CLEaR2014: Conference Proceedings
Nitra: SlovakEdu, 2015
ISBN 978-80-971580-3-3

‘GMINA’, ‘WOJEWÓDZTWO’, ‘POWIAT’, etc.: How to relevantly translate such intricate Polish words into English and remain competent? (The challenges for university students, translation-trainees and translators)

Artur Świątek, PhD.
Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland
artursw@interia.pl

Abstract

The objective of this article is to demonstrate how significant relevance is in the process of translation from the source language into the target language. Two languages will be considered here - Polish and English. Polish will serve here as the source language and English as the target one. Both languages, deriving from distant language families, provide anyone who takes up any translating tasks with lots of discrepancies in the fields of administration, law, medicine and other disciplines which require translation. The items that will be exemplified in this presentation (e.g. ‘gmina’, ‘województwo’, ‘powiat’, ‘okólnik’, etc.) cause a tremendous difficulty for anyone who is obliged to translate them into English.

The following ambiguous questions will be posed in the article:

- what is more professional and relevant to rely on – paper dictionaries or their electronic equivalents?
- what about many available Internet websites or Internet translators?
- where is this golden means to master the translator`s work?
- how to access relevant information in the form of precise equivalents necessary to convey the intended message?

Such intricacies and nuances keep tormenting many translators` minds for years. Where is the source of perfection? What to do when we come across a really challenging item to translate? How to approach it – is it better to use the avoidance strategy by omitting a difficult part or do our best to find the equivalent in the target language even if it truly does not exist or if it may not precisely correspond to the one we manage to coin in the target language?

The author of this article is convinced that all these posed questions will be fully answered and explained, which, hopefully, will open a nice source for a debate on translation nowadays.

Key words: relevance, translation, translation sources, translator`s approach.

Introduction

The idea to describe this intricate process of challenging words and phrases related to administrative field occurred to the author after his advancing experience as a translator, which presently amounts to over ten years. Being obliged to face such intricacies on a daily basis, while fulfilling the post of a translator, the author was forced to check up the meaning of such terminology in many available sources. They abounded in both paper and electronic forms, however, to his surprise, many of them were not profoundly relevant and convincing as for which notion(s) should be used predominantly in the required context.

Therefore it was decided to describe the translator`s doubts and queries in this respect. They concerned the so-called 'forced choice' as many times all available sources displayed many equivalents instead of one, which could be apparent and relevant at the same time. Very frequently there were too many to be selected. Hence there occurred the first question needed to be posed in our study: which equivalent among so many available ones, should be used as the very relevant one in the preparatory stage of the translation process? The approach suggested by many translation scholars in this respect is to select the first as the most common, popular and relevant one. This is not always the case, as in the paper forms such an approach is still favoured, however in case of electronic sources, namely in case of online dictionaries, the displayed equivalents at our disposal amount even to a dozen or more, hence there remains the subsequent query that causes our doubts: which one or two of these equivalents should be appropriately selected and subsequently implemented into a piece of writing – the translated text? These queries will be responded to in the following sections of this article.

Relevance

In accordance with the definition provided by Cambridge Dictionaries Online (online source) relevance is *the degree to which something is related or useful to what is happening or being talked about.* In other words, it is the condition in which a given word, phrase, expression is in comparison and contrast with its intended translated counterpart in the target language. Some equivalents may be related due to their proximity in both analysed languages, hence the ease of translation as both forms, the source one and the target one, will be promptly comprehended by recipients of the target text or language. The complexity arises when the act of relevance may not be fulfilled due to frequent intricacies in the process of translation, e.g. in case of the afore-mentioned discrepancies in the field of law, medicine, administration, etc.

Therefore, the practical part of this article will prove how close or distant the notion of relevance is in case of translation of administrative terms from Polish into English.

The study and discussion

The current study aims at indicating the most common instances of administrative terms, while transposing them from the source language (Polish) into its target counterpart, (English).

