

**Philip Earl Steele**

## **THE CASE OF SELF-REFERENTIALITY IN TRANSLATION**

**Lecture delivered to the 17<sup>th</sup> TEPIŚ Workshop  
September 25, 2004**

*The author - a historian and classical philologist from the state of Idaho - was a lecturer at the Institute of Applied Linguistics, Warsaw University, for 11 years. Since 1994 he has been an editor of Polska w Europie, a quarterly journal devoted to Poland's foreign policy. In 2000-2001 he was the senior language editor of the philosophy monthly Dialogue and Universalism. Since 1997 he has closely worked with the publishing house of the National Library as an editor and translator. In 2004 the National Library published two book-albums in his translation, namely, The Illuminations of the Potocki Psalter and A Journey to Arabia. In recent years his own papers and articles have been published in: Archeologia Żywa, Przegląd Powszechny, Znak, Gość Niedzielny, Wieg, Crisis (USA), Międzynarodowy Przegląd Polityczny and Lingua Legis. His book entitled Nawrócenie i chrzest Mieszka I [The Conversion and Baptism of Mieszko I] will be published by Fronda in the upcoming months. He is the translator of The Power of Globalization, the expanded version of professor Jadwiga Staniszkis' newest book.*

It's both a pleasure and an honor to be here - I'd like to thank *Pani Prezes* and *Pani Zofia* for the opportunity to speak to you all. Do please know that I wish to leave time for a comment and response period following my remarks, so - I ask you to jot down whatever questions and remarks you'd like to air as I go along. So as not to forget.

Last year when I met with many of you I concluded my lecture with an example of how the translator oftentimes must consciously work to uphold a Polish perspective in materials being translated into foreign languages. The case I gave was that of Polish terminology that conflicts with terminology found in Russian historiography, which may well be said to reign in English-language materials. The particular instances I cited were those of such pearls as "the Lithuanian-Russian state", in reference to the 13th and 14th century Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and "Russian Kiev", in reference to the 10th and 11th century state centered on Kiev. Again, the point here revolves around the Polish distinction (one that in my view is entirely correct) between "Ruś" and "Rosja" - and the need to uphold that distinction in translation over and against the reigning conventions that would stipulate use of the adjective "Russian" and not "Ruthenian".

Today I'd like to continue with that point, believing as I do in the purpose of promoting a Polish perspective in translation, and - at the risk of sounding grandiose - believing as I do in the purpose of maintaining the systemhood (systemowość) of things Polish in the world outside.

As you will soon note, I shall be treating "translation" altogether broadly - even as "explanation", "conveyance". But I will also be careful to focus on "translation" as it is more properly understood.

In a moment I'll present a theory I'm convinced is quite helpful in grasping a wide-ranging set of problems reflecting threats to the systemhood of things Polish. But first, let me give a telltale example - one I hope will cue us to the issue I mean to deal with today.

Last spring Jacek Kaczmarski<sup>1</sup> passed away. An untimely death. I know I was saddened - much of the Polish I first learned at the Polonicum in the early 1990s was from various songs of his that our teachers had us learn. My point, though, is that in the very next sentence after Jolanta Pieńkowska<sup>2</sup> told us on *Wiadomości* that he had died, she added, "To był nasz Bob Dylan"<sup>3</sup>.

I'm sure the absurdity of that statement is at once clear to many of us. But let me nonetheless stress what was happening here. *Otóż* (a word I so miss in English<sup>4</sup>) *otóż* here we have Poles - in Polish - explaining to other Poles who a certain Pole was. And doing so in reference to an American, in terms of an American narrative. I call this bizarre - and bizarre despite the fact that it's altogether typical.

With cases like this in mind, I would now like to introduce the concept of "self-referentiality". "Self-referentiality" is a concept that has enjoyed a thriving career in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century German sociology. It's primarily associated with the work of Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) and "systems theory". In Polish I've seen it translated as "zdolność rozpoznawanie siebie", "samoreferencjalność" and "orientacja na siebie". I'm not quite convinced as to the fittingness of any of those terms. Myself, I would prefer "ksobność", a term used especially in Polish psychiatry, swiftly "correcting" the negative connotation of that term with "zdrowa" - "zdrowa ksobność"<sup>5</sup>. But I'll let you Poles be the judge, and will hereafter stick with "self-referentiality".

