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On how the English concept of *fate* retells Andrzej Stasiuk’s tale about “Travels in the Other Europe”

*Jak angielskie słowo *fate* opowiada Andrzeja Stasiuka historię „Podróży po innej Europie”*

**Abstract:**

The paper intends to draw a clear line between the meaning of the Polish concept of *los* and the English meaning of *fate*. Suitable explications of the words are provided within the framework of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and they constitute the basis for all the ensuing investigations concerning the problem. The case study is based on Andrzej Stasiuk’s book, *Jadąc do Babadag*, and its English translation by Michael Kandel.

**Key words:** Translation Studies, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, Andrzej Stasiuk, the Polish concept of *los*, the English concept of *fate*.

1. **Natural Semantic Metalanguage**

Natural Semantic Metalanguage is a linguistic theory whose foundation is built on strictly empirical investigations of diverse linguistic realities, oftentimes as distinct as the languages of the Australian aborigines. Andrzej Bogusławski, almost always quoted by Wierzbicka to have sparked her more serious engagement in trying to establish and develop the controversial theory of primes (otherwise referred to as universals), was keen to pinpoint that “its [the NSM theory’s] novelty lay in [a] modified theoretical bias towards empiricism, in the sense of [a] newly developed emphasis, not so much on logical or discourse considerations, as on collecting and interpreting ever new materials from various languages, especially those hitherto less explored” (Bogusławski 2011, 10). Essentially, NSM assumes that all human beings are capable of communicating with one another, regardless of the linguistic realities they have been born into, because they are naturally equipped with the ability to recognise complex meanings after
they have been translated into a simple, culturally-independent language. Throughout her extensive body of work, Wierzbicka is seen to be crucially recapitulating the following rudimentary tenets:

This means that just as we can have a rudimentary universal lexicon of indefinable concepts, we can also have a rudimentary universal grammar of such concepts. And if we have a minilexicon and a minigrmram, then we can have a minilanguage – a minilanguage carved out of natural languages that can be used for the description of and comparison of languages, in their lexicon and grammar, and also in their discourse practices: in short, a “natural semantic metalanguage” (NSM).

(Wierzbicka 2006, 17)

This minilanguage is the key which allows access to all the natural languages of the world, although it itself is an example of a non-natural language (hence the prefix ‘meta’ in the name). As Wierzbicka was also keen to notice, “the idea that fundamental human concepts (semantic primes) are universal is closely linked with the notion that these concepts are innate” (1996, 16) and this is not a new invention. Picked up first by Gottfried Leibniz, who was the first philosopher seriously considering the existence of what he called the ‘alphabet of human thought’, the German scholar posited that all complex ideas have to necessarily be composed of a finite set of simple notions without which human beings would not be able to maintain communication even within the strata of only one language. Leibniz’s philosophy has had a considerable bearing on a list of philosophers and linguists who found in it a tangible opportunity to study the meaning of words with the application of a more rigid methodology that seemed more reliable than ad hoc definitions with circularity being the order of the day. It is no coincidence then that Leibniz has found his way into Wierzbicka’s writings: “as Leibniz argued eloquently three centuries ago, not everything can be explained. At some point, all explanations must come to an end, for a regressus ad infinitum explains nothing” (2006, 17). An even more conclusive observation which effectively outlines the nature of Natural Semantic Metalanguage comes from Wierzbicka’s 1997 book, Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words, where the following passage compliments the above remarks: “being a firm believer in the ‘psychic unity of humankind’ (founded on the universal ‘alphabet of human thought’), Leibniz recommended a comparative study of different languages of the world as a way to discover the ‘inner essence of man’ and, in particular, the universal basis of human cognition” (1997, 22). Hence, it is more than forty
years during which NSM and the scholars working within the NSM framework have been busy developing a fully comprehensive linguistic theory which is seen to be unconditionally based on empirical research, rather than speculative assumptions and intuitive judgements.

