

The Online Response to the Two Polish Translations of *The Wee Free Men* by Terry Pratchett

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Abstract

The online community of science fiction and fantasy fans constitutes a rich source of material for analysing reader response to translations as its members often reflect not only on the books they read but also on the quality of their translations. The Polish translations of Terry Pratchett's The Wee Free Men are a good example of translations which evoked ample response online, with criticism focusing on the reasons for initially not employing the usual translator of the Discworld series, the treatment of names and dialect in the translation, and the issues connected with defining the target reader of the text and adjusting the text to their needs. The analysis of online reactions shows that translation solutions are considered problematic by readers especially when the reasons behind them are not clear.

Keywords: reader response, fantasy in translation, translation criticism, online response, Terry Pratchett

Streszczenie

Komentarze internetowe do dwóch polskich tłumaczeń *The Wee Free Men* Terry'ego Pratchetta

*Internetowa społeczność fanów fantastyki stanowi bogate źródło materiału do badań nad reakcjami czytelników na tłumaczenia, gdyż jej członkowie często wyrażają opinie nie tylko o książkach, które czytają, ale też o jakości ich tłumaczeń. Polskie przekłady *The Wee Free Men* Terry'ego Pratchetta są dobrym przykładem tłumaczeń, które zainspirowały wiele komentarzy. Krytyka w nich zawarta skupia się na powodach, dla których tłumaczenia nie powierzono od razu tłumaczowi pozostałych książek w serii Świat Dysku, sposobie tłumaczenia imion i dialektu, oraz zagadnieniach związanych z określeniem docelowego czytelnika i dopasowaniem tekstu do jego potrzeb. Na podstawie analizy można wnioskować, że poszczególne wybory tłumacza są uważane przez czytelników za problematyczne zwłaszcza tam, gdzie nie dostrzegają oni ich uzasadnienia.*

Słowa kluczowe: reakcja czytelnika, tłumaczenia fantastyki, krytyka tłumaczeń, komentarze internetowe, Terry Pratchett.

1. Introduction

It is not very often that readers of popular books know and care about not only their authors, but also the translators, but it is the norm in the science-fiction and fantasy community. This makes the online community of science fiction and fantasy fans a rich source of material for analyzing reader response to translations. Investigating reader response can add to the understanding of translation quality in that it “refers to potential end users and can help to establish current preferences in the reception of translations” (Joanna Dybiec-Gajer 2012: 15). Reader response in form of reviews, posts, and comments online promises to be especially interesting as it seems most natural, exceeded perhaps only by private communication in this regard. What is more, the people who choose to post their opinions on translations online are not just their potential but actual users, and as such they have a personal interest in assessing the quality of the texts. While not as easily analyzable and measurable as responses elicited in experiments and questionnaires, the data available online is nonetheless useful in that its analysis can help answer the question of which aspects of translation readers notice and focus on. Also, since their responses are not elicited with specific questions, they indicate which aspects of translated texts are the most prominent for readers.

To answer those questions, and to demonstrate the usefulness of such data, the present article looks at fan reactions, expressed online in form of reviews, blog posts, comments and forum discussions, to the two translations of Terry Pratchett’s *The Wee Free Men* (2003) into Polish – by Dorota Malinowska-Grupińska in 2005 (*Wolni Ciutludzie*), and by Piotr W. Cholewa in 2010 (*Wolni Ciut Ludzie*). Terry Pratchett is one of the most popular fantasy writers in Poland and worldwide, and the fan community which has grown around his comic fantasy Discworld series, numbering 41 novels, is very active on the Internet. Every Discworld book has been extensively discussed, reviewed and analysed by fans in forums and blog posts, and it was no different with *The Wee Free Men*. The novel poses many translation problems the solutions to which are traditionally complicated, and the two Polish translations differ in how they approach them, which is why the book has generated ample response online not only about the plot and characters, but also about the quality of its translations. The aim of the article is to present the aspects of translation which the online reviewers and commenters pay attention to, what and why they find to be problems, and the translation solutions they prefer rather than judge their opinions as right or wrong or evaluate the two translations.