Let us now proceed to the very exemplification of the selected group of terms. Unfortunately, the demonstration of all this intricate translation process will not be possible here, as we need to face many spatial constraints. Therefore, we will outline this process by defining, clarifying the terms as well as suggesting the most relevant selection of theirs, and conclude with the subsequent implementation of these terms into the very translated texts.

The first analysed term that has been selected for our needs is the word '*gmina*'. In Polish it means the basic unit of local government[1]. As it can be clearly noticed, the Polish definition is not clear-cut, as it may seem too general or just vague. Let us now try to find its counterparts in English. Following our first selected source, the website proz.com, we face lots of problems, as here this website is not the website itself, but also a forum to discuss many intricacies in the field of translation. As *gmina* may be used in different contexts and hence be polysemous, the users of this website and forum in one, keep discussing and exchanging arguments to find the best equivalent, but it is rather too challenging. Let us provide the very first counterpart, which turns up when we click this word. It is the word *commune.* As this equivalent is not clear, the most frequent suggestion made by both translators, linguists and English philologists is to preserve this term with its bracketed Polish counterpart. The problem remains that we need to bear in mind who the recipients of the potential translated text will be, whether it will be only an English-speaking group or English speakers originating from Poland, hence understanding Polish reality and being able to fully comprehend what was translated and refer quite relevantly to the translated content of the conveyed message.

---

[1] All Polish definitions provided here are translations by the author of the article. The definitions are based on Polish Wikipedia sources, selected as the most adequate and relevant for the content of the article.

Apart from the general meaning of the Polish word *gmina,* we, as Polish inhabitants, have to be able to distinguish from other sub-terms used on a daily basis in relation to a rather intricate Polish administrative division. This division is unnecessarily too complex, but that is only a personal view of the author of this article. By complexity and intricacy we mean the further divisions into types of the Polish administrative unit *gmina.* We also distinguish such a word as *gmina miejska,* which in Polish means an administrative unit, which comprises a town or a city in its administrative boundaries. Let us now try to search for its English counterpart. It is *municipality.* The English equivalent may be similar, because it touches upon the issue in question, but obviously is not thoroughly relevant, as following Merriam-Webster dictionary online the definition is as follows: a city or town that has its own government to deal with local problems. This English-English source provides us rather with a more general definition of the word *gmina miejska* in English than in case of its source counterpart in Polish, as it rather refers to administrative duties of the people governing it than to its administrative boundaries.

Another kind of the Polish word *gmina* is *gmina wiejska.* Referring once more to the Polish sources, we may define this word as an administrative unit, not comprising a town or a city in its boundaries. Let us find its English counterpart. Following the website proz.com, we will not be able to find its equivalent, as this source equips us with the expression *rural commune,* which is definitely very imprecise, as it was elaborated on above. As we did not obtain the relevant information from proz.com, we will now proceed to obtain some assistance from other Polish-English online dictionaries. The equivalent we were able to find was unfortunately absent, which means that the only counterparts that were possible to be considered appropriate were two words that were separately treated by online sources, namely *gmina* and *wiejska.* In this case we may clearly state that the available sources (both paper and online ones) failed completely with provision of adequate news, so vital for our needs. There remains a question: what should this poor little thing – a translator – do in this respect? We think that the only solution to this very challenging translation nuance and a problem with translation is to provide any reader, recipient or naturally a client with the descriptive equivalent.

The last kind of the Polish word *gmina* is *gmina miejsko-wiejska.* It is a total mixture as for terminology of the Polish administrative system, for it combines both kinds described separately above, that is *gmina miejska* and *gmina wiejska.* In accordance with the Polish sources providing us with its definition, it is an administrative unit, which comprises one town or one city and neighbouring villages. This term becomes a very complex one, as it unnecessarily complicates already not a very simple Polish administrative system. As far as its English counterpart is concerned, we encounter the one as follows: *urban and rural commune.* Again this counterpart is imprecise, as it, on the one hand, refers quite accurately to the second element of this expression, namely *urban* or *rural* (from the perspective of the Polish source word), but, on the other hand, it completely obstructs the very meaning of the word *gmina* in Polish and is totally incomprehensible for the English-speaking recipients. What follows is another obstacle a translator needs to overcome, namely how to deal with another nuance in translation? Whether to blindly and inconsistently follow the imprecise sources that provide such imperfect instances or to be above it all, use them and improve their meaning by providing an adequate description as well? It is clearly advisable that a translator should follow the last piece of advice to preserve his or her competence and be professional in fulfilling his or her translation commitment.

The next administrative term that has been selected for our study is the Polish word *'województwo'.* As Poland has undergone many administrative reforms since 1970s, the semantics of this word has changed many times, very frequently due to the changing territory *województwo* comprised through the years. But let us focus initially on its Polish definition. In Polish it denotes a unit of administrative division of higher degree in Poland. Once more the definition does not reflect anything similar or recognisable when confronted with English speaking background. Let us now use the most favoured website that is used to reveal any doubts, also in this respect, namely proz.com. According to it, the counterpart is *province.* It is unclear, as such a word has many connotations in English. What is even more surprising and what appears on this website as well is a set of three equivalents: *commune, district, province.* As we remember, the equivalent suggested to match the Polish word *gmina* was to be *commune.* Three equivalents to match one administrative unit in the Polish conditions is just too wide a selection, hence it causes ambiguity and doubts in a translator`s mind. What should be the translator`s approach in this matter? Definitely, to select one provided counterpart out of three suggested, but which one is the most relevant? In this case the translator`s decision should require lots of flexibility and knowledge-based experience as many years ago, the core equivalent for the Polish word *województwo* was *voivodship* (following the core paper Polish-English, English-Polish dictionary by Jan Stanisławski). However, due to the change of a political system in Poland in 1989, many changes in the market of dictionaries as well as administrative reform in 1990 occurred; the equivalent *voivodship* lost its significance, mainly due to the range of territory Polish *województwo* comprised. The number of Polish administrative units of this kind decreased from 49 to 16, hence the problems started occurring and persist till today. As for our analysis, the most relevant counterpart that we, as translators, use on a daily basis is the word *province*.

Another word that has been selected from a wide list of intricate notions for translators to convey into the target language, was the Polish word *'powiat'.* The Polish definition of this word is a unit of 2nd degree administrative and territorial division. Similarly to the formerly analysed instance, this definition is very unclear and it does not clarify its meaning to any potential addressee. Let us now proceed to the very analysis of its counterparts in English. Using the same source we tend to rely on, namely the website proz.com, we may find the following equivalent in English: *district.* We may be easily confused seeing such an equivalent, as it is very misleading when confronting it with the English administrative system, where there are obviously districts, provinces, boroughs and counties, but their territorial and administrative division is different and distant from their Polish equivalents. Therefore we need to pose another question that needs to be replied here. What is the translator`s approach in such matters? Whether it would be more advisable and relevant to just select one more or less corresponding word at random and leave it as it is or would it be simply more logical and better to focus on one equivalent accompanied by a Polish source word as well and followed by some description? The solution to this intricate problem is to use the English word *district,* followed by its Polish source word and provided with a very relevant description what precisely the word *district* refers to in Polish conditions.

There exist many kinds of *powiat* in Polish as well. The reason is also very similar to the issue of *gmina,* mentioned above. The initial assumptions for introducing many kinds of this administrative unit derive from the interwar period in Poland, as due to many social and political changes, such divisions were introduced. Surprisingly, as the aftermath and immediate consequence of introducing the last administrative reform in Poland in 1990, the kinds of *powiat* were re-introduced to demonstrate respect to interwar period achievements and to outline this new division as a fully democratic move. Hence, at present we have many kinds of this administrative unit. To distinguish only several of them, we may enumerate the following ones: *powiat miejski (grodzki)* – these two terms are used interchangeably and *powiat ziemski.* In case of the former one, it is still used officially and on a daily basis, in case of the latter one it occurs mostly in informal contexts just to pay respect and demonstrate sentiment for the interwar period. As for the Polish definition of the former one, it is the following: an administrative unit in Poland, comprising a town or a city, and similar in the field of responsibilities to *gmina.* Let us now proceed to a brief analysis of their English equivalents. In case of *powiat miejski (grodzki)* we may illustrate such a counterpart: *township.* The term used in English has a very approximate connotation and meaning compared to its Polish source word and surprisingly fulfils its function.

