

## Research Article

Joanna Kosmalska\*

# Liberated from Their Language: Polish Migrant Authors Publishing in English

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0061>

Received September 3, 2017; accepted December 29, 2017

**Abstract:** The article opens with a brief analysis of the publishing industry in the UK and Ireland to provide an informed assessment of how difficult it is for Polish migrant authors to establish their presence on the local literary market. It proceeds to show how these writers have been amazingly persistent in their efforts to win British and Irish readership by, for example, participating in literary competitions, submitting their work to literary journals, collaborating with local writers or self-publishing their work. Then some attention is given to how the process of writing a book in a non-native language engages the writers: they tend to adjust their texts to the international readership, become involved in the translation process, try their hand at writing in a foreign language, and prepare bilingual advertising materials. Why they feel such a strong need to be published in English is a question broached in the next part of the article. Finally, the closing section explores how the fact that their writing is a translation influences the reception of the writers' work.

**Keywords:** Polish migrants in Britain and Ireland, literary translation, migrant literature.

The inspiration for this article was the news that BBC Radio 4 invited two Polish authors living in London to contribute short stories that would shed some light on the experience of Polish people in the UK. A. M. Bakalar's *Woman of Your Dreams* and Agnieszka Dale's *Fox Season* were turned into radio plays and aired on 4 and 11 September 2015 respectively. When the Brexit campaign sparked some anti-Polish incidents, BBC Radio 4 approached Agnieszka Dale again with the request to write another short story as a comment on the current socio-political situation. The result, *A Happy Nation*, was aired on 14 October 2016. The blurb for the play discloses that the story takes place in the near future when Polish migrants have left the country except for one, Krystyna Kowalska, who receives a late-night visit from an immigration officer. Krystyna is fully assimilated into the local society: she has lived in Britain for years, is married to a British man, speaks perfect English and her children are British. She could easily pass for British herself but the rising anti-immigration sentiment in the UK makes her acutely aware of being "the other," a stranger, a foreigner. The job commissioned by BBC Radio 4 to Bakalar and Dale entailed translation on a few different levels. The writers performed an audience-oriented translation, communicating the hardship of a life lived by a contemporary Pole in the UK to British people. They rendered a set of experiences of Polish migrants through the prism of their own experiences. They presented the British national debate on immigration as seen from the perspective of an immigrant. And in the most literal sense, their work was an act of interlingual translation since Bakalar and Dale submitted their stories not in Polish, which is their mother tongue, but in English.

**Article note:** The article is a self-translated, modified version of "Dyskurs literacki w procesie przekładu. Studium polskiej twórczości migracyjnej," the text written in Polish and submitted for publication in the monograph *Dyskurs—współczesne opracowania i perspektywy badawcze* by Łódź University Press. The permission to publish the text in English was granted by the editors of the book, Iwona Witczak-Plisiecka and Mikołaj Deckert, and the publishing house.

\*Corresponding author: Joanna Kosmalska, University of Łódź, Łódź, Poland, E-mail: joanna.kosmalska@gmail.com

It was the awareness of the complexity that lies behind the text written in a “foreign” place, a “foreign” language and for a “foreign” audience that encouraged me to look at the writing published in English by Polish migrants who have lived in Britain and Ireland since 2004. The article opens with a brief analysis of the publishing industry in the UK and Ireland to make an informed assessment of how difficult it is for Polish migrant authors to establish their presence on the local literary market. It proceeds to show how these writers have been amazingly persistent in their efforts to win British and Irish readership, for example by participating in literary competitions, submitting their work to literary journals, collaborating with the local writers or self-publishing their work. Then some attention is given to how the process of writing a book in a non-native language engages the writers: they tend to adjust their texts to the international readership, become involved in a translation process, try their hand at writing in a foreign language, and prepare bilingual advertising materials. Why they feel such a strong need to be published in English is a question broached in the next part of the article. And the closing section explores how the fact that their writing is a translation influences the reception of the writers’ work.

## Slightly over 0.5% of All Translations? Polish Literature in Britain and Ireland

The article refers to the “book market” in Britain and Ireland, rather than to two separate markets, since there has long been a close connection between the publishing industries in both countries. In “Novelistic Production and the Publishing Industry in Britain and Ireland,” Claire Squires argues that Irish publishing was subaltern to the London-based industry for most of its history. The exceptions were a revival at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a mini-boom during and shortly after the World War II, and a period in the 1970s when British publishers were hit by recession, which facilitated the emergence of new publishing houses in the Republic of Ireland, such as the O’Brien Press, Blackstaff or Appletree. But a prevailing tendency throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was for Irish writers to seek a publisher in the UK. This provided them with more efficient marketing and distribution of their writing and, accordingly, better remuneration. Sometimes, it was also a way to avoid censorship (178). The Squires’ article reads in places like a paraphrase of *A study of the evolution of concentration in the Irish publishing industry*, the report put out by the European Commission in 1979. The study acknowledges that the majority of books sold in the Republic of Ireland were imported from the UK, paradoxically, many of them authored by Irish writers (for example, Edna O’Brien whose writing was published by Penguin Books). In the Irish market, which was dominated by newspapers, books comprised only 11.9% of the printing industry. Unlike in Britain—where small, family-run publishing businesses morphed into international multi-media conglomerates in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—most Irish publishing houses remained small, privately-owned companies that hired less than five people or even relied on part-time staff alone. The result was that they were only able to produce a few titles per year and lacked the resources to handle the output of bestselling authors. In her 2015 Guardian article “A new Irish literary boom: the post-crash stars of fiction,” Justine Jordan argues that the situation has been changing: Irish writers who grew famous in the 1990s—for instance, Anne Enright, Roddy Doyle, Colm Tóibín and Sebastian Barry—tended to be published from London but nowadays the emerging authors are poached by Irish publishers. Nevertheless, the publishing industries in both countries are still closely linked, the epitome of which is the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland. The association promotes retail bookselling in both countries, operates the National Book Token, sponsors the Whitbread Award and holds an annual conference, among other things. This article, therefore, refers to the British and Irish publishing industries as “one market,” in spite of it being a slightly simplified approach.