2. Reader response to the two translations of *The Wee Free Men*

The responses described below come mainly from two sources. One is the 18 reviews Google suggests in search results for reviews of both *Wolni Ciutludzie* and *Wolni Ciut Ludzie*, 11 of which refer to the translation, and the comments under those reviews. The descriptions from bookshops and the publisher are excluded. The list includes two articles which specifically set out to discuss the translation rather than review the novel. The other source is discussions on two biggest forums for Terry Pratchett's fans in Poland. The reactions were expressed over a span of 12 years, the oldest being posted before the publication of the first Polish translation, and the most recent ones in August 2016.

Reviews and comments vary greatly in how objective and professional they are, as well as in how much detail they include, but what most of them have in common is that they show their authors' strong personal attachment to the Discworld series and/or its translations into Polish, and they are often very emotional. The negative responses are especially likely to include emotionally charged language, sometimes including profanity, but there are also many responses (positive, negative, and neutral) which strive for objectivity and balanced judgement. The emotional tone and form of the comments aside, where they do provide opinions more specific than whether the translation is good or bad, few seem to be outright wrong, and most show an understanding of the issues they discuss. While the reviewers usually admit that they are not language specialists, they do tend to have some knowledge of the English language, and some even read Pratchett's novels in English. They differ from the general population in that they do read books, and, what is more, they are serious and passionate enough about reading to take the time and make the effort to express their opinions about books in writing. This makes them a rather elite group, and alone could serve as a good reason for taking their opinions into consideration by publishers and scholars in the field of translation studies, even if they are not expert opinions of professional linguists, editors or translators.

The volume of the online responses alone, together with the content of the comments, indicate that translator's invisibility described by Lawrence Venuti (2004) is not always the accepted norm, at least among Polish readership. They clearly show that there are readers who are conscious of the necessary difference between reading the original and the translation. At the same time, they tend to be determined that this difference should be minimal, and do not object to the translated text being more demanding for the reader if it means it stays closer to the original. Conversely, they generally object to any translation solutions which they see as obscuring the original author's ideas. The specific issues brought up in the discussions and

reviews most often are the fact that the book was first translated not by the usual translator of the Discworld series, cycle continuity, the treatment of dialect, the treatment of proper names, and infantilization/simplification of the text in translation.

2.1. The first translator – the best translator

The issue of using a different translator features very strongly in all the discussions since it is generally accepted that Terry Pratchett's popularity in Poland is a result not only of his brilliant writing, but also of brilliant translations produced by Piotr W. Cholewa. His name has become a brand familiar to virtually all fans of Discworld in Poland, and numerous enthusiastic reviews and comments shared online show that his work is greatly appreciated and treated as a guarantee of the highest translation quality. While some fans do notice some shortcomings in Cholewa's translations or have reservations about his style – although they too usually recognise his undeniable contribution to bringing Pratchett's prose to Poland – they are definitely in minority.

It is not surprising then that the decision to publish a Pratchett's Discworld book translated into Polish by someone else – Dorota Malinowska-Grupińska – was met with suspicion and followed by a flurry of criticism from the fandom. As evidenced by discussions on internet forums, it was a cause for concern even before the translation was produced. When the translation did become available, first a free fragment online, and then the book in bookstores, the reaction was also almost uniformly negative, with only a few commenters expressing an understanding of the challenge Malinowska-Grupińska faced and soberly observing that with such a negative attitude, a positive reception may have been impossible. It is also worth noting here that positive or even neutral opinions on Malinowska-Grupińska's translation almost always appear in opposition to criticism.

Out of the 11 reviews and articles which mention the translation, all except one criticize Malinowska-Grupińska's translation or mention the superiority of Cholewa's. Even the sole review which mentions Malinowska-Grupińska's translation without offering any criticism of it or expressing the view that Cholewa's is better does state that “the translation is good, **even though** this time Dorota Malinowska-Grupińska was responsible for it, not Piotr W. Cholewa,” suggesting that a different translator is automatically a problem ¹.

In criticising the decision to employ a different translator, many point to the fact that Terry Pratchett already has a well-established Polish voice constructed for him by Cholewa, and that it would be difficult if not impossible to translate a Discworld novel as well or better than

¹ (http://www.literatura.gildia.pl/tworcy/terry_pratchett/wolni_ciutludzie/recenzja), translation and emphasis mine, KD.