The final, yet still formally undeveloped idea for studying meaning came from the already-mentioned eminent Polish linguist, Professor Andrzej Bogusławski, whom Wierzbicka credits as the pivotal figure in her own linguistic pursuits: “the ‘golden dream’ of the seventeenth-century thinkers, which couldn’t be realized within the framework of philosophy and which was therefore generally abandoned as a utopia, could be realized, Bogusławski maintained, if it was approached from a linguistic rather than from a purely philosophical point of view” (Wierzbicka 1996, 13). However, although the underlying concept behind NSM is to, first, establish (empirically) a list of primes/universals and, second, apply them to define all the non-primes/non-universals, the inherent philosophy of NSM is to combine that which is universal with that which is relative. In essence then, what we are asked to accept is the logic of linguistic relativism (in the vein of Sapir and Lee Whorf, to name the two most recognisable names) in which all the complex words (relativity) can be defined not only approximately, but with the highest degree of precision, once linguistic universalism is also endorsed (NSM). This is what Wierzbicka had to say about this particular aspect of Natural Semantic Metalanguage:

I want to stress, therefore, that although many scholars may question this undertaking from a position of relativism or narrow empiricism, my own strictures have a totally different basis. I am in sympathy with the attempts to capture what is fundamental, universal, and presumably innate. I am also in sympathy with attempts to discover discrete categories behind the apparent ‘fuzziness’ of human cognition.

(Wierzbicka 1992, 120)

As of today, NSM contains a list of empirically verified 65 universals (‘indefinables’) which are extensively used to define more complex concepts (‘definables’), including that of Polish los as well as the English concept of fate. Below is a full list of NSM universal concepts which are presented in English:

1 Wierzbicka’s first book-length publication came out as early as 1972, under the title of Semantic Primitives. The book introduces the core methodology behind NSM (in a rather tentative manner) and proposes the initial set of semantic universals (she proposed 14 semantic universals at that time).
2 The two main contributors to the NSM theory are Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard.
Substantives: I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY
Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE
Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW
Evaluators: GOOD, BAD
Mental predicates: KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech: SAY, WORDS, TRUE

Actions, events, movement, contact: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH

Location, existence, specification: BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
Life and death: LIVE, DIE
Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Time: WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space: WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Intensifier, augmentor: VERY, MORE
Relational substantives: KIND, PART
Similarity: LIKE~AS~WAY
Descriptors: BIG, SMALL
Possession: BELONG TO~BE (SOMEONE’S).

(Wierzbicka 2013, 3)

The ensuing sections of the study intend to follow closely the footsteps of Anna Wierzbicka, thus they contain attempts to test the outcomes of the NSM research with respect to the concepts in question as they are distributed in Polish and translated into English in the respective editions of Andrzej Stasiuk’s Nike Award winning book.

2. NSM explications of the Polish concept of los and the English concept of fate in a comparative study

To begin with a technical note, NSM minilanguage is fundamentally used to offer definitions of more complex concepts, the non-primes, which Wierzbicka prefers to call explications. Below are two explications, first, of the Polish concept of los and, second, of the English concept of fate:

los
(a) different things happen to different people
(b) sometimes good things, sometimes bad things
(c) more good things happen to some people than to others
more bad things happen to some people than to others
not because someone wants it
a person cannot think: I know what things will happen to me
one cannot know this.
(Wierzbicka 1992, 76)

A cursory glance at the explications clearly indicates that
the two concepts are very distinct, contrary to the popular belief
which suggests their apparent equivalence if we were to take what
the dictionaries say at face value. On the other hand, however,
the word *fate* is still frequently used to substitute the word *los* in
translation practice which hints that there must exist possible
overlapping components of meaning that the two concepts possess.
Andrzej Stasiuk’s collection of memoirs and evocative travel stories
published in 2004 provides ample examples of the classic contexts
which the Polish concept of *los* seems most comfortable with. More
interestingly, however, it showcases some conspicuous problems
which Michael Kandel, the American translator of *Jadąc do Babadag*,
had to face especially in the passages containing references to what
the collective Polish consciousness knows as *los*.