Although few Polish migrants write in English—out of seventy authors whose work I have analysed, only six can speak of such achievement<sup>1</sup>—their conscious efforts to establish their presence on the British and Irish literary scene are more frequent. The writers undeniably confront a challenge since translated books

<sup>1</sup> The list of writers and the full bibliography of the literary works mentioned in the article are available in the Virtual Archive which has been compiled as part of “Polish (e)migration literature...” project: [archiwum-emigracja.uni.lodz.pl/en](http://archiwum-emigracja.uni.lodz.pl/en).

constitute only a fraction of all literature published in the UK and Ireland every year. Worse still, publishers tend to label all texts sent in by first-time authors who are migrants as “foreign literature,” even though some of the books were originally written in English. In 2015, Literature Across Frontiers, an organisation based in Wales which, among other things, promotes literature in translation, formulated a report on *Publishing Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990-2012*. The study sample was based on one of the most voluminous bibliographies in the world compiled by the British Library annually. The results of Alexandra Büchler and Giulia Trentacosti’s research confirm the often-cited statistics claiming that translations represent only 3% of all published literature in the UK and Ireland. This makes it eleven times less than in Poland, where translations constitute over 33% of all published books.

**Table 1.** Translations share in Germany, France, Poland, Italy and the UK and Ireland in 2011. Source: *Publishing Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990-2012. Statistical Report (9)*.

Country	All publications	Translations %
Germany	96,237	12.28%
France	81,268	15.90%
Poland	24,380	33.19%
Italy	63,800	19.7%
UK and Ireland	87,412	3.16%

While the French, German, Spanish, Russian, Italian and Swedish writings generate the most interest in Britain and Ireland, the texts from Eastern Europe enjoy very little attention. Although Poland holds the strongest position in this group (65 books came out in the past 12 years, which adds up to 0.67% of all translations published in that period), the Polish writers are still eighteen times less likely to be published than French authors.

**Table 2.** Number of translations from selected source languages published annually in the UK and Ireland over the period 2000-2012. Source: *Publishing Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990-2012. Statistical Report (15-16)*.

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
French	77	82	82	97	93	95	92	80	117	99	84	109	110	1217
German	57	37	43	43	44	47	51	61	51	73	60	89	73	729
Spanish	24	20	25	38	45	43	38	42	54	32	45	39	36	481
Russian	14	16	24	35	28	23	20	38	45	44	44	43	58	432
Italian	20	25	22	29	21	25	27	32	25	36	45	41	35	383
Swedish	12	12	14	17	18	21	18	33	36	44	33	49	52	359
<b>Polish</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>65</b>
Hungarian	1	6	1	3	7	4	5	4	4	4	7	1	4	51
Czech	1	2	1	0	2	3	2	9	6	6	7	2	1	31
Latvian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	2	0	5

There is but one consolation for writers: Büchler and Trentacosti’s findings show that the number of literary translations have grown by 69% in the period of 2000-2012. The figures indicate that fiction is the most often translated material (63%), then poetry (16%), children’s literature (9%) and drama (7%).

The fact that British readers have recently shown more interest in the foreign literature was also mentioned by Dalya Alberge in *The Guardian* in August 2014. In her article, Alberge adduces opinions of experts involved in editing and selling books, one of whom is Liz Foley, Harvill Secker’s publishing director,

who ingeniously juxtaposed beliefs British people harbour about literary translations with the common opinion about vegetables: they are both “good for you but not enjoyable.” Foley argues this way of thinking about translation has been changing and translated literature has started to attract the attention of leading-edge publishers.

Chris White, who selects fiction for Waterstones, a major book retailer, ascribes this transition to sales figures. He alleges the example of a top German author, Ferdinand von Schirach, whose rendering of the novel *The Collini Case* (2012) sold 29,385 copies, thereby outselling the thriller by John Grisham that came out around the same time. Not unlike Liz Foley, White observes that the perception of literary translations has undergone a revolutionary change over the last decade. Translated titles are no longer recognised as low-grade texts but, on the contrary, they are perceived as potential bestsellers. This shift was brought about by intensified migrations, which aroused readers’ interest in the cultural heritage of the newcomers, and by the development of the Internet, which accelerated the dissemination of information about the books released abroad.