Cholewa does. To show just how strongly his voice is associated with Discworld, a commenter said that reading Pratchett in English made her feel uncomfortable after years of reading about Discworld as described by Cholewa. His style has also been described as the kind of Polish Pratchett would speak if he spoke Polish. The quotation below illustrates how strongly Cholewa's style is associated with Pratchett's:

Tak się złożyło, że miałam możliwość czytać [oba przekłady] równoległe - i choć nie mogę powiedzieć, by pierwszy z nich był zły, to drugi jest zdecydowanie lepszy (nie mam tu na myśli wierności oryginałowi, którego nie miałam okazji przeczytać w całości, lecz stworzenie specyficznego klimatu, dobrze znanego wszystkim fanom twórczości Pratchetta). (<http://ksiazki.wp.pl/rid.4422,tytul.Fik-Mik-Figle-vs-Nac-Mac-Feegle,recenzja.html?ticaid=1199bb>).²

[I was able to read [both translations] at the same time – and although I cannot say the first was bad, the second is definitely better (I'm not talking here about faithfulness to the original, which I did not have an opportunity to read in its entirety, but about creating the characteristic atmosphere, well known to all fans of Pratchett's work)].³

It is interesting to note that the few readers who defend Malinowska-Grupińska's version have in common the fact that they either read the book as children or before reading any of Cholewa's translations of Discworld. They discovered *The Wee Free Men* without expectations about what Pratchett's prose "should" sound like in Polish. Some of them say that even though they saw nothing wrong with the novel on first reading it, they have changed their mind since reading or learning about Cholewa's version. Others, however, note that because Malinowska-Grupińska's version of the characters in the novel was the first one they encountered they still prefer it, and have found it difficult to get used to Cholewa's version of these characters in the subsequent novels – a reversal of the more usual situation. Here is an example of such an opinion, which also mentions some other issues which will be discussed below:

Nie wiem co o tym myśleć, gdyż do Akwili Dokuczliwej mam pewien sentyment, wiecie - moja pierwsza książka Pratchetta, młody wiek, ogólnie wspomnienia wspaniałe wakacje spędzone z tą książką, ale wprawdzie z innym przekładem. Prawdę powiedziawszy Fik Mik Figle bardziej mi pasowały do typu nieskomplikowanej i lekkostrawnej powieści, którą pamiętam z dzieciństwa... [...] Nie czytałam przekładu Cholewy (wiem, wiem, "nie czytała więc się niech nie wypowiada") ale dlaczego te smyrfy seplenią jak stare wioskowe dziady... ehmm no dobra już wiem... ta gwara ma niby nadać wyraźniejszy charakter ciągle chłujących i mierzących kilka cali "szkoto-smerfów". A pamiętam, że składnie wysławiające się Figle budziły u mnie większe zaufanie, sympatię i wydawały się takie szlachetniejsze :) (taka dorosła wersja Smerfów) Ta zmiana najbardziej mnie odrzuca od nowego

² All comments are quoted with original spelling and punctuation.

³ All translations mine, KD.

przekładu, a z przyjemnością sięgnęłabym po np. Zimistrza tłumaczonego przez tą Grupińską... (polter.pl/ksiazki/Wolni-Ciut-Ludzie-Terry-Pratchett-c22449)

[I don't know what to think about this, since I am rather fond of Akwila Dokuczliwa – my first book by Pratchett, young age, memories in general the great holidays with this book, though with a different translation. To be honest, Fik Mik Figle made more sense to me in this sort of uncomplicated, light novel I remember from my childhood... [...] I didn't read Cholewa's translation (I know, I know "you can't talk about it if you haven't read it) but why do those smurfs lisp like old country gaffers? Oh well, I know... this dialect is supposed to show more clearly the character of the "Scottish Smurfs" who are drinking all the time, and are only a few inches tall. But I remember that the well-spoken Figle seemed to me more trustworthy, nice, and sort of noble :) (sort of like adult version of Smurfs). This is the change that puts me off the new translation the most, and I would gladly read, e.g. *Wintersmith* translated by this Grupińska...]