Below is one clear illustration of how the Polish concept of *los*
and the English concept of *fate* can be substituted without an underlying
shift in meaning:

To wszystko miało się odbyć za Sygietem Marmaroskim i pewnie się
odbywało. Lecz dowiedziałem się o tym dwa lata później z Okręgu Sinistra
Adama Bodora i prześladuje mnie to do tej pory. Prześladuje i przesłania
plaską przestrzeń mapy. Znów widzialne blaknie wobec opowiedzanego.
Blaknie, lecz nie znika zupełnie. Traci tylko wyrazistość, ubywa mu niez
nośnej oczywistości. To jest specjalność krajów pomocniczych, narodów
drugiego rzutu i ludów rezerwowych. To jest ta migotliwość, ta zdwojona,
potrojona fikcja, krzywe zwierciadło, magiczna latarnia, fatamorgana, fanta-
styka i fantasmagoria, która wślizguje się litościwie między to, jak jest, a to,
jak być powinno. To jest ta autoironia, która pozwala igrać z własnym
*losem*, przedrzeźniać go, papugować, zmieniać upadek w heroikomiczną
legendę, a zmyślenie przeinaczać w coś na kształt zbawienia.
(Stasiuk 2008, 20, emphasis added)

The English version proposes the following interpretation:
All this supposedly took place near Sighetu Marmăței, but I learned about it only two years later, in Ádám Bodor’s Sinistra District, and the story has pursued me since. Pursued me and replaced the flat space on the map. Once again, the visible pales before the narrated. Pales but does not disappear. It only loses its force, its intolerable obviousness. This is a special quality of auxiliary countries, of second-order, second-tier peoples: the ephemeral tale in different versions, the distorted mirror, magic lantern, mirage, phantom that mercifully sneaks in between what is and what ought to be. The self-irony that allows you to play with your personal fate, to mock it, parrot it, turning a defeat into heroic-comic legend and a lie into something that has the shape of salvation.

(Stasiuk 2012, 12, emphasis added)

If we make a recourse to the explications above, we will be able to acknowledge an apparent unity of meaning between component (b) in the case of los and component (a) with regards to fate:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{los} & \quad (b) \text{ sometimes good things, sometimes bad things} \\
\text{fate} & \quad (a) \text{ different things happen in the world that are bad for people}
\end{align*}
\]

In both cases we have an explicit reference to failure as some loss is invariably written into the meaning of both concepts. It is true, however, that in the case of los the situation also invites positive experiences and Polish folk psychology\(^3\) does encourage this type of interpretation which is completely absent with respect to the English concept. It does not change the fact that los and fate share a common context of ‘bad things’ happening to people. In the passage above, Stasiuk indeed connects los with a defeat which leaves one with limited options to choose from. Although his advice is to mock it, occasionally parrot it, the ubiquity of failure prevails and the bitter taste of defeat cannot be entirely shaken.

As Jadąc do Babadag contains more than a few examples of a similar distribution of the concepts in question, due to space considerations, I will quote only one more extract which complements this particular significance of los and fate:

\(^3\) Wierzbicka is noted to have a special preference for calling all non-primes ‘folk concepts’, alternatively described also as reflections of ‘folk psychology/philosophy’ to indicate that all complex concepts represent culture-specific values, non-existent in the majority of world languages. It is telling in many ways that the title of her latest book is *Imprisoned in English. The Hazards of English as a Default Language*. 
I sip a black Albanian Fernet and look down on the hometown of Enver Hoxha. In the early afternoon the streets empty, and the crowd before the consulate disappears. The sun, directly overhead, sweeps the shadows from the narrowest alleys. It becomes so still, it's as if everyone has left, abandoning the town to its fate, to the predation of time and the heat. From the mountains, wolves will come down and breed with the dogs; the vineyards will pry apart the stone walls; the hundred-year-old Mercedes will pine for their chauffeurs and die; the Turkish fortress on the hill will fall into itself; the wind will fill the rooms of the Sopoti Hotel with sand; rust will eat into the Muslim loudspeakers; the raki will burn through the screw tops of the bottles in the Festivali Bar; the discarded packs of hundred-lek notes with Fanem Noli on them will all turn into oxygen; and finally the gray carapace of the mountains will cover everything.

