknames of the characters, which result from the *camp* practice of “queer renaming”. This relies on transforming or substituting male proper names with ironic and witty female nicknames. The paper analyses the German, French, English and Czech translations of the novel to explain the strategies used to render such “talking nouns” in new linguistic-cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: Camp, queer, nicknames, translation studies, Michał Witkowski, *Lubiewo*

Published in 2005, *Lubiewo* by Michał Witkowski is considered by critics to be one of the most important achievements of post-1989 Polish prose. Both its theme (the homosexual subculture under Communism) and its language (protean, imaginative, filled with vulgarisms) contributed to make it a publishing sensation. The heated debate that arose around the novel extended beyond the literary field and raised social, cultural, and political questions¹. Due to its pioneering character and the clamor surrounding its reception, the book soon became a cult phenomenon. As Błażej Warkocki (2013: 133) asserts, “the groundbreaking importance of Witkowski’s *Lubiewo* is undeniable. Thanks to its originality and value, as well as its critical resonance, the novel undoubtedly represents a turning point in gay literary discourse”².

Combining irony, irreverence and nostalgia, *Lubiewo* focuses on a peculiar segment of the homosexual underground in the Polish People’s Republic. In the first part of the book, an intradiegetic narrator interviews two older men who recall a time of hot-blooded adventures and cruising experiences, as well as humiliation and brutality, that vanished with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the advent of capitalism.

¹ Overviews of the reception of the novel are provided by Amenta 2008: 55–59 and Warkocki 2013: 109–125.

² All translations in the paper are my own.

The second part, more choral and anecdotal, is set on the beach of Lubiewo, on the Baltic Sea, and introduces an array of bizarre characters who exist on the borderline of parody and affectionate caricature. A generational and mindset clash occurs when the effeminate, mannered and affected old guard, talking about themselves in feminine terms and using a language filled with sexual allusions, meet young and modern men who call themselves ‘gays’ (with the political potential this word implies), talking about themselves in masculine terms, using the language of mass media and fighting for equal rights. The former jealously preserve their otherness in relation to the dominant discourse, while the latter aim at normalization and assimilation.

Since its publication, *Lubiewo* has had eight reprints, a graphic novel, an audiobook and various theatre adaptations, and has been translated into about twenty languages. The main problems the novel poses for its translators are the gay sociolect, puns and wordplay, double-entendres and innuendo, vulgarisms, direct quotations or veiled allusions to Polish literature, frequent references to the realities of everyday life and pop culture in the Polish People’s Republic. The absence of a canonical edition creates additional problems: each reprint of the book introduces some changes, and every translation is based on a different text, often consisting of a collage of fragments taken from various editions (see also Szymił 2014: 264).

LUBIEWO AS A CAMP NOVEL

One of the distinguishing features of the book lies in its camp aesthetics, which manifest at the linguistic, figurative, anthroponymic and situational levels. By now there is an extensive literature on the notion of camp as style and sensibility, starting with Susan Sontag’s classic study *Notes on Camp*. Sontag states that “the essence of camp is its love for the unnatural” (Sontag 1964: 515), and that its distinctive traits are artifice, theatricality, irony, exaggeration, frivolousness and extravagance. Other elements highlighted by successive studies on camp’s forms, functions and representations include aestheticism, incongruity, ambiguity, stylization, humor, parody and eccentricity (Babuscio 1977; Bergman 1993; Cleto 1999, 2008; Felluga 2015).

The relationship between homosexuality and camp is close and longstanding. From a historical point of view, not only is the gay community the main inventor and primary audience of camp (Sontag 1964), but it has traditionally used camp as a slang or an argot that allowed mutual comprehension in a hostile environment (Bergman 1993: 13). Though depictions of camp in film, theatre and literature have been widely explored, comparatively little regard has been paid to the concrete features of camp at a translational and linguistic level. A significant exception is Harvey’s research (1998, 2000), which posits a framework comprised of four

categories: paradox, inversion, ludicrism and parody. These categories consist of “underlying semiotic strategies that produce a variety of surface textual effects (stylistic and pragmatic)” and “orientations to language use that allow speakers to manipulate the potential of language systems and discourse contexts” (Harvey 2000: 240, 243). Particularly interesting for our purposes are the features falling within the strategy of inversion – that is, of gendered proper nouns, grammatical gender markers, expected rhetorical routines and established value systems.

QUEER RENAMING PRACTICES

On the linguistic front, one of the main camp devices used in Witkowski’s novel is ‘queer naming’, a practice of renaming/nicknaming male subjects by means of female proper nouns and sobriquets. Along with the inversion of the expected grammatical gender markers (personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, etc.), this practice generates a deliberate ‘gender confusion’ (Harvey 2000: 245). It aims at challenging the socio-linguistic norms that treat gender as a fixed and immutable category, creating a link between members of a minority group, allowing their mutual recognition and producing a sense of community outside the borders of the hegemonic discourse.

These ‘talking nouns’, whose semantic content suggests or alludes to an individual’s behavioral or physical traits, belong to what Hermans (1988: 88) calls ‘loaded names’, i.e. meaning-bearing nouns. However, queer renaming involves specific features that differ from the usual praxis of nicknaming. As Harvey (2000: 248) declares:

a camp name will usually enact a reference to physical characteristics and behaviour only when relevant to sexual/gender identity and sexual proclivities. The reference may even be grossly explicit and thereby flout taboo by its very enunciation. The camp name is often also a very public phenomenon (contrasting with those in-group names that remain obscure to outsiders) and is chosen precisely in order to be decoded in, and have an impact on, the public arena. Indeed, in the case of drag performance, camp names are quite literally stage names. This theatricality often has formal consequences in that, far from being a shorthand, the names are long and complex. Finally, it is also important to note that many camp speakers use such names for themselves, however demeaning they may appear. These terms, in other words, are not primarily restricted to derogatory third-person reference. The irony that a speaker generates through the use of such a ‘handle’ serves to emphasize the general camp preoccupation with role and persona in contrast to a depth model of selfhood.

From a formal and morphological point of view, the nicknames used in the novel can be divided into three classes³. The first includes nicknames that combine the

³ The present analysis is based on the first edition of the novel.

female form of a proper noun (or its altered version, for instance an augmentative or a diminutive) with an adjective related to the character's job (*Łucja Kapielowa*, *Bronka Ubeczka*, *Roma Piekarczowa*, *Flora Restauracyjna*). The nickname *Zdzicha Wężowa*, for example, derives from *Zdzisław* (male proper noun) > *Zdzisława* (female counterpart) > *Zdzicha* (female augmentative) + *Wężowa* (adjective derived from *wąż*, snake), due to the fact that this character works at the zoo's herpetarium. The second class includes nicknames consisting of a single noun or adjective (*Aptekarka*, *Piórella*, *Pissuaressa*, *Czarna*), sometimes antiphrastic or sexually allusive (*Panna*, *Śnieżka*), occasionally taken from divas or musical icons (*Anna*, *Kora*), toponyms (*Oleśnicka*, from the town Oleśnica) or aristocratic titles borrowed from Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the favourite novel of *Lubiewo*'s characters (*Hrabina*, *Wicehrabina*). To this class also belong common nouns of female animals that, from a semantic point of view, suggest some features of the character's physicality, personality, provenance etc. (*Aligatorzyca*, *Kaczka*, *Sowa*) and proper names marked as affected, pretentious or pompous in the Polish language (*Patrycja*, *Lukrecja*, *Dżesika*, *Żorżeta*, *Gizela*). The third class includes nicknames consisting of a proper noun plus a genitive case (*Maria od Relikwii*, *Katarzyna od Rzeźnika*, *Jaśka od Księdza*). Finally, there are sporadic cases of epithets which apparently do not follow one of the aforementioned models (*Ta w Rajtuzach*).

TRANSLATION OF NICKNAMES

In general, the translation of nicknames has not been subject to specific studies as a stand-alone category, but it has been discussed in research on the translation of proper nouns as an anthroponymic subcategory. According to Hermans (1988: 13), proper nouns can be

- (1) reproduced in the target text without alterations
- (2) transcribed, transliterated or adapted on the level of spelling, phonology, etc.
- (3) substituted with an equivalent
- (4) translated if they are semantically loaded

One of the most exhaustive classifications, including ten potential strategies going from non-translation to deletion, is proposed by van Coillie (2006). The scholar conceived it with reference to the translation of proper names in children's literature, but it can be applied to other types of literary texts. They are:

- (1) Non-translation, reproduction, copying
- (2) Non-translation plus additional explanation
- (3) Replacement of a personal name by a common noun

- (4) Phonetic or morphological adaptation to the target language
- (5) Replacement by a counterpart in target language (exonym)
- (6) Replacement by a more widely known name from the source culture or an internationally known name with the same function
- (7) Replacement by another name from the target language (substitution)
- (8) Translation (of meaningful names with a particular connotation)
- (9) Replacement by a name with another or additional connotation
- (10) Deletion

Salmon (2006) draws a distinction between ‘literature of verisimilitude’ (realistic prose, satire, parody) and ‘literature related to an imaginary world’ (myth, fable, fairy tale, comics). The same translation strategies can be applied in both cases, but the second category does not impose the restriction of morphological verisimilitude to the source language. Particularly interesting for our purposes is that ‘nicknames should be recreated semantically, even if they derive from non-transparent surnames’ (Salmon 2006: 87). The translation techniques proposed for rendering proper names in the target language are:

- (1) intercultural substitution
- (2) intracultural substitution
- (3) intersemiotic recreation
- (4) recreation of ethnonymic anthroponyms
- (5) explication
- (6) generalization or hypernym (metonymic) transformation
- (7) morphological adaptation

In the foreign editions of *Lubiewo*, the nicknames have been rendered according to a wide range of strategies, from non-translation and phonetic adaptation to intercultural substitution and intersemiotic recreation. Furthermore, morphologically similar nicknames are rendered through different approaches, the main criterion being their semantic content, not their formal aspect.

TRANSLATION OF *LUBIEWO*’S NICKNAMES

The following table presents twelve nicknames taken from Witkowski’s novel, created by means of queer renaming and chosen as representative of the aforementioned classes. Beside the original Polish nicknames can be found the corresponding sobriquets used in the English, French, German and Czech editions (Witkowski 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2010), respectively translated by Bill Martin, Madeleine Nasalik, Christina Marie Hauptmeier, and Jan Jeništa.

Polish	English	French	German	Czech
Patrycja	Patricia	Patrycja	Patrycja	Patricie
Lukrecja	Lucretia	Régliſse	Lukrecja	Lukrécie
Żorżeta	Georgette	Żorżeta	Georgette	Žoržeta
Śnieżka	Snowflake	Blanche-Neige	Schneewittchen	Sněžka
Aligatorzyca	Alligatorina	Miss Alligator	die Alligator	Aligátořice
Kangurzyca	Kangaroo	Kangourette	die Känguruh	Klokanice
Bronka Ubeczka	Grasser Grażyna	Bronka, surnommé l'Indic	Stasi-Bronka	Brořka Estébačka
Zdzicha Wężowa	Zdzicha Anaconda	Zdzicha la Femme-Serpent	Schlangen- -Zdzicha	Zdiřka Hadovka
Łucja Kąpielowa	Lucia La Douche	Łucja des Bains-Douches	Bader-Lucja	Kornélie Lázeňská
Lady Pomidorowa	Madame de Pomme de Terre/ Madame d'Aubergine	Lady Soupe à la Tomato	Lady Pomeranza	Rajčatová Lady
Zdzicha Ejdsuwa	Zdzicha Aidsova	Zdzicha la Sidaïque	Aids-Zdzicha	Zdiřka Ajdsovatá
Matka Joanna od Pedalów	Mother Joan of the Homos	Notre-Dame-des- Pédales	Mutter Joanna der Schwulen	Panř Marjánka, matka kluků

Before turning to the analysis of the techniques adopted to render these nicknames, it is worth noting that in a document sent to the translators⁴ and intended as a short handbook in response to the most frequently asked questions, Witkowski wrote:

Under no circumstances should nicknames such as 'Łucja Kąpielowa' be left in the original Polish version (as it happened in the English, German and French translations included in the catalogues of the Frankfurt Book Fair!). Other pseudonyms must be found, equally funny, but rooted in the culture of a given country and semantically similar [...]. If in a country the name Łucja, for instance, doesn't exist, another name from the culture of that country should be taken, as long as it is female and likewise pretentious. The same applies to the various Żorżeta etc. They should be female, pretentious, archaic names.

Nonetheless, many nicknames have not been reformulated. The names of the protagonists *Patrycja* and *Lukrecja* have been kept unchanged in German and replaced with exonyms in English and Czech, while in French the first was left

⁴ I would like to thank the Czech translator of *Lubiewo*, Jan Jeništa, for providing me with this document.

unaltered and the second has been translated (*Réglisse*, i.e. *Liquorice*). The French translation also maintains the pretentious *Żorzeta*, even though it is a Gallicism that refers to the lightweight crêpe fabric known as *georgette*, translated as such in English and German, and adapted in Czech. In three languages, *Śnieżka* has been replaced with its official counterpart in the target cultures, but in English it has been substituted with *Snowflake* instead of *Snow White*. The nicknames consisting of animal names have been subject to various translation strategies. In English *Kangurzyca* became a genderless *Kangaroo*, while *Aligatorzyca* is rendered through the neologism *Alligatorina*, whose suffix morpheme ‘-ina’ is a feminine gender marker. The German translator compensates for the lack of gender markers with the addition of the feminine definite article *die*. In French, the first name has been rendered with a neologism created through feminine suffixation (*Kangourette*), while the second is preceded by a semantically feminine English title (*Miss Alligator*). The Czech translator coins two neologisms through feminine suffixation (*Aligátořice*, *Klokаницe*). *Bronka Ubeczka* represents a hard challenge for translators: the first term is the diminutive of the proper name *Bronisława*, the second is an adjective derived from *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* (UB), the secret police service operating in Poland during the Stalinist era. Since there is no counterpart for the second term in their cultures, the English and French translators opted for a generalization: *grasser* and *indic* (colloquial abbreviation of *indicateur*) both mean police informer. The Czech and German translators turn instead to an intercultural substitution with a functionally equivalent term (*Státní bezpečnost* and *Stasi*). The nickname *Zdzicha Wężowa* has been rendered in English with a non-translation plus a hypernym (*Zdzicha Anaconda*), in French and German with a compound noun (*Zdzicha la Femme-Serpent* and *Schlangen-Zdzicha*), and in Czech with an exonym (*Zdiška*) plus a derivative noun (*Hadovka*, from *had*, snake). *Łucja Kapielowa* is one of the many names rendered in English through French language (*Lucia La Douche*), while in French the proper name has been kept unchanged and the adjective rendered with a genitive case (*Łucja des Bains-Douches*). In German we have a compound noun (*Bader-Lucja*) with a partial graphic-phonetic adaptation. The Czech translator substitutes the proper name, clearly felt to be insufficiently pretentious, and puts it together with an adjective (*Kornélie Lázeňská*). The solution adopted by Bill Martin for the nickname *Lady Pomidorowa* is quite peculiar. The first term could have been left unchanged, since it is already in English, while the second refers to a typical Polish soup also known in the target culture (*tomato soup*). Nonetheless, Martin turned again to French and replaced the soup with an eggplant (*Madame d’Aubergine*) and a potato (*Madame de Pomme de Terre*). The German translator keeps the title unchanged and substitutes the soup with an orange. In Czech we have an intercultural replacement, being *rajčatová*, the local counterpart of the Polish tomato soup. Quite effective in all four languages is the solution chosen for the nickname *Zdzicha Ejdsuwa*, whose second term is a neologism coined by Witkowski from the word AIDS. A coinage is recreated in French (*Sidaïque*,

from *Sida*, AIDS in French), Czech (*Ajdsovatá*) and English (*Aidsova*), where the feminine suffix morpheme ‘-ova’, keeping the term transparent, gives a ‘Slavic’ connotation to the name. The German translator turns instead to a compound noun (*Aids-Zdzicha*). The last nickname taken into account, *Matka Joanna od Pedalów*, hints at the title of the short story *Matka Joanna od Aniołów*, by the Polish writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. In English and German it has been translated literally, but French and Czech opted instead for an intercultural substitution: *Notre-Dame-des-Pédales* alludes to the novel *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* by Jean Genet, and *Paní Marjánka, matka kluků* winks at the title of the play *Paní Marjánka, matka pluku*, by the Czech dramaturg Josef Kajetán Tyl.

CONCLUSIONS

This short review allows us to illustrate the main translation strategies adopted to render the nicknames of *Lubiewo*’s characters into four different cultural-linguistic contexts. The English translation is notable for the use of French as a sign of pretense, affectation, effeminacy and ‘aristocratic mannerism’ (Harvey 1998: 251). This practice is a long-lasting tradition in the English-speaking world and can be easily decoded as a camp strategy by the target audience. However, it creates a sort of fabrication of history. *Lubiewo*’s characters are in fact relicts of the communist era and live in poverty, far away from the noble, cosmopolitan and distinguished milieu evoked by the French language. They gravitate, rather, toward the sphere of Soviet cultural references and, if turning to foreign languages, they speak Russian, associated with the memory of their acquaintance with the Red Army soldiers. The French nicknames appear transparent to the target readers, but the translation activates a network of mental associations somehow alien to the novel’s characters (see also Crickmar 2014: 184). The English translator adapts or substitutes with exonyms some proper names (*Patricia, Lucretia, Giselle, Jessie*), while keeping others unchanged (*Zdzicha, Rolka, Zofia*) or replacing them with other names (*Grażyna* instead of *Bronka*) without a clear criterion, in one case showing an internal incongruity (*Lady Pomidorowa* rendered once as *Madame D’Aubergine* and the other times with *Madame de Pomme de Terre*). The absence of gender markers is sometimes compensated by feminine suffixation (*Alligatorina*), but most frequently is explicated and counterbalanced by means of personal or possessive pronouns (*she, her*).

In the French version, all the proper names and their altered forms are kept unchanged, with minor exceptions (*Réglisse, Oleśnicette*) that sound undoubtedly campy, but clearly diverge from the chosen strategy of non-translation. The lack of gender markers for some animal nouns is counterweighed with the addition of an English title (*Miss Alligator*), feminine suffixation (*Kangourette*) or compound

words (*Femme-Serpent*). Interesting solutions are both neologisms (as *Sidaïque*) and intercultural substitutions (*Notre-Dame-des-Pédales* or *Braquemart I^{er}* for *Wielkochujaszczy*), the former grasping the intertextual reference and ‘activating in the mind of the addressee the associations evoked by the overall meaning of the original proper noun’ (Salmon 2006: 83).

The German edition also chooses non-translation for proper names, with some exceptions (*Jessica*, *Michalin*, *Georgette*). It is marked by the use of compound nouns for the majority of the nicknames consisting of a proper name plus an attribute (*Bäcker-Roma*, *Schlangen-Zdzicha*, *Restaurant-Flora*), sometimes with partial adaptation (*Bader-Lucja*). The absence of gender markers in the names of some animals is compensated by the addition of the feminine definite article in contrast with the rules of the German grammar (*die Känguruh* instead of the neuter *das Känguruh*, *die Alligator* instead of the masculine *der Alligator*), obtaining an estrangement effect that shows the artificial nature of gender as a socio-linguistic construct (see Gawrońska Pettersson 2011: 68). The intercultural substitution *Stasi-Bronka* seems successful, since the Stasi’s role in the GDR was analogous to that of the UB in the Polish People’s Republic.

Finally, the Czech translation shows a higher level of name replacements, especially of an intercultural nature, finding satisfactory functional equivalents in the target culture (*Broňka Estébačka*; *Rajčatová Lady*; *Paní Marjánka*, *matka kluků*; *Sněžka*). The translator Jan Jeništa replaces proper names and their altered forms with Czech exonyms (*Patricie*, *Lukrécie*, *Zdiška*, *Broňka*, *Honzina*), but in some cases substitutes them with other names if they do not sound sufficiently pretentious in the target language (*Kornélie* for *Lucja*). Lastly, he creates a number of neologisms through suffixation (*Aligátorice*, *Klokanice*, *Ajdsovátá*).

Since nicknames do not function as meaningless nouns or empty signs like ‘conventional names’ (Hermans 1988: 88) do, but convey important features of the characters bearing them, particular attention should be paid to their translation. Substitution, adaptation (exonyms) and recreation seem to be the most effective techniques, especially for a target-oriented translation. The loss of a certain number of references to the source culture is balanced by semantically transparent counterparts that supply the readers with new information. Non-translation and graphic-phonetic adaptation tend instead to produce a source-oriented text that preserves some peculiarities of the original background but leaves the nicknames opaque for the new audience. The Czech and English translations of *Lubiewo* seem to prefer domesticating strategies, but they don’t completely avoid foreignisation; so do the German and French translations, which more frequently turn to conservative techniques. Ultimately, analysis of four editions of Witkowski’s novel shows that translation praxis tends to put aside a prescriptive and stiff approach to the translation of nicknames and proper nouns in favor of a more mingled and fluid rendition.

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