2.2. Cycle continuity

Problems with continuity are well known to fantasy and science-fiction fans as the genre is rich in multi-volume cycles where it is difficult to keep track of all the facts and characters' names even when one person translates the entire cycle. It was another reason why fans expressed the view, online and in letters to the publisher, that the books translated by Malinowska-Grupińska should be translated again by Cholewa. Even before the publication of the first translation, they wondered how the book translated by Malinowska-Grupińska would tie in with the other Discworld novels. It is worth noting here that when *The Wee Free Men* was first published it was impossible to tell whether the characters from it would appear in other Discworld novels. Later, when they did and those novels were translated by Cholewa, readers remarked on how differently those characters were portrayed. The difference was especially striking, to the point where some readers did not realise right away that they were the same characters, in case of the Feegles, who in Cholewa's version even speak a different dialect.

2.3. The Feegles' dialect

The Wee Free Men features a group of characters, the Nac Mac Feegles, who speak a strong quasi-Scottish dialect, and the treatment of this dialect in translation is one of the issues online reviewers were especially willing to comment on. Malinowska-Grupińska's version normalises the Feegles' language, while Cholewa decided on rusticalization based on the regional variety of Polish spoken in Podhale.

Before Cholewa's version was published, Malinowska-Grupińska's decision to make the Feegles speak standard Polish was criticised as the commenters felt it hid their "Scottishness",

which in the original is clearly apparent, and changed their character. Those who read the original had the impression that the Malinowska-Grupińska's Figles are less fierce, dangerous, or interesting than Pratchett's Feegles. Also, many expressed the view that that some of the richness of the original text was lost due to the loss of the dialect in translation and, consequently, everything that may be associated with it. When Cholewa's translation was published, the solution he chose was largely praised, with only occasional comments pointing out that the inhabitants of Podhale and Scotland are very different people and therefore this solution, if not entirely wrong, is also not ideal.

2.4. Proper Names

Considerable criticism of Malinowska-Grupińska's translation concentrates on the fact that she chose to change the main character's name from Tiffany to Akwila, and her brother's name from Wentworth to Bywart. Both Bywart and Akwila still look rather foreign in a Polish text, and the reader has no reason to assume they are not the names given to the characters by the author himself, which is why some commenters mention their shock at discovering they had been deceived.

It should be noted here that Discworld fans do not oppose translating or adapting names in general, and they are not necessarily against a mixture of Polish and English names in a novel. Numerous Discworld characters have received Polish names from Cholewa, and many such solutions have been praised. At the same time, numerous characters have retained their original names in Cholewa's translations. The main problem with the names Akwila and Bywart seems to be the difficulty in understanding the translator's motivations behind the decision to use them, as the names are not simply Polish equivalents, and do not sound Polish. A few readers go to great lengths inventing possible etymologies and justifications for them, but none seems satisfactory, and most readers believe that those two names should not have been in any way manipulated. Consequently, Cholewa's decision to keep Tiffany and Wentworth in his version was appreciated.

2.5. Infantilization and simplification

When speaking about the simplification or infantilization of Malinowska-Grupińska's version, it should be noted that *The Wee Free Men* is one of a few Discworld novels written with a younger reader in mind. The fact that it is read as eagerly by adult Pratchett fans as the rest of the Discworld series makes it a crossover novel. As pointed out by Roderick McGillis, Terry Pratchett himself commented on how his writing for children differed from his writing for

adults, and while the distinction between fiction for adults and for children may not be well defined, it is acknowledged by both publishers and writers (McGillis 2014). Still, some readers refuse to recognise this distinction or see its implications for translation differently, which is where some criticism of Malinowska-Grupińska's translation originates. What is more, there seems to be a range of ideas as to the target reader of the text discussed here. While some are surprised that the translator would see *The Wee Free Men* as a book which parents might want to read to their children, and refuse to see it as in any way different to the other Discworld books, most do acknowledge that it was written for younger readers.