In fact, I may have the cart before the horse. Let's grapple with the concept on its own terms.

"Self-referentiality", in Luhmann's treatment, is one of three key features allowing us to speak of systemhood. These are: 1) autopoiesis (or self-production), 2) self-referentiality (which directly pertains to a system's relation with its "outside" environment), and 3) the capability of reproduction. Quite obviously, these matters have much in common with biological concepts - and that in fact is one of the sub-points to be made here, i.e., that of contemporary science and academia's marked fluidity in the application of concepts - in this case, from biology to sociology and, as is my own aim, to translation studies writ large. There is nothing exotic in this. Indeed, Habermas<sup>6</sup> not disparagingly labeled Luhmann's sociological systems theory "metabiology". But rather than defend the application of "system" so conceived to linguistics, I would simply point out the concept's significant consonance with our own notion of "discourse community".

Thus, as Luhmann would have it, any system to be a system, be it biological or social or linguistic, must maintain these three salient features. To focus just on that of self-referentiality, such a system must evince the capacity to distinguish self from non-self (as in immunology and in reproduction from the cellular to the species level). To clarify that, Luhmann conceived society as being something more than the sum of its parts. He held that society is more pertinently defined in terms of its relation to its surrounding environment, to what is outside itself. When we conceive a system from that vantage point, we more readily understand that the lack of self-referentiality threatens the continued existence of a system as such. At the very least, such failure threatens a system's absorption by its surroundings.

I first encountered the concept of self-referentiality in the work of professor Staniszkis. Let me briefly review how she applies this theory in her analysis of the postcommunist world's plight in the face of globalization and European integration.

Staniszkis argues in *Władza globalizacji* (2003) that Poland and the other postcommunist countries now in the European Union - but Poland in particular, as the longtime "star pupil" in implementing "Western reforms" - have failed in maintaining self-referentiality. She states that, in the course of the transformation begun some 15 years ago, Poland has not upheld its own "logic", as she writes, its own "rationality". On the contrary - Poland has throughout adopted the "logic" of markets having a completely different size and scale than Poland's. Likewise, Poland has adopted political institutions modeled on those of states having a fundamentally different

structure and developmental level than Poland's. These market solutions and political institutions, Staniszkis writes, have not suited Polish realities and have been seized upon without regard to time, to sequence, and have therefore been malapropos. The result, she goes on, is that the reforms as implemented have undermined postcommunism's systemhood, leaving it propped up on the prosthetics of foreign capital and redistribution - not production - as circulated by the new political class or "*neo-nomenklatura*"<sup>7</sup>. Again, this obstruction of proper capitalist and democratic development has occurred, according to Staniszkis, for the reason that Poland surrendered its own perspective in favor of that of the global market, of an integrated Europe - in a word, that Poland renounced its own self-referentiality. Parenthetically, I can only suspect that self-referentiality occupies a prominent place in negotiation theory - though it likely goes by a different name.

That said, I hasten to add that professor Staniszkis is by all means in favor of capitalism, privatization, democratization, etc., etc. Her point, rather, is that countries such as Poland should have pursued - and still must pursue those ends in accord with their own developmental level and their own interests. Resorting to a little "*łopatologia*"<sup>8</sup>, something she wouldn't at all approve of, it's somewhat like jerking a child out of preschool and placing them in high school. For although that child is indeed upon a trajectory leading to high school, there are utterly necessary intermediary stages, ones which cannot be skipped without direly disrupting the child's development. But as I say - "*łopatologia*".

Much more has been said about these matters in terms of the strained and weakened identity resulting from the very nature of the relationship center-periphery. That the metanarrative of the center *ipso facto* absorbs or, better, devours and digests, those of the periphery. And so let's return to Bob Dylan. This is clearly a case that can be described as that of the periphery (more precisely, "semi-periphery") explaining to itself an aspect of its own "peripheral" self in terms of the semiotics of the center - and thus having lost sense of its own identity. However, what I think may well be most important here is that talk of relations along the axis center-periphery carries a distinct undertone of inevitability. And the sense of inevitability leads straight into resignation. I'm inclined to believe that that sense is mistaken - and that conscious application of self-referentiality as an approach to relations with the "outside environment", with the non-self, opens a way out of any such "inevitability".