The los/fate that awaits the town suggests decay and deterioration which has a transparent reference to ‘bad things’ happening to people. It is curious, to add a side note, that Stasiuk is able to interpret these ‘bad’ experiences as a source of profound wisdom centred on the idea of ‘waiting’ until the natural course of events is fulfilled. The book overflows with numerous scenes where characters are waiting humbly for something to happen and are, most importantly, expectant that los will somehow change their lives, either for the good or for the bad (which the English concept of fate can reflect without change in meaning).

As might be expected, however, the discussed component of los ((b) sometimes good things, sometimes bad things) contains a meaning which is hardly consistent with the overall denotation of the concept of fate. Below is an example that calls for such an interpretation:
Takie podejrzenia nawiedzają mnie późnym wieczorem. Wieje z północnego zachodu i białe półokrągłe ostrza zasp kładą się w poprzek szosy wiodącej do Koniecznej. Powinniem wymyślić jakąś zgrabną historię, która tam właśnie miałaby swój początek i koniec, jakiś czwany kit, który zaspokaja wyobraźnię, łagodzi lęk i oszukuje głód. Powinniem w ciemnościach życia wypatrzyć jakiś pojedynczy ślad, który w cudowny sposób zamieni się w los, w coś, co można naśladować, coś, czym można się pocieszać. Nic z tego nie wychodzi. Świat jest teraźniejszością i ma gdzieś opowieść. Gdy próbuję sobie coś przypomnieć, przypomina mi się wszystko inne.

(Stasiuk 2008, 227, emphasis added)

Here we have an explicit illustration of that second meaning of los where “the element of a chance game where one is likely to lose but where one can always hope to win, and where one may act freely, putting all one’s money on one card” (Wierzbicka 1992, 102) constitutes an underlying meaning of the Polish concept. Stasiuk, although the feeling of bitterness and failure is still more than apparent, also identifies los as a (rather unlikely) promise for a better tomorrow. It would be rather eccentric to talk about fate which is wonderful, or splendid, or as something one eagerly awaits to take hold of one’s life. Wierzbicka indicated that “people’s losy (plural) are seen as changeable and unpredictable, but there is no evidence that the concept los includes the ‘adversative’ component ‘one can think: more bad things will happen to me than good things’ ” (ibid., 76). The English translation of the passage appears to be very competent in this particular context:

Such thoughts afflict me in the evening. The wind blows from the northwest, and the white semicircular edges of snowdrifts lie across the road leading to Konieczna. I should invent a graceful story that begins and ends there, provide a first-aid kit that cleverly soothes the mind, alleviates anxiety, and stills hunger. In the darkneses of life I should come up with one piece of evidence that miraculously points the way to what can be followed, what consoles. But no, not a prayer: the world is here and now and doesn’t give a flying fuck about stories. When I attempt to recall one thing, others surface.

(Stasiuk 2012, 180, emphasis added)

Seen from this perspective, apart from the possible positive outcomes which the meaning of los reflects, yet another crucial sense seems to be inherent in the Polish concept. Wierzbicka pointed out that “components (b), (c), and (d) ... show that good and bad things are distributed among people unevenly” (1992, 77) and that the Polish folk philosophy suggests that los “evokes the image of a great lottery, where different people draw different tickets” (ibid., 75). To further
substantiate this distinct ‘double’ but related meaning of the concept, the Polish scholar went on to comment accordingly: “the Polish word for a lottery ticket is also los, and although we have to treat ‘los-fate’ and ‘los-lottery ticket’ as two distinct meanings of the word los, these two meanings are clearly related, not only in the etymological but also in the semantic sense” (ibid.). Below are the four components of the explication of los which point to that interpretation of the Polish concept:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{los} & \\
\text{a) different things happen to different people} & \\
\text{b) sometimes good things, sometimes bad things} & \\
\text{c) more good things happen to some people than to others} & \\
\text{d) more bad things happen to some people than to others} &
\end{align*}
\]

No similar content is present in the case of the English concept of fate which calls for extra caution when translating the typically ‘Polish’ context. Below is one such example:

Trzymam te wszystkie zdarzenia w tekturowym pudełku po butach. Czasami wyciągam jedno albo drugie, tak jak papuga wyciąga los na loterii: Valabil-2 Calatorii — wąski pasek papieru w kolorach zielonym, czerwonym i pomarańczowym — bilet tramwajowy dwukrotnego kasowania z Sybina do Rășinari. Tramwaj kursuje z miasta do wsi i z powrotem. Na moich najdokładniejszych mapach nie widać, że jest tam jakaś linia tramwajowa, ale jechałem nią przynajmniej dwa razy, a wzdłuż niej ze cztery. Od tego świstka można by zacząć parę niezwykłych opowieści: o sybińskiej bezsenności Emila Ciorana, o palhiniskim szaleństwie Constantina Noiki, który w letnie miesiące w Gura Rîului próbował ułożyć ontologię miorytyczną... Wszyscy trzej musieli jeździć tym tramwajem pamiętając austro-węgierskie czasy. Tak właśnie działa pudełko po butach i mój umysł jak papuga wyciągająca losy na loterii. Tak działa blaszana puszka po wódce absolut, laterna magica zbiegów okoliczności, przypadków i przypędów składających się w opowieść, która toczy się we wszystkie strony i nie może potoczyć się inaczej, ponieważ dotyczy pamięci i przestrzeni, a one przecież zaczynają się w dowolnym momencie i nigdy nie kończą.

(Stasiuk 2008, 236, emphasis added)

It would not make sense to render all the above occurrences of los as fate as the use of the English concept does not conform to contexts of this type. The English version of the book takes the following shape:

I keep all these events in a shoebox. Sometimes I take out one or another, like a parrot plucking a slip in a lottery drawing. Valabil-2 Calatoria, a thin strip in green, red, and orange, and a tram ticket, punched twice,
from Sibiu to Răinari. The tram shuttles between the city and the village. Even my most detailed maps don’t show its route, yet I took it at least twice and drove along its tracks four times. From this scrap of paper you could segue to a few good stories: about Emil Cioran’s insomnia in Sibiu; about the Păltiniș madness of Constantin Noica, who wanted to breed Romanian geniuses; or Lucian Blaga, who in the summer months in Gura Râului attempted to establish a Mioritic ontology ... All three men had to take this tram that harks back to the Austro-Hungarian time. The shoebox works exactly that way, my brain like the parrot plucking slips in a lottery. The metal canister for Absolut vodka works that way, too, a magic lantern of coincidence, accident, and adventure making a story that goes in all directions and cannot go otherwise, because it involves memory and space, both of which can commence at any point, both of which never end. (Stasiuk 2012, 187, emphasis added)

One important aspect of the meaning of los is hinted at, and in fact already mentioned in passing, by the plural form of the Polish word. The following example shows it succinctly:

Biorę to wszystko w garść, przesypuję przez palce i czuję, jak wymyka mi się przestrzeń, czas, historia społeczna i gospodarcza razem z ludzkimi losami, czuję jak Karpaty, Wyżyna Czesko-Morawska, Wielka Nizina Węgierska, Nizina Rumuńska, Transylwania i kawałek Bałkanów zamieniają się w cichy brzęk. (Stasiuk 2008, 230, emphasis added)

The concept of los seems more likely to be used in the plural form (both this passage and the second example from the previous passage) which implies that it is all the people who are subjected to the unpredictable ‘twists of fate’. A similar impression in the case of the English fate is highly improbable and Wierzbicka appears to have corroborated these conclusions, stating that “just as in English one can speak much more readily of a person’s fortunes (in the plural) than of his or her fates, in Polish one can speak of a person’s losy (plural), in particular, dalsze losy (subsequent ‘fates’, that is, all the things that happened to a person ‘later’, all the subsequent turns in the course of his or her life)” (1992, 77). Again, this has been recognised by the translator who opted to choose what follows:

I let the coins dribble from my fist and feel how time and space go by, society, economy, human lives, how the Carpathians, the Czech-Moravian Heights, the Great Hungarian Plain, the Romanian Lowlands, Transylvania, and a part of the Balkans all convert into a soft clink. (Stasiuk 2012, 183, emphasis added)
Although the expression ‘human lives’ introduces a different set of connotations, devoid of a specific reference to unpredictability attached to the Polish concept of *los*, it seems the best option to at least approximate the original meaning.