But the publishers’ contentment is hardly shared by academics. B. J. Epstein, a lecturer at the University of East Anglia, accuses mainstream publishing houses of underestimating the British and Irish readers in assuming they would show little interest in the stories of people living in distant places around the world. The inevitable outcome of this assumption is that the authors likely to be published in the UK and Ireland are those who have already achieved financial success in their home countries or won prestigious awards. In *Politics of Cross-Cultural Reading*, Marion Dalvai views such practice as natural: after all, literary prizes spread the word about high-profile books internationally, enhance the symbolic capital of the work, increase the sales and thereby enable the authors to enter foreign markets (96). Dalvai’s point is successfully confirmed by the careers of Polish writers. The elite whose books were selected by British and Irish publishers include such names as Paweł Huelle (*Castorp*, Serpent’s Tail 2007), Andrzej Sapkowski (*Baptism of Fire*, Gollancz 2014) or Jacek Dehnel (*Saturn*, Dedalus Press 2012). These are well-known, critically-acclaimed and award-winning authors in Poland: success in their homeland paved the way to the literary markets in the West.

Similar observations to those of B.J. Epstein were made by Lawrence Venuti, the author of the highly acclaimed book on *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995). Venuti criticises English-language publishers for skilfully concealing that books are translations by omitting the translator’s name on the cover. For the same purpose, the covers are customized to reflect local trends and the titles are domesticated to sound familiar, catchy and intriguing. The trick is to make a passer-by believe he is looking at a home-grown novel. A brilliant example of how foreign books have been adjusted to the needs of the local market is *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą białą-czerwoną* [The Polish-Russian War under the White-and-Red Flag] by Dorota Masłowska which was rendered by Benjamin Paloff and published by Atlantic Books in London in 2005. Compared with the cover of the Polish volume, the British edition dazzles with the vivid red and the title has been shortened to three words, *White and Red*, to catch the eye of the potential customer.

The effort invested in the rendering of a text seems to be more appreciated by small, independent publishing houses. But even those tend to showcase the name of the translator more often on poetry than prose books. In *Gościnność słowa* [The Hospitality of Words] (2012), Jerzy Jarniewicz ascribes this tendency to the ingrained but ill-grounded conviction that rendering a poem involves greater creativity than translating a prose piece.

As if to vindicate Jarniewicz’s diagnosis, Marek Kazmierski’s name is found on the cover of *Finite Formulae & Theories of Chance* (2014), a poetry collection by Wioletta Greg.<sup>2</sup> Kazmierski was introduced to Greg’s writing around 2010 and started to promote her work in England’s literary circles. He rendered into English and edited a collection of her poems *Pamięć Smieny/Smena’s Memory* (2011) which was then published by Off\_Press, an indie press he set up in London. It is worth recalling, Kazmierski, like many others before him, put his name not on the cover but on the front page of *Pamięć Smieny/Smena’s Memory* to purposefully conceal the book was a translation. This publication opened up a career path in the UK for Greg, which led to real success: her first prose book, *Swallowing Mercury*, translated into English by Eliza

<sup>2</sup> Wioletta Greg is the pen-name of Wioletta Grzegorzewska which she uses for her publications in English.

Marciniak, was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2017. Kazmierski was given the credit for his involvement in Greg's literary career when the Arc Publications, a British publishing house, released *Finite Formulae & Theories of Chance*, the collection of poems that was shortlisted for the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize in Canada in 2015. The competition organisers gave much attention to the translator: on the website of the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry, Kazmierski's name and biography were displayed above the pseudonym and the bio note of the poet. The book was introduced as "*Finite Formulae & Theories of Chance* by Marek Kazmierski, translated from the Polish, written by Wioletta Greg," which conveyed the impression the volume had two equally important authors. In the promotional video from the awards ceremony, the translator and the poet sit beside each other at the table, signing copies of the book together. Then Marek Kazmierski is shown reading out his translations while Wioletta Greg stands behind him, waiting for her turn to present the same poems in Polish. This competition was one of those rare occasions when the poet seemed slightly overshadowed by the translator.

## ***Per aspera ad astra*, Migrants' Attempts to Leave a Mark on the Local Literary Scene**

Many migrant authors can only dream of a collaboration like the one between Greg and Kazmierski where the translator publishes and promotes the poet's work in the local society he knows inside out. Therefore, they look for other ways to enter literary circles in the UK and Ireland, one of them being the participation in literary contests. When Tomasz Mielcarek won the Jacek Bierezin Prize in a nationwide competition in Poland, it enabled him to publish his debut book *Obecność/Presence* (2014). The organizers of the contest from Dom Literatury [The House of Literature] in Lodz suggested the volume should be bilingual and they recommended David Malcolm, as a translator, who was already well known for his excellent rendition of *Till the Words Draw Blood!/Slowem do krwi!* (2013), an anthology of poems by Julian Tuwim. Mielcarek gave his consent: the collaboration between the author and the translator was so successful that Malcolm offered to translate the poet's next book.

Marek Kazmierski, in turn, won the 2007 Decibel Penguin Prize for his short story "No Way Back Where" in the competition organised by Arts Council England and Penguin Books. The judging committee included Shami Chakrabarti, a popular female politician, who expressed hope the prize would encourage people to look at the tabloid headlines critically and appreciate the cultural wealth migrants bring in to the UK. The award earned Kazmierski formal recognition that, apart from being a skilled translator and a publisher, he was a talented writer.