Perhaps it's to overstate things - though maybe not so much as we might first think - but Poland doesn't exist in the world. *Ba!* - another fine word I sorely miss in English - *ba!*<sup>9</sup> Poland doesn't really even exist in Europe. By no means do I want to suggest that translation which upholds self-referentiality within the world of "Polishness" is the silver bullet. But I really do believe that somewhere down the list of reasons for Poland's non-existence is that of the way Poles are wont to translate their world - that of the way they convey their narrative in surrender of self-referentiality.

Last May in Gdańsk a new airport was christened. Does anyone here know the name? It's "Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa Airport". No Polish letters! No "ń", no "ł", no "ę". In fact, inasmuch as so much else was anglicized, internationalized, the name "Lech" almost begs transliteration lest it be read as "Lech"!<sup>10</sup> This is an outrageous case of capitulation - even self-mutilation, if I can resort to a little hyperbole - and though there were those who protested in the Pomorski Sejmik<sup>11</sup>, at my last check the airport is still dubbed "Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa Airport".

To expand a bit, I can say that this is something I've battled against for years. All those "Stanislauses" instead of "Stanisławowie" - those "Boleslauses" and "Adelberts", "Łódź" and "Ślask" - which, I think most will agree, is much worse than the other choice, so long as we're straying from self-referentiality, of "Silesia".

Now, "Ślask" - maybe that is a hard word. But let me simply note that important trends would seem to point us precisely in that direction. After all, the world has learned to say "Ukraine" - not "The Ukraine". Even "Belarus", which is a striking case of being greater "Belarus" patriots than the people of that country themselves<sup>12</sup>. We have also learned to say "Moldova", etc., etc. - so why not Ślask over Silesia? Since we all know and use the word "cockney" in Polish - why not, with an appropriate introduction, "żuleria" in English? From the world of hip-hop, why are its fans called "homies" in English materials? - why not "blockers", if not "blockersi"? Perhaps I am being just a wee facetious - so, yes, I do agree that these things can be overdone, "over-Polonized". I flash here on the Harry Potter books being sold in the Czech Republic under the authorship of "J. K. Rowlingova"<sup>13</sup>.

Of course, I realize there are psychological issues at play here. Some of this no doubt revolves about the inferiority complexes still pronounced here. In other words, national pride - or its shortfall - would certainly seem of issue. Mind you, Germans tend to keep their umlauts, the French their cedilla, Spanish-speakers their tildas. In other cases there's a certain "nobilitation", as was the case two weeks ago when the economic summit in Krynica was billed - as it is every year - as the "polski Davos". We all know those little stock phrases. They echo all over Poland. "Polski Oskar", "polska nagroda Nobla"<sup>14</sup> and so on. My point is that this is all fine and dandy when a Pole is explaining such things *to a foreigner* - but not to other Poles. This poignantly, ringingly betrays the lack of self-referentiality.

What's peculiar is that such indeed appropriate cases of bridging to the foreign *skopos*<sup>15</sup> are so very often absent when Poles in fact do address foreigners. One case among millions: several times I've caught the news on TVN24 being broadcast in English. In each instance I was struck first and foremost by the fact that the entire effort seemed to be targeted on the medium, not the message. As if to boast the bare fact that the news were being delivered in English at all. How international! But again, I've found the message to be lost. For instance, I saw a report on the help Poles have extended to the victims of the terrorist attacks in Beslan. What struck me was how the name "Janina Ochojska" was simply tossed out, left to hang in a vacuum, one understands, in the mind of the foreign viewer. No! What should have been done was to say something about her remarkable organization in a way to plant her persona and charitable work in a way that would stick. As it was, there was really no point in having mentioned her by name at all. Self-referentiality, in the sense of its enabling proper relations with the "outside environment" here, too, was lost.

There are simply so many cases of the lack of self-referentiality. 'Tis almost a delight to romp around their typologies. For instance, I don't yet have a third-generation cell phone, but my second-generation model doesn't include Polish letters for the SMSs I write. How is that possible with a market of over 20 million cell-phone users in Poland?

One of the other types worth specifying is that of self-referentially handling unique or peculiarly Polish terms. I'm happy to note that TEPIŚ does so in a wealth of cases, using, for instance, terms like "gmina", "voivode", etc., in its English publications. I certainly applaud that. By way of contrast I would point out how English-language materials on Russia typically employ terms like "boyar", "obshchina", etc. - but so seldom do we see, for instance, "szlachta"<sup>16</sup> as such. Even at lectures delivered in English at Warsaw University one is most likely to hear "gentry" or "nobility". Peculiar, this - and something which fundamentally defeats the purpose, that of instilling a sense of Poland's uniqueness and specificity.

