

# explorations



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## Looking for Perfect Equivalence: Chosen Key-Words in the Series of Polish Translations of *Lord Jim*

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**Abstract.** The paper is to compare the strategies of translators used to express Conrad's key concepts in *Lord Jim* and it aims to assess whether retranslations of the novel into Polish, spanning over a century, have provided the Polish reader with an equal opportunity of being exposed to the stylistic consistency of Conrad's usage of chosen key-words, and to notice their importance while interpreting the meaning of the novel. The translations examined include the first translations of *Lord Jim* from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (by Emilia Węśławska and Anna Zagórska) and the latest ones from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (by Michał Kłobukowski and Michał Filipeczuk).

**Key words:** Joseph Conrad, Polish translations, *Lord Jim*, equivalence, key words in translation of literary works

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Key-words in Joseph Conrad's works are of fundamental significance in understanding the author's underlying philosophical concepts. They are of great importance both for the structure and poetics of the works, and consequently both the primary reader of the original text and the secondary reader of the translation should have an equal opportunity to decode the author's concepts. The translator's main task is to overcome the natural differences between languages and cultures and attempt to find as perfect equivalence as possible. Establishing the best equivalents for Conrad's key-words and using them consistently should be a part of a translator's strategy.

This paper compares the strategies of translators in presenting Conrad's key concepts and motifs throughout one of his best known novels *Lord Jim* with the use of key-words. Conrad's repetitive use of certain phrases, which were to convey chosen images pictures, thoughts or ideas to the reader and to amplify them, has sometimes been described by literary critics as bad style, caused by his non-native competence of the English language.

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For example, in his *Great Tradition*, F.R. Leavis writes about Conrad's perpetual use of "inscrutable", "unspeakable" and "inconceivable" in *Heart of Darkness*:

The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors; to magnifying a thrilled sense of the unspeakable potentialities of the human soul. The actual effect is not to magnify but rather to muffle. (Leavis 1950, 176)

However, Conrad knew what effect he wanted to achieve and this effect should not be lost on readers of translations of his novels. The key-words used by Conrad to structure *Lord Jim* and to show its main themes include the following: *inquiry*, *dream*, *imagination*, and their derivatives. The proper interpretation of the mentioned lexical items has a great bearing on an understanding of the text. In my paper I would like to examine whether the most recent translators have used the findings of the extremely rich field of Conradian studies and follow the suggestions of both literary and translatory criticism; or maybe the first translations are closer in expressing Conrad's literary style and recreating the impact that the text had on the English language reader.

## 2. CONRAD'S KEY-WORDS IN TRANSLATIONS

In his paper *Conrad w przekładach Anieli Zagórskiej*, Zdzisław Najder analyses Zagórska's translations of Conrad's works and mostly praises them. However, he also points out some shortcomings of her texts. One of his critical remarks concerns her inconsistency and imprecision in translating key-phrases or key-words of metaphorical or symbolical meaning which are used by Conrad in a very systematic and deliberate way. Najder gives an example of "darkness" – the main motif of *Heart of Darkness* - which is usually rendered as "mrok"[darkness] throughout the novella; not as "ciemność" [darkness], which Zagórska used in translating the title. Najder also mentions her lack of consistency in the translations of key-words in *Lord Jim* and *Victory* (cf. Najder 1975, 204). Najder's paper was written in 1975, when there were only two translations of *Lord Jim* into Polish: one from 1904 by Emilia Węśławska and another one delivered by Anna Zagórska in 1934. The latter translation was corrected to a certain extent by Najder himself in 1972. His alterations included phrases and vocabulary used in connection with moral and philosophical issues, specialist maritime vocabulary and the style of the dialogues. Forty years after that correction and almost one hundred years after the first translation, two new translations of *Lord Jim* by Michał Kłobukowski (2001) and Michał Filipczuk (2003) saw daylight.

As Najder points out, "a most important and up to now neglected element in this novel: imagination and dream, both 'typically Romantic concepts are opposed to each other" (Najder 1997, 87). Imagination can be dangerous and lead to destruction and fall, as in Słowacki's *Kordian* (cf. Najder 1997). Immersed in his imaginary world, Jim is not capable of action, either in school or on Patna. Stein's crucial words: "to follow the dream, and again to follow the dream - and so - -ewig – *usque ad finem*... (Conrad 2001, 138), on the other hand point to the realisation of dreams in reality, as in the case of Stein (cf. Najder 1997, 87). "Jim's psychological evolution" (Najder 97, 90) from a person

living in his imagination makes him follow a dream and pursue a path of heroism and honour, saving and helping the people of Patusan. However, being a typically romantic hero, he meets his death, sacrificing his life to honour and duty.

In *Lord Jim*, Conrad uses the noun “imagination” 16 times (+1 in plural) and “dream” 22 (+7 in plural). As mentioned before, “imagination” is presented as a force making Jim incapable of action, while “dream” is that positive impulse for implementing noble and heroic ideas. Thus, the distribution of these words differs throughout the novel. Only eight times does the “dream” appear in the first part of the novel, relating mostly to the Patna incident: the failure of Jim’s dream of glory, the Court of Inquiry and Jim’s escape from “the Intolerable”. In Chapter twenty, which is a kind of caesura between the two parts of the novel and in a way two parts of Jim’s life, Stein presents his diagnoses of Jim as a “romantic” and defines the nature of “dream” as a romantic concept. In this chapter, the “dream” appears nine times. In the remaining part of the novel, “dream” is used twelve times. The noun “imagination” has a more even distribution – appearing in the first part seven times and in the other eight times. However, in the first part almost all its uses refer directly to Jim and the crucial and negative role the “imagination” has in his life, leading him to his downfall. Drowning in his imaginary world, he thinks of glorious moments that await him in the future, not realising that these moments are right in front of him. Failing to realise it, he fails as a man and as an officer responsible for the lives of innocent people. In the second part “imagination” is used rather as a counterpoint to the concept of “dream”, or to stress the difference between Jim and Marlow, who claims to have no imagination at all, and only once does it refer to Jim directly (cf. Ch. 21).

Thus, Conrad’s use of the nouns “dream” and “imagination” is a vital part of the construction of the novel and an important stylistic element. Their use underlines Conrad’s understanding of the romantic concepts of “imagination” and “dream”, and in order to express Conrad’s philosophy correctly and keep his style it should be assumed that translators use Polish equivalents consistently. As it turns out, this assumption is not always true.

In the case of the word “dream” or “to dream” the situation is more complicated for the translator. *Dream* can mean “a series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary 2004), which in Polish translates into “sen” or “marzenie senne”, and it can also mean “a strongly desired goal or purpose” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary 2004), which can be translated as “marzenie” or “sen” as well. Thus, it seems much safer for the translator to choose *sen* as an equivalent to Conrad’s “dream” and use it consistently throughout the novel.

Only one translator seems to be consistent and uses “sen” in most fragments. Filipczuk employs it twenty-four times, including five in plural, and “marzenie” appears three times only. Kłobukowski applies “sen” twelve times and “marzenie” eight times. Other translators use “marzenie” and “sen” rather interchangeably: Węslawska uses “marzenie” seven times and “sen” seven. However, she omitted the word three times and some parts of the novel were just summarised, or not translated at all. Zagórska applies “sen” ten times and “marzenie” sixteen times. The renderings of the verb “to dream” are shown in Table 1:

	Emilia Węslawska	Aniela Zagórska	Michał Filipczuk	Michał Kłobukowski
to dream 9	sen/śnić 2 marzyć 5 przyjść na myśl 1 <i>omitted 1</i>	sen/śnić 3 marzyć 4 przejsć przez głowę 1	sen/śnić 4 marzyć 4 roić 1	sen/śnić 4 marzyć 3 przyjść na myśl 1 podejrzewać 1

Table 1. The renderings of the verb “to dream”

As can be seen in Table 1, the verb “to dream” is translated rather inconsistently by all the translators without contributing to the strengthening of the motif of *dream* so carefully presented in the original.

The noun “imagination” should not pose any difficulty for translators because of its clear meaning and its obvious Polish equivalents: “wyobraźnia”, or its rather dated and archaic equivalent “imaginacja”. Conrad uses “imagination” seventeen times and Węslawska translates it into “imaginacja” sixteen times, only once omitting it, which proves to be very consistent. Zagórska is also very consistent, using “wyobraźnia” sixteen times and “wyobrażenie” [image] once, which has a less abstract meaning, but is close enough to follow Conrad’s pattern in form. Filipczuk is equally consistent, applying “wyobraźnia” in all seventeen cases. In comparison to those three translations it may be surprising that, in Kłobukowski’s version of *Lord Jim*, “wyobraźnia” appears only twelve times (seventy per cent of occurrences) and the remaining five occurrences are rendered in various ways – once it is a pronoun “jej”, which is referring back to “imagination” used twice by Conrad in the same paragraph; twice it is the noun “fantazja” [fantasy], and twice he uses verbs instead of nouns – “przywidzieć się” [to see things] and “uroić sobie” [to get something into one’s head], which has a pejorative meaning in Polish. Although these can be regarded as proper translations of “imagination”, they do not follow Conrad’s consistency.

In Chapter Six, Marlow directly states why he is interested in Jim, why he comes to the inquiry, and what the whole novel seems to be really about: it is “the inquiry into the state of a man’s soul” (Conrad 2001, 36). The court inquiry becomes a metaphor for the whole process of the author’s/reader’s investigation into the true nature of Jim, of finding the real Jim, and of finding the real soul of man.

Thus, “inquiry” is one of the key-words used by Conrad repeatedly, which accentuates the preceding investigation into human nature. Conrad does not limit the presentation of the *inquiry* metaphor to the use of the noun alone, but he also uses the verb “to inquire”, which clearly reinforces the motif of the examination of human nature. It could certainly be argued that “to inquire” is used for stylistic reasons so as not to repeat the verb “to ask” when introducing reported questions. However, it seems quite clear that Conrad uses it consciously and in keeping with his concept of repeating key-phrases, as he uses “to inquire” only four times in the context where “to ask” could be used, while “to ask” is used thirty-one times. Thus, the reason for the use of “to inquire” is obviously to emphasise the motif of investigation.

	Emilia Węslawska	Aniela Zagórska	Michał Filipczuk	Michał Kłobukowski
inquiry x 23	śledztwo x 8 badanie x 6 przesłuchanie x 1 sąd x 1 rozprawa sądowa x 2 roboty x 1 sędziowie x 1 poszukiwania x 1 pytać x 1	śledztwo x 14 dochodzenie x 1 sprawa x 3 badanie x 1 posiedzenie x 1 sąd x 1 zatrzaszczyć x 1	śledztwo x 13 przesłuchanie x 5 sprawa w sądzie x 1 sąd x 2 pytać x 1 zbadać x 1	dochodzenie x 10 przesłuchanie x 6 rozprawa x 1 sąd x 1 rozpatrzeć x 1 proces x 1 komisja śledcza x 1 pytać x 1 omission x 1
to inquire x 7	zbadać x 1 (roz)pytać x 3 badawczy x 1 omission x 2	wglądać x 1 sprawdzać x 1 (wy/do)pytać x 5	wnikać x 1 sprawdzić 1 przerwać x 1 dociekać x 1 (wy)pytać 3	dociekać x 1 (do)pytać x 5 badawcze x 1

Table 2. The renderings of the noun “inquiry” and the verb “to inquire”

The noun “inquire” is used twenty-three times and the analogous verb in different forms seven times in the whole novel. However, almost all of them appear in the first part of *Lord Jim*, which seems natural as the first part revolves round the court inquiry into the Patna accident. The inquiry will ruin Jim’s career and reputation, and as a result it will be the reason for his incessant escape from white civilisation. Such a frequent use of the lexical item “inquiry” highlights the importance of the concept of inquiry and makes it almost obsessively omnipresent. Metaphorically, it draws the reader’s attention to the real reason for Marlow’s interest in Jim – Marlow wants to see inside Jim’s soul, and he wants to inquire into man’s soul. In twenty-two cases the noun “inquiry” refers directly to that court inquiry, and the reader would assume that once the translator decides on the equivalent he or she wants to use, they would keep it consistently throughout the novel. However, as clearly transpires from Table 2, none of the translators appreciated the importance of keeping one term in all the cases, and different equivalents change and deform the translation through quantitative impoverishment (cf. Berman 2000). Conrad’s insistence on using the term “inquiry” with such a considerable frequency in the first part and only twice in the second part points to the importance of the concept of inquiry, both in the physical and metaphorical sense, in understanding the novel. In the second part, the noun “inquiry” is used only once in reference to the court inquiry and the second use “I knew very well he was of those about whom there is no inquiry” (Conrad 2001, 144) paradoxically shows no interest in Jim’s fate on the part of the civilised world and it emphasises the destructive inquiry and public interest which ruined Jim’s life and eventually led to his death.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, we can clearly see that subsequent translations – in this case, translations which are almost a century apart – do not guarantee a presentation of the text that would be closer to the original. The assumption that “later translations take a critical stance to the earlier translations and seek to improve of them” (Chesterman 2000, 25) in

the case of contemporary Polish translators of Conrad's works does not seem to be valid. In some aspects, recent translations seem even further away from Conrad's primary design than the ones done almost right after the original novel was written.

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