There is also a group of migrant authors who have succeeded in showcasing their work in London-based journals. A. M. Bakalar's short story "Whatever Makes You Sleep at Night" (2013), originally written in English, and the excerpts of Jan Krasnowolski's novel *African Electronics* (2014) in Anna Hyde's translation, came out in *Wasafiri*, a magazine which has been promoting multicultural writing in English since 1984. The quarterly is based at the Open University in London where Susheila Nasta, its founder and editor-in-chief, works as a lecturer. The title comes from the Swahili language where "wasafiri" means "travellers" and reflects the profile of the magazine focused on highlighting the impact migrations and multiculturalism have had on the "English" literature. The journal has always given much attention to Caribbean, Indian and Bangladeshi authors, who represent the dominant ethnic groups in the UK. As Polish people gradually became the largest minority in Britain and Ireland, their writing has also piqued curiosity of the magazine's editors.

A further confirmation of the growing interest in the writing of Polish authors came when *Litro Magazine* dedicated its 126 issue entirely to Polish literature. A. M. Bakalar, the guest editor of the volume, asked for submissions both from authors who are based in Poland (such as Jacek Dehnel, Zygmunt Miłoszewski and Paweł Huelle) and those who have been living abroad (for example Wioletta Greg or Grażyna Plebanek). The blurb discloses that the issue provides a fast track onto the contemporary literary scene in Poland and argues that: "With Polish now the second most widely spoken language after English in the UK, Polish literature is a hot topic" (Bakalar, *The Litro Magazine*). The magazine's overview of Polish writing seems

broad-brush: it presents just a handful of writers and spares only one page for each of them. But this is actually the idea that lies behind *Litro Magazine*, which is modelled on tabloids to allow a commuter on a train or a customer in a café to skim-read and discard it quickly. In its continuing focus on the general reader, rather than those with a particular interest in literature, the magazine is pocket-size, consists of about thirty pages per issue, and can be accessed for free via the Internet.

Last, but not least, Wioletta Greg's prose piece "On the River Boży Stok" (2015) was rendered into English by Anna Hyde for *The Guardian's* series *Translation Tuesday*. In her translation, Hyde focused on retaining Polish elements in the text, including the Silesian vernacular, diacritics and cultural references as the following excerpt illustrates:

For me the epitome of the decline of the peasant culture at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s was *bebok*, a demon most likely originating from the Slavic mythology, in some other villages called *babok* or *blandurek*. It lived near people's houses, in storage clamps, in quarries, in dark nooks of mows, in post-German bunkers and—as the adults used to say—it liked kidnapping naughty children. To me it seemed as dangerous as *Black Volga* [5], always coming from some dark place, from a limepit. (Greg, "On the River Boży Stok")

The words taken from the Silesian vernacular are italicized and left in the original form. The endnotes elucidate cultural references embedded in the text, one of them being *Black Volga* which alludes to an urban legend popular in the 1970s in Poland. The story has it that a driver of the black Volga car kidnapped children to draw their blood and sell it to Germans suffering from leukaemia.

Yet another group of Polish migrant writers have settled into the local literary scene by cooperating with British and Irish authors. For instance, the collaboration of Anna Wolf and Rory O'Sullivan resulted in the drama *The Passangers* that premiered in April 2015. The play was put up by the Polish Theatre Ireland and staged in The New Theatre in Dublin. It told the story of a Polish businessman Krzysztof, his sister Anastazja, and an Irish nurse Grainne whom the two met at the airport by coincidence. The characters were played by Irish and Polish actors: Paul Travers, Kasia Lech and Elaine Reddy respectively. In the play, Krzysztof and Grainne get stranded at the airport by snow and Anastazja speaks with her brother and the nurse on Skype. Similarly, in real life Kasia Lech performed her part via the communicator from her flat in Canterbury in the UK. Indeed, the audience experienced a transnational play where different nations, places and the virtual and real worlds got intertwined.

Some other example of a collaboration between the newcomers and locals is Angelika Sobieraj, a Polish student from one of Dublin's high schools, who participated in creative writing workshops organized by Fighting Words, a centre established by the Irish writer Roddy Doyle and his friend Sean Love. During the meetings, the participants worked on their own short stories that were later compiled in the volume entitled *Yet to Be Told* (2012). Meave Binchy, a widely-read Irish novelist, wrote the foreword to the collection, which was a huge reward for the students and an incentive to purchase the book for other people. The anthology included two versions of Angelika Sobieraj's short story "Chris": the original one in Polish and its English rendition by a translator and writer Siobhán McNamara. Although the stories collected in the volume smack of amateurism and teenage naivety, the project is an interesting example of how cooperation between migrants and the locals helps Poles to emerge on the Irish and British literary map.

The last group I am going to mention here consists of the authors who decided to self-publish their writing. One of them is Przemek Kolasieński. In 2012, he published a collection of essays *Co mi dała Irlandia?/What I Got from Ireland?* in two separate volumes – one in Polish and the other one in English. He invited Brian Earls, a prominent diplomat and researcher, to write a concluding chapter which highlighted historical similarities and differences between Poland and Ireland. Thanks to Earls' contribution, the collection went on sale in Eason, the most popular chain of bookstores in Ireland, and a brief article about the volume appeared in *The Dublin Review of Books*, the biweekly where Brian Earls had published for years. The category of self-publication encompasses also books that are authored by an owner of the publishing house, like in the case of Marek Kazmierski's *Damn the Source* (2013). These writers enjoy a greater freedom and encounter fewer procedural obstacles than authors who have to face qualifying procedures of external publishing houses.