As for the next kind of *powiat,* namely *powiat ziemski,* we will analyse now the definition in Polish and its counterpart in English. Commencing with the Polish definition, it states that *powiat ziemski* is an administrative unit in Poland, mostly in the interwar period, related to a town or a city, and similar in the field of duties to *gmina.* As we may clearly observe, the definition in Polish profoundly resembles the one quoted above and referring to *powiat miejski (grodzki)* with the only exception that in case of *powiat ziemski* we encounter this historical reference to the interwar Poland. What about its English equivalent? It is *rural county.* Evaluating this equivalent, it is worth noting that it is a very relevant term, as it precisely refers to the administrative term used in Britain, hence its comprehension will be highly probable by English recipients. In this case, a translator may quite easily deal with his or her translation task.

The subsequent word that will undergo our investigation is the Polish word *'sołtys'.* This is the first word here which does not precisely refer to a set of administrative terminology adaptable in Polish conditions, but rather in the first place to a person responsible for holding a post related to a given administrative division. The Polish definition of this word is a representative of a local community, preferably in the country. Having provided this definition, let us try to search for its English counterparts. Commencing with our main source – the website proz.com, we may find the following equivalents, which are *village leader* or *village administrator.* The equivalents are rather clumsy and awkward, as in Polish reality and administrator, *sołtys* is a person responsible for administering the village community and providing it with all up-to-date news and status quo revolving around the everyday life inside and outside of the village community. But the first equivalent in the form of *village leader* simply does not fulfil its role in any sense, as the term is too irrelevant and apparently too vague to be used in such conditions. Obviously, this criticism is related to the reception of Polish recipients knowing English and reading about Poland, while being abroad and having access to English sources depicting Polish administrative system. That is the perspective of a Pole, being an English translator. However, for the needs of English native speakers, we cannot be as critical as before, because such correspondence conveyed for the target English recipients would definitely suffice.

In case of another term, which should be analysed in our article, the problem appears to be of a similar nature, as the word derives from the Polish word *sołtys*, because it refers to the administrative division any Polish *sołtys* is obliged to hold his or her position in. This word in Polish is *sołectwo.* Its Polish definition is an auxiliary unit for commune in contemporary Poland, characteristic for rural areas. Let us now quote its English equivalent. It is as follows: *village.* Referring to the illustrated equivalent, we may easily state that again it is not precise, as it refers generally to the area any village may cover, but administratively it is not relevant at all, as we know about the existence of the English words, such as *country, village,* the meaning of which is very vague in Polish conditions.

Another word which we may study is the Polish word *marszałek.* Its Polish definition is the chairman of a province, the executive organ of provincial government. Before we proceed further with our clarification, let us now briefly refer to the word ‘provincial’ in the Polish definition. The word ‘provincial’ derives from the word ‘province’ discussed above as one of the many Polish administrative terms. The English equivalent for *marszałek* is, as proz.com indicates, *marshal of the voivodship.* As we may clearly see, the translation is rather out-of-date, as even the most relevant and contemporary source, which proz.com is considered nowadays by all translators and linguists, cannot provide more adequate counterpart. Apparently, the Polish word *marshal* possesses different meanings than its meaning used in the field of administration, however even in this specific case, the counterpart should be more precise, as the word *voivodship,* rather criticised above, should be replaced with something more modern, e.g. province. Hence we see that all the problems with transposing many administrative terms from Polish and English persist.

The subsequent word which we would like to discuss in our study is the Polish word *wojewoda.* We have already mentioned the inadequately transposed Polish word *województwo* above. Now we shall concentrate on the analogy between the Polish words *sołtys* and *sołectwo* (discussed above as well) and *wojewoda* and *województwo*. The analogy originates from the fact that these are administrative divisions given to state officers fulfilling their functions in and the very names for people fulfilling such functions. But let us return to the very word *wojewoda,* announced several lines above. In Polish the definition states that *wojewoda* is an organ of state administration. What is highly surprising here is that even the Polish definition does not specify that *wojewoda* is a person, but an organ which makes it sound very artificial. It is a very responsible post in the hierarchy of Polish administration, but it does not simultaneously mean that the definition should be so vague even for Polish native speakers, let alone its translation. Let us proceed to look for the equivalents of this word in English. The available sources, out of which still the website proz.com is the predominant one and the most relevant, indicate the following instances: *voivode, governor.* We observe lack of relevance and adequacy here, as the first equivalent must be apparently treated as very archaic, and deriving from not very modern contexts. In case of the second instance, we may accept it more easily as it concerns the range of duties any *wojewoda* has to take to fulfil his position in administration.

The next instance, which we intend to outline in our article, will be of a slightly different nature, as it does not precisely refer to the very administrative division in Poland, but rather to administrative and office work. This word is *'okólnik'.* The Polish definition is very general, naming *okólnik* as a kind of official document. For Polish translators, as well as for Polish citizens, this word is rather not modern, let alone the obligation to familiarise the English recipients with its existence and meaning. In English the equivalent is, according to proz.com, non-existent. In other words it was not possible to find it on this website. Other online dictionaries provide us with *circular,* which surprisingly is one of the very few instances which may be regarded as fully corresponding and being relevant to its source counterpart. *Circulars* in this meaning are used not only in office correspondence. They also occur in the academic contexts, as sources informing potential conference participants about the upcoming conferences and trainings.

Conclusion

Concluding the above considerations, we may state that translation of administrative terms from Polish into English is a highly challenging task, not only for university students commencing their practice and academic work based on translation, but for translation trainees and professional translations as well. Why is that? The reason for encountering challenges in this case is this field of translation, namely administration. Because two administrative systems differ profoundly, it is required from any translator to be highly competent and relevant while performing a translation task in this respect. Competence and relevance will be clearly visible in the work of any translator. But how to be fully competent and relevant in transposing terminology that is unfamiliar for users of this or that language? Firstly, any translator must be eloquent and possess sufficient specialised knowledge in the translated field, here administration. Secondly, their knowledge may be enhanced by their exposure to relevant sources, that is dictionaries, glossaries, Internet messaging boards and the like referring precisely to the terms, which are nessary to be familar with, to be seubsequently conveyed into the target language.

It is believed that the selected instances presented above allowed to comprehend how intricate each translation task is when faced with any challenging terminology.

References

Print dictionaries

STANISŁAWSKI, J. 1994. *Wielki słownik polsko-angielski. The Great Polish-English Dictionary*. A-Ó. Wiedza Powszechna. Warszawa.
STANISŁAWSKI, J. 1994. *Wielki słownik polsko-angielski. The Great Polish-English Dictionary*. P-Ż. Wiedza Powszechna. Warszawa.
STANISŁAWSKI, J. 1964. *Wielki słownik angielsko-polski z suplementem. The Great English-Polish Dictionary supplemented*. A-N. Wiedza Powszechna. Warszawa.
STANISŁAWSKI, J. 1964. *Wielki słownik angielsko-polski z suplementem. The Great English-Polish Dictionary supplemented*. O-Z. Wiedza Powszechna. Warszawa.

Online dictionaries

http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/relevance
www.merriam-webster.com
www.proz.com

Contact

Artur Świątek, PhD. , Assistant Professor
41-300 Dąbrowa Górnicza
ul. Stara 11c/3
Woj. Śląskie
Poland
artursw@interia.pl