Those who complain about the text being infantilized by Malinowska-Grupińska point out the diminutive forms in the text, treating them as a flaw which the original text is free from, (and disregarding the fact that English practically never uses diminutive forms):

Słowem, pierwsze tłumaczenie było cukierkowe, przesłodzone, sztuczne, odrzucające i obdzierające baśń Pratchetta z tego, co czyni je tak cudownymi – z oryginalnego języka i braku nadmiernego słodzenia. (<http://polter.pl/ksiazki/Wolni-Ciut-Ludzie-Terry-Pratchett-c22449>)

[In a word, the first translation was saccharine, oversweetened, artificial, off-putting, and deprived Pratchett's fairy tale of what makes them so wonderful – the original language and the lack of excessive sugar-coating.]

Another reason why commenters see Malinowska-Grupińska's text as infantilised is the avoidance of words which may be challenging to the reader, such as *kilt*, which was translated as *spódniczka* (*skirt*), rather than *kilt*, which is a word also used in Polish to describe this traditional Scottish garment, but is probably less likely to be familiar to younger readers. This example, together with the loss of the Feegles' dialect, is also cited as an example of removing the "Scottishness" from the text, heavily criticised by many commenters. Below is an example comment of a more emotional nature:

Powiecie może, że to dlatego, iż chodzi o literaturę dziecięcą. Ale nawet jeśli Dorota Malinowska-Grupińska przyjęła założenie, że tłumaczy książkę dla dzieci, założyła jednocześnie, że książkę dla dzieci można przetłumaczyć byle jak. Że można ją strywializować, zbanalizować i pozbawić wszelkich ukrytych znaczeń. Bo dziecko i tak nie zrozumie... (Nawiasem mówiąc, będąc 12-latką wcale się za dziecko nie uważałam). A może polskie dzieci są od angielskich głupsze? (<http://katedra.nast.pl/artukul/1116/Bardzo-splaszczony-Dysk-czyli-o-tlumaczeniu-Pratchetta/>)

[You might say it's because it's literature for children. But even if Dorota Malinowska-Grupińska adopted the premise that she was translating a book for children, she also decided that a book for

children can be translated sloppily. That it can be made trivial and banal, and robbed of all hidden meaning. Because a child will not understand anyway. (By the way, as a 12-year-old I did not think of myself as a child). Or are Polish children stupider than English ones?]

At the same time, some commenters and reviewers admit that avoiding elements which may impede understanding is welcome and may be necessary in a book for children, regardless of whether they see *The Wee Free Men* as one.

3. Conclusion

Internet forums and blogs are a rich source of reader response which is easy to access and use by anyone interested in translation quality as seen by translation users, be it for commercial or research purposes. The fact that the publisher eventually decided to publish Cholewa's translation of *The Wee Free Men*, and with the translator's name clearly marked on the cover, suggests that it is a source they already use.

Of course, as any source, it is not without limitations. The fact that opinions posted online are more likely to be subjective than objective is both an advantage and a potential problem. As noted by Munday (2012, p. 217), "[t]he reviewers' comments indicate and to some extent determine how translations are read and received in the target culture." Some of the reviews and comments online are likely to have been inspired by other comments and reviews rather than their author's own examination of the translated text. Finally, while the Internet is a source of opinions posted by readers most invested in the subject, the opinions found there cannot be considered representative of the entire readership without further investigation.

The volume of the fan reactions to the two Polish translations of Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men* shows the high level of awareness of the translator's role, and the importance of translation quality for the reader's perception of the book. Of course, the understanding of translation quality varies from reader to reader but, based on the online reactions analysed here, it can be stated that the main issue focused on is choosing a different translator for a book in a cycle which already has an established and successful translator, which is connected to both ensuring the continuity in the cycle and the less tangible issues of the style the readers are accustomed to. This is followed by focusing on the treatment of names and dialect in translation, and issues connected with defining the target reader of the text and adjusting the text to their needs.

Rather than treat the Polish version as identical and completely interchangeable with the original, readers show an understanding of issues faced by the translator, and usually accept that some aspects of the text must be lost in translation, while also expecting the highest translation quality possible. The analysis of online reactions shows that the readers generally do not object to the translator's visibility in the text as described by Venuti (2004), and are happy to accept some peculiarities of language and style as long as they appreciate the choices the translator has made. Individual translation solutions tend to be considered problematic only when the reasons behind them are not clear to the readers.

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Discussion forums for Polish fans of Terry Pratchett

<http://forum.pratchett.pl/>

<http://forum.dyskowe.info/index.php>