## Working on the Book in a Non-mother Tongue

The awareness their books are going to be published in English is one of the major factors shaping the migrants' writing. The authors adjust their texts—sometimes deliberately and sometimes instinctively—to the international audience: they engage with more universal topics and tend to avoid cultural references only Polish people would understand. Where culture-specific elements are included, they use footnotes or explain any historical, cultural or linguistic references within the text. In interviews, they talk eagerly about the measures they take to make their writing translucent, pointing to similar features as those mentioned by Jan Krasnowolski, the writer who moved with his family to Bournemouth in 2005:

I don't write in English and I doubt I'll ever dare because I have too much respect for the language. It's easy to convey the meaning but it's a different matter to capture the language subtleties. Therefore, some things should be left to the translator. What I try to do is to make my writing reasonably universal and comprehensible to the Western reader. For that reason, I avoid culture-bound references that only Polish people would grasp. Instead I play with the language and inject it with Polish idioms, sayings, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Once the author decides to have his writing published in English, he faces the challenge of finding a capable translator. The best-case scenario is to ferret out a native speaker who grew up in the target language and culture but, at the same time, knows the Polish context and language well enough to pick up on the subtleties of the original text. There are only a handful of translators living in Britain and Ireland who can meet those expectations and the top dog is award-winning Antonia Lloyd-Jones. A number of Polish migrant authors are, therefore, left no choice but to pin their hopes on their children. Those who have already sought this intergenerational collaboration point out that due to the age gap, their children, and even more so grandchildren, tend to misread certain allusions, especially those referring to the Communist times. For instance, Aleks Wróbel's grandson, who rendered his collection of poetry, had different connotations than his grandfather with "Społem," the largest chain of stores in the Polish People's Republic, or "the jump over the wall," a symbolic gesture performed by Lech Wałęsa to lead the strike in the Gdańsk shipyard in 1980. However, the migrant writers speak English fluently enough to detect any inaccuracies and suggest alternative translations. By the same token, they are actively involved in the process of translation although they say unanimously that the translators should be given a free hand and the authors should interfere as little as possible.

There are also those, like A. M. Bakalar, Agnieszka Dale or Daniel Żuchowski, who have taken up the challenge of writing directly in English, even though it is not their mother tongue. They remark in interviews that reading British, Irish and American literature helps them switch to thinking and writing in English and, because they are out of regular touch with Polish, they actually find it easier to describe commonplace situations, events and issues in English, the language they use in their everyday life. As the authors admit, the act of writing in a non-native tongue is a time-consuming and difficult task but the satisfaction derived from completing a text in English is commensurably greater. A. M. Bakalar highlights some advantages and disadvantages of writing in a non-native language in a short video clip she uploaded to YouTube:

Writing in the second language... Yes, it is difficult. Obviously speaking fluently in one language is like one aspect. But writing in the second language is a completely different ball game... For me, writing in English, cause my mother tongue is Polish, was a liberating experience because there were certain ideas that I wanted to talk about and I found it difficult to express myself in Polish. And there was also another aspect of writing in English. Before I started writing the book, I translated like two or three books—novels by other authors from English into Polish cause I used to work as a translator back in Poland. And I sent it to three different publishers in Poland. Every one of them came back with the same comment that my Polish had English structure. So it made me think as well. I just didn't feel comfortable writing in Polish ... because I was kind of moved—living in the UK—from the language. It was a very conscious decision to start writing in English. I wanted the book to be accessible. And if I wrote it in Polish, it'd probably take a lot of time for the book to be translated into English. And finding a publisher that would invest the money into translating a book like that, I thought, it'd be quite a long process... I don't think I'll ever write in Polish. I wrote short non-fiction pieces that were published in the Polish

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Jan Krasnowolski carried out by Joanna Kosmalska in 2016 as part of the research project "Polish (e)migration literature..." ([www.emigracja.uni.lodz.pl/en](http://www.emigracja.uni.lodz.pl/en)).

press. But I found it a strenuous experience and I kind of prefer to speak and to write in English. (Bakalar, “A. M. Bakalar and writing in the second language”)

Bakalar made sure not only *Madame Mephisto* (2012) but also all marketing materials promoting her book were available in English. At least as much English-language information can be found on the Internet about Wioletta Greg’s translated writing. There has also been an increasing number of Polish migrant authors’ websites appearing in English on Facebook and Wikipedia. And many authors have become actively involved in the literary events in the UK and Ireland: for example, Jan Krasnowolski took part in the Liars’ League, a themed fiction night held once a month at The Phoenix pub in London. For the occasion, writers from around the world submit short stories on a designated theme. Then the association’s members select the best texts for professional actors to perform in front of live audience. The readings are filmed for the online archive and YouTube channel with a view to promoting literature in a similar fashion to theatre and film productions. The motive behind the writers’ efforts to emerge in the English-language public discourse is obviously to gain some recognition in the country in which they currently live: if their work is reviewed or mentioned in the British and Irish newspapers and scholarly articles, it enhances the writer’s (and the translator’s) visibility.

## The Need to be Published in English

Looking at the efforts of Polish authors living in the UK and Ireland, one might wonder why they feel such a strong need to be part of the local literary scene. One obvious explanation is the deeply-rooted desire to belong to the local community because, as Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary argue in the article *The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation* (1995), happiness and equanimity in life are strongly correlated with having some close social ties. The feeling of being excluded from the community, even if it is merely a misplaced impression, evokes depressive mood states which evince themselves in anger, resentment, despondence, jealousy or irascibility. Conversely, the feeling of being accepted and having support of other people provides a buffer against anxiety and stress. It leads to a variety of positive emotions, such as fulfilment, contentment or tranquillity. But, as Baumeister and Leary point out, physical presence is essential to maintain these close relationships.