A similar context of plurality of *losy* can be identified in the following passage:

Na zdjęciach z Voskopojë nie ma żywej duszy, tylko dwa osły pasące się wśród ostów i kamieni. Wiem, że powinien być na nich kierowca Jani, popijający na przemian brandy i piwo, i Greczynka, właścicielka knajpy, i jej milczący mąż, i nawalony jak stodoła przyjaciel Janiego o słowiańskich rysach, i niedorozwinięty chłopak, którego wzięliśmy po drodze, ale przecież wtedy opowieść utknęła by w miejscu na wieczność i już nigdy nie wywulkanęby się z *plątaniny ich losów*.

(Stasiuk 2008, 288, emphasis added)

The English translation reads as follows:

In the pictures from Voskopojë there is not a soul, only two donkeys nibbling among thistles and stones. I know that their driver, Jani, ought to be with them, drinking brandy and beer in turn, and Greczynka, the owner of the pub, and her silent husband, and Jani's friend, as broad as a barn and with a Slavic face, and the retarded kid we picked up on the road, but then the account would bog down and I would never extricate myself from the confusion of their lives.

(Stasiuk 2012, 228, emphasis added)

Again, acknowledging the improbability of the plural form of *fate*, the translator decided to adopt a smooth and typically English expression, ‘confusion of their lives’ which aptly summarises the original intentions.

As an end-note comment on the relationship between the Polish concept of *los* and the English concept of *fate*, it is essential to mention that the omnipresence of a ‘lottery aspect’ in the meaning of *los* is what makes it impossible to be applied in contexts reflected by the emphasised components of *fate* in the explication below:

*fate*

(a) different things happen in the world that are bad for people

(b) these things happen because some other things happen

(c) if those other things happen, these things cannot not happen.

Components (b) and (c) indicate inevitability of something that will occur sooner or later. However, it has to be noted that the ‘thing’ in question stems from a logical chain of events that precedes the very ‘thing’. Although Wierzbicka suggested that *fate* is
a deterministic concept, “it refers to things which ‘happen’ and it presents them as inevitable, irreversible, uncontrollable, and determined by earlier causes” (1992, 92). She also stressed that “fate, as it is used in modern English, doesn’t suggest any impenetrable mystery behind the events, and if it has residual otherworldly connotations they are relatively slight” (ibid.). If we take the trouble to examine the two following contexts from Stasiuk’s book, we will be able to recognise this specifically English connotation of the concept of fate:

It is very interesting and highly illuminative to investigate what is going on in the English translation of the same passage:

The English context suggests a chain of events ruled, somewhat gruesomely, by the omnipresence of ‘sadness’. The original version speaks of przeznaczenie which seems to connote a similar idea that brings to mind a list of causes which leads to a specific result. The impression implied by both extracts corresponds to the typically English understanding of the concept of fate, although, the Polish concept of przeznaczenie rings a familiar bell of religious undertones, again unseen in the case of the English expression. The logic behind reasoning that the English concept of fate is uncomfortable with mystical and strongly anthropocentric undertones seems to lie in
English history: “it breathes the atmosphere of English empiricism, and skepticism, the atmosphere of Hobbes, Hume, and Locke, and it feels thoroughly at home in scientific discourse” (Wierzbicka 1992, 93) which suggest a significantly more ‘down-to-earth’ perspective rather than a continuous uncertainty inherently attached to the Polish concept of los.

3. Concluding remarks

These few, rather sketchy observations do not exhaust the subject. This paper is intended to draw attention to some of the most visible differences between the concepts that are frequently confused. Andrzej Stasiuk’s collection of memoirs from his travels around Europe provides a wealth of examples that illustrate the underlying differences between the Polish concept of los and the English concept fate. It goes without saying that careful attention is required when a Polish-English translator is confronted with the issues discussed.

References: