

Translating the language of science

## Science is „Nauka”?

*As a sublimely polyglot friend with many years' experience translating for EU institutions once pointed out to me, translators can sometimes be their own worst enemy. Despite (or indeed perhaps because of?) the EU's vast efforts to maintain terminological accuracy, translators sometimes have a subtle sense that a kind of "newspeak" of their own making might be lurking just around the corner. In her assessment, the colossal EU translation machine possesses a tendency to recycle terms and phrasings within a closed loop that can, if left unheeded, slowly creep away from standard, living English.*

*Setting aside all debate about EU translation policy or prescriptive purism, I'm nevertheless sure she put her finger on something here. Her tale certainly resonated with my impressions of how the English translation market in Poland has evolved since my own start in the early 1990s, and how the Internet is now forcing the English language to face new challenges worldwide, especially in a scientific milieu.*

*Needless to say, no translator can possibly have all the knowledge they require at their fingertips, and texts inevitably turn up terms and concepts that are unfamiliar or tricky to handle even in one's own native tongue. (While working for a hard-hitting popular science and promotional publication like ACADEMIA, this can be a downright daily occurrence.) A decade and a half ago, when personal knowledge failed, all a translator could hope to fall back on was a collection of dictionaries, a stock of professional literature, and ultimately contacts among specialists in each particular domain.*

*But how things have changed since then! The Internet has revolutionized the organizational aspects of the field, demanding ever-faster turnaround times. Moreover, a plethora of highly specialized electronic translation resources are now available, and in this respect Polish is fast approaching the level of Western European languages. Even the very fiber of the Polish language has changed, its terminology becoming ever more sophisticated.*

*But not only does the Internet offer wide access to many invaluable resources, search engines themselves have in fact become a first tool of choice for many pressed-for-time translators - offering a kind of one-stop shopping to check up on the "correct" usage of terms, collocations, etc. A glance at the increasingly popular specialist web forums where translators can exchange advice and tips on how to handle specific terminology puts this into stark relief: whichever suggestion scores the most Internet hits is frequently deemed to be the "best."*

*But here's the rub: in this fashion we could be engendering the same kind of dangerous recycling of linguistic material*

*mentioned above, as the Internet offers no simple way of culling out potentially misleading references. Since English is unique in that large and rapidly expanding volumes of materials on the Internet are now being contributed by non-native speakers, a democracy-rules approach to seeking the best solutions within this corpus might indeed lead translators increasingly down the wrong path.*

*Of course, this is just another instance of the platitude that the Internet must be used with prudence. Yet overall, such terminological concern is particularly applicable to the ACADEMIA articles we translate, as we are aware of a certain constitutive nature of many of our texts - especially when they*

*represent the first English-language popularizations of groundbreaking Polish research.*

*Space here prevents a deeper look into the myriad pitfalls lying in wait for translators of scientific texts, but as a brief case in point let's take one seemingly innocent word that lies at the core of all our work at ACADEMIA: the term "science," or rather its Polish version "nauka." Dictionaries hold these two to be equivalents, yet the fact is that the Polish "nauka" covers both the English "science" as well as the broader notions of "study" and "learning." For example, some of the more humanistic disciplines (such as art history, bible studies, literary criticism, musicology, and legal studies - to name a few topics from previous ACADEMIA issues), although they do*

*rest firmly within the scope of "nauka," are hard to construe in English as "science" per se, being more aptly described as "scholarship" or "research." As a corollary, "naukowcy" working in such fields are much more appropriately dubbed "scholars" or "researchers" rather than "scientists" - even though such usage can indeed be commonly encountered in Eastern European publications and on the Internet.*

*The more technical the jargon, the more tricky such nuances can become. And so, even in this Internet era, the translator is often forced to go back to the basics: researching each topic in professional publications, and especially contacting specialists. That's what makes translating for ACADEMIA challenging but in many ways ideal: all our authors are experts in their fields, the very best consultants, who work with us to ensure terminological and substantive accuracy in both Polish and English. So for us on the ACADEMIA staff, science is indeed always "nauka" in the broader sense: we are always learning something new, and hope readers appreciate our battle to keep the standards high!*



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