In their books and interviews, Polish writers reveal that they felt strong resistance to forming attachments when they moved abroad, partly due to the language barrier and cultural differences and partly because they invested a lot of time and energy in staying in touch with the friends and family they left behind. But this resistance diminished over time. The physical absence of the beloved slackened the ties and the migrants replaced old relationships with new ones. The same might be said of their attitude towards language: while their initial strong sentiment towards Polish shrivelled due to limited propinquity, the affinity towards English intensified. This natural process, as Baumeister and Leary argue, is driven by the fact that every person needs his or her achievements (such as literary accomplishments among other things) to be recognized and valued by the people he or she lives among. It is even more important for writers who often view their work as communication with readers. When asked why they publish in English, Polish migrant authors tend to say they want to write for the local people about the issues they all face together day in day out. And no other language would enable them to “talk” to such a large, multicultural group of readers. In an interview in *Jantar Podcast*, Agnieszka Dale elaborated on this idea with a remarkable cogency:

I would say I always felt a little bit oppressed by English. To me, English is a kind of language that my parents always told me: “You need to speak English because with just Polish no one will hear you basically.” So I don’t write in English because I love the language. I write in English because I want to be heard and I’m very much aware that it’s the universal language that everybody speaks.

Another reason for having their work published in English is the writers’ urge to pass their legacy onto their descendants. As Aleks Wróbel, a poet living in London, observes his grandchildren and greatgrandchildren



will speak no Polish so he can stay bonded with them only through English. This reflection motivated him to have his work translated. Some authors also feel a need to flaunt their cultural heritage, which—as they themselves admit—stems either from vanity, pride or patriotic feelings, or the mixture of these emotions.

In the end, the English language opens up international book markets for writers, interestingly not only those in English speaking countries. The story of Aleks Wróbel and Tomasz Mielcarek illustrates how this mechanism works. Both poets have organised Slavic Poetry Festival in London, the outcome of which was establishing close relationships with writers from Bulgaria, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, Romania, Serbia and Russia. The collaboration they had started in 2013 soon bore fruit: Aleks Wróbel's and Tomasz Mielcarek's selected poems were translated from English into Belarusian, Bulgarian, Russian and Slovak and published in leading journals, anthologies and festival almanacs. This, in turn, led to a number of invitations to literary events in Eastern European cities. Later, their poetry books were rendered into Bulgarian and launched in Sofia and Plovdiv. In essence, the English language paved the poets' way to the literary circles in the East.

## Migrant Literature as a Literature Always in Translation

As often happens in cases such as the above-mentioned, the English language does not play the hackneyed role of the cultural hegemon but functions as an intercultural mediator. Although translating the text from the third language (in this case from Polish into English and only then into Slovak) seems absurd when one takes into account how close Poland and Slovakia are geographically, culturally and linguistically, the fact is that the translation *through* English (and not other languages) has become a sign of contemporary globalization processes. For a large majority of people, English is simply their second language, often one of many, they use for communication.

In *English as a Language Always in Translation* (2008), Alistair Pennycook argues that English has become the transcultural language which is in the continuous process of translation. Since there is a multiplicity of Englishes, and they often interact with the speakers' mother tongues, translation has, in fact, become the key to communication. Therefore, when evaluating English competency, one should take into account not only if the person is a fluent speaker of the language but whether he or she formulates original statements, is able to use English to convey their own culture and identity and is aware of multifarious social, cultural and historical implications of the utterance he or she has produced. If we bear in mind the variety of the speakers' ethnic backgrounds, it seems obvious the contemporary English discourse, including the literary discourse, should always be interpreted in the context of other languages and cultures. Only such approach allows one to decode it adequately.

All the more so because, as Fiona J. Doloughan observes in *English as a Literature in Translation*, the writing in Britain is increasingly being produced by bilingual and multilingual, rather than monolingual, authors (4). They tend to use English in a creative and innovative way, fortifying it with idioms, grammatical structures and phrases imported from a whole array of other languages. They pay little attention to linguistic conventions because their main focus is not the linguistic transfer but the transmission of information. They appropriate the language and shape it according to their needs. This, in turn, leads various idiolects to clash, permeate and superpose on one another: and out of this welter of different "Englishes," there emerges a new dictionary. To show how this influences the reception of the text, I will quote excerpts from two reviews published on blogs in which the British readers comment on the language in A. M. Bakalar's *Madame Mephisto* (2012). Stuart, the editor of *Winstonsdad* blog, who lives in Derbyshire, makes the following remark:

The voice of Magda even though written in English has a very Polish feel to it, I do wonder if this is why some publishers weren't so keen on this book. As for me, it gives it a real feel. Bakalar said her choice to write in English was because her Polish writing had been seen as tinged by English due to her extensive work translating and I may say the opposite is true: her writing in English has a Polish feel without the reader getting bogged down in Polish words. ("Madame Mephisto by A. M. Bakalar")

The above-quoted observations reverberate in the review by Rachel Ward, a translator and literary critic from Norwich, who argues on her blog *a discount ticket to everywhere* that:

The other particularly strong aspect was Magda's experience as an immigrant in London, ending up too Polish for the Brits and too English for the Poles. This clearly reflects the author's own experience as A. M. Bakalar was born and raised in Poland but has lived all over the world before settling in London in 2004.... Madame Mephisto is the only book on the Stork Press list originally written in English, yet is it also a translation? A translation of the Polish experience perhaps? ... I did find the English occasionally tinged with Polish, but perhaps that was because I was expecting it to be. If it had been a conventional translation I'm sure I would have commented to that effect. (Ward, "Madame Mephisto")

Both reviews echo Alistair Pennycook's (2008) pertinent thesis that English is a language always in translation. The phenomenon is further reinforced by the fact that in almost every book there overlaps a panoply of voices, often multicultural, which belong to people involved in the publication process: the voices of the author, translator, reviewer, editor, proofreader, etc. What the readers often forget is that before they open a book, its content has been translated, edited and rewritten several times.

## A Polish(ing) Touch on the British and Irish Literary Map

Like postcolonial writers before, the contemporary Polish migrant authors cling to the hope that something is gained rather than lost in the act of translation. In their astute essay "Where's Your Accent From? Britain's White Others," A. M. Bakalar and Agnieszka Dale remark:

But we are enriching English.... We both write via Polish, even if we do it in English. Polish must leave a significant mark, even if the accent is undetectable, on the page. Even if nobody knows. There will be Polish directness, sense of humour, our impatience with words.

Drawing upon the theories of Frantz Fanon, Bakalar and Dale place the Polish case in the wider context of the debate of postcoloniality. They point out that the writing of Polish migrants goes further than a simple linguistic translation: it carries over aspects of Polish culture into English, it renders a set of migrant voices and experiences for the local readers, it helps the authors to invent their own hybrid identity and reflects the national identity of the British and Irish people. After all, migrants are the perfect foil for the natives, thereby emphasizing their national characteristics.

Despite a remarkable similarity of Bakalar's and Dale's opinions, there is one major difference between the two—their relationship with English. While the language has had a liberating effect on the former writer, the latter has felt oppressed by it, by its privileged position and its capacity to push other languages aside. Dale forthrightly expresses her frustrations in the poem "A Very Secret Wish of Every Immigrant," in which she wishes for all English speakers to disappear from the earth for at least half a minute so that she can breathe.

But Dale also implicitly acknowledges that this oppressive quality is only one aspect and writing in a foreign language can also be a liberating experience in a sense that translation helps the writer surpass the potential of his or her mother tongue. Even more importantly, publishing in English enables migrants to be heard. A shrewd awareness of this probably accounts for the efforts of Polish migrant authors to reach out to the British and Irish readers by submitting their writing to local journals and publishing houses, investing money in self-publishing their work, participating in literary competitions and events and becoming engaged in all sorts of projects with local writers and translators. The Polish migrants do not seem discouraged by the fact that the book market in Britain and Ireland is highly competitive for non-native writers and, despite being the fifth largest in the world, shows very little interest in the translated literature from Poland as it has been shown by Alexandra Büchler and Giulia Trentacosti's report.

But, by a weird paradox, the situation of Polish writers in the UK and Ireland has slightly improved in recent years. The local publishers and broadcasters, who had been obsessed with writing that somehow related to the Middle East, turned their eye to Poland because of the Brexit campaign. As I have already mentioned in the article's introduction, one of the results was that A. M. Bakalar's *Woman of Your Dreams*

and Agnieszka Dale's *Fox Season* and *A Happy Nation*, three short stories that depict the life of the Polish diaspora in the UK were aired on BBC Radio 4 in 2015. As it happens, Poland was also a Market Focus country at the 2017 London book fair, which whipped up some more interest in Polish literature in Britain and Ireland. Books that were promoted on that occasion included those authored by Polish migrants, such as Wioletta Greg's *Swallowing Mercury* and A. M. Bakalar's *Children of Our Age*.

## Works Cited

- Alberge, Dalya. "British readers lost in translations as foreign literature sales boom," *The Guardian* (24 August 2014). Web. 14 February, 2017 <[www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/british-readers-translations-foreign-literature-sales-boom-stieg-larsson-jo-nesbo](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/british-readers-translations-foreign-literature-sales-boom-stieg-larsson-jo-nesbo)>
- Bakalar, A. M. *Madame Mephisto*. London: Stork Press, 2012.
- , *Children of Our Age*. London: Jantar Publishing, 2017.
- , "Whatever Makes You Sleep at Night." *Wasafiri* 28.3 (2013): 35-38.
- , Ed. *Litro Magazine # 126: Poland*. (2013). Web. 14 February 2017 <[www.litro.co.uk/product/litro-126-poland/](http://www.litro.co.uk/product/litro-126-poland/)>
- , *Woman of Your Dreams*. BBC Radio 4, 4 September 2015.
- , "A. M. Bakalar and writing in the second language." Stork Press YouTube Channel. (21 May 2012). Web. 14 February 2017 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhV9Puumo\\_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhV9Puumo_A),>
- Bakalar, A. M. and Agnieszka Dale. "Where's Your Accent From? Britain's White Others." Web. 14 January 2018 <<https://unbound.com/boundless/2017/12/12/wheres-your-accent-from-britains-white-others/>>
- , "Polish Special. Jantar Podcast." London: Jantar Publishing, October 2017. Web. 14 January 2018 <<https://soundcloud.com/user-345317472/polish-special>>
- Baumeister, Roy F. and Mark R. Leary "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin* 117.3 (1995): 497-529.
- Büchler Alexandra, Giulia Trentacosti. *Publishing Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990-2012. Statistical Report*. Wales: Literature Across Frontiers, 2015.
- Dalvai, Marion. *Politics of Cross-Cultural Reading: Tagore, Ben Jelloun and Fo in English*. Berno: Peter Lang, 2015.
- Dale, Agnieszka. *Fox Season*. London: BBC Radio 4, 11 September 2015.
- , *Happy Nation*. London: BBC Radio 4, 14 November 2016.
- , "A Very Secret Wish of Every Immigrant." Quoted in: Bakalar, A. M. and Agnieszka Dale. "Where's Your Accent From? Britain's White Others." Web. 14 January 2018 <<https://unbound.com/boundless/2017/12/12/wheres-your-accent-from-britains-white-others/>>
- Doloughan, Fiona J. *English as a Literature in Translation*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
- European Commission. *A study of the evolution of concentration in the Irish publishing*. Brussels, 1979. Web. 14 January 2018 <<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f1e65a7a-2257-45e9-9b7d-3e3743a05868/language-en>>
- Grzegorzewska, Wioletta. *Pamięć Smieny/Smena's Memory*. Trans. Marek Kazmierski. London: OFF\_Press, 2011.
- Greg, Wioletta. *Finite Formulae & Theories of Chance*. Trans. Marek Kazmierski. Lancashire: Arc Publications, 2014.
- , *Swallowing Mercury*. Trans. Eliza Marciniak. London: Transit Books, 2011.
- Grzegorzewska, Wioletta. "On the River Boży Stok." Trans. Anna Hyde. *The Guardian*, 8 December 2015. Web. 14 February 2017 <[www.theguardian.com/books/translation-tuesdays-by-asymptote-journal/2015/dec/08/translation-tuesday-on-the-river-bozy-stok-by-wioletta](http://www.theguardian.com/books/translation-tuesdays-by-asymptote-journal/2015/dec/08/translation-tuesday-on-the-river-bozy-stok-by-wioletta)> HYPERLINK "http://www.theguardian.com/books/translation-tuesdays-by-asymptote-journal/2015/dec/08/translation-tuesday-on-the-river-bozy-stok-by-wioletta-greg" journal/2015/dec/08/translation-tuesday-on-the-river-bozy-stok-by-wioletta-greg">
- Jarniewicz, Jerzy. Gościnność słowa. Szkice o przekładzie literackim. [The Hospitality of Words. Sketches about Literary Translation] Kraków: Znak, 2012.
- Jordan, Justine. "A new Irish literary boom: the post-crash stars of fiction." *The Guardian*, 17 October 2015. Web. 14 January 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/17/new-irish-literary-boom-post-crash-stars-fiction>>
- Kazmierski, Marek. "No Way Back Where." *From There to Here: 16 True Tales of Immigration to Britain*. Ed. Menaka Raman. London: Penguin Books, 2007: 179-198.
- Kazmierski, Marek. *Damn the Source*. London: OFF\_Press, 2013.
- Kolasiński, Przemek and Brian Earls. *Co mi dała Irlandia?*. Będzin: E-bookowo, 2012.
- , *What I Got from Ireland?*. Bloomington: Xlibris, 2012.
- Krasnowolski, Jan. *Afrykańska elektronika*. Kraków: Ha!art, 2013.
- , *African Electronics* (excerpt). Trans. Anna Hyde. *Wasafiri* online, (September 2014).
- Masłowska, Dorota. *White and Red*. Trans. Benjamin Paloff. London: Atlantic Books, 2005.
- Mielcarek, Tomasz. *Obecność/Presence*. Trans. David Malcolm. Łódź: Dom Literatury, 2014.

- Pennycook, Alistair "English as a Language Always in Translation." *European Journal of English Studies* 12.1 (2008): 33-47.
- Schirach, Ferdinand von. *The Collini Case*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.
- Sobieraj, Angelika. "Chris." Trans. Siobhán McNamara. *Yet to Be Told*. Ed. Ciara Doorley, Daniel Bolger, Clara Phelan. Dublin: Fighting Words, 2012: 223-283.
- Squires, Claire. "Novelistic Production and the Publishing Industry in Britain and Ireland." *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*. *Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture*. Ed. BW Shaffer. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004: 177-193.
- Tuwim, Julian. *Till the Words Draw Blood!/Słowem do krwi!*. Trans. David Malcolm i Agata Miksa. Łódź: Dom Literatury, 2013.
- Winstonsdad's Blog. "Madame Mephisto by A. M. Bakalar." (23 August 2012). Web. 14 February 2017 <<https://winstonsdad.wordpress.com/2012/08/23/madame-mephisto-by-a-m-bakalar/>>
- Wolf, Anna and Rory O'Sullivan. *The Passangers*. Dublin: Polish Theatre Ireland, 2015.
- Żuchowski, Daniel. *The New Dubliners*. Dublin: Literary Publishing, 2014.
- Ward, Rachel. "Madame Mephisto." *a discount ticket to everywhere*. (14 December 2012). Web. 14 February 2017 <<https://adiscounttickettoeverywhere.wordpress.com/2012/12/14/madame-mephisto/>>