Self-referentiality also has an important bearing on facing outward with self-respect, on deliberately conveying Polish realities with an appropriate "spin". A recent case I flash on is that of some materials I was editing that were to be submitted to the European Union for a large grant. Throughout those materials I kept having to change "backwardness" and the like into, for instance, "the need to modernize"...

I also flash on the way Polish history, culture, etc. is conveyed to foreigners in terms of short-cuts or bridges to an imaginary pan-European periodization. It goes something like this: you guys (Swedes, Belgians, Greeks, etc.) had a period of monarchical rule - and so did we! Or: you guys had a period of Romanticism in literature, and so did we! So there ya' have it! Now you know Polish history!

No doubt such short-cuts are often - and in many contexts - altogether helpful. But in works commanding any kind of an important foreign audience - which is to say, works that are to be translated - Polish realities should be conveyed in their specificity, in terms of their difference.

As you are all only too aware, those nasty fiends, English's articles, lay an unending array of traps and snares<sup>17</sup>, at least one of which relates to self-referentiality. I do a small mountain of editing work, so I regularly see the troubles they give Polish translators. There's one journal I might like to pick on, though. I do a little pro bono work for them - every month I polish up their English-language summary of that issue's offering. There the translator, in portions presenting the texts of prominent Polish intellectuals, is ever wont to write, for instance, "Stefan Swieżawski, a renowned philosopher", or, "a respected theologian, Father Tomasz Węcławski". I'm sure many of you at once recognize the problem. In writing, "a renowned philosopher" we depreciate - even if only slightly - that person's suggested standing in the minds of foreign readers. What that construction suggests to the foreign reader is that they can't be expected to know the scholar in question. Conversely, when we replace "a" with "the" we distinguish, ennoble - even if only slightly. We suggest to readers that if they don't know Swieżawski, they'd best make a point of finding out about his work. And so: "Stefan Swieżawski, the renowned philosopher" - do you sense the different thrust? It's most definitely there for native speakers. The use of "the" here beckons and showcases - and that's after all a basic point in translating, that is, in "conveying" things Polish to those abroad.

Romping right along, another group - and from the other direction - is that of the originally English-language TV programs kids are raised on here. Now, the Flintstones are an important exception when they're aired as the "Jaskiniowcy". So is Winnie the Pooh staged as Kubuś Puchatek with his friends. But in many other instances when I look in on what cartoons my own kids are watching in Polish, I note that many of the redolent with meaning proper names are not being rendered into Polish. The effect? Like a watercolor in the rain...

I've seen it argued in business publications that the kind of Polish self-referentiality I am discussing is in fact anathema to successful sales, that association with Poland suggests poor quality. Better to give Polish products an English or Italian-sounding name than a Polish one. Maybe that's so. I would guess that most of us here would prefer a Swedish product to a similarly priced Romanian product of ostensibly comparable quality. So I suppose I'd have to refrain from a critical view of such names as "Sunset suits", "Royal collection", etc. But "Myslovitz"? M-y-s-l-o-v-i-t-z?<sup>18</sup>18 That kind of labeling puzzles me.

I also know that linguistic borrowing is natural and fulfills real needs. On the other hand - and although I'm no purist - here, too, I see room for criticism from the perspective of maintaining self-referentiality. For instance, such words we've borrowed like "laptop" grate on my gentle nerves. Why "laptop" when there's the brilliant proposal of "kompudełko"<sup>19</sup>? All the more so, as Poles are physiognomically different than English native-speakers. Poles, after all, have no "lap" - you've only got knees, right? But that works both ways - Americans and the British have none of your dreaded "korzonki"<sup>20</sup>20. I don't know - maybe Canadians have 'em, too...

In drawing my remarks to a close, I want to stress that by no means am I trying to suggest that at issue is the demise of the Polish nation or the end of the Polish language. Rather, what I am underlining is that the lack of self-referentiality in translation (in the expanded sense I'm employing here) entails a lasting consignment to the periphery, to a veritable colonial position. That the lack of self-referentiality entails resignation from a place in a global, even a European narrative, that it spells a resignation from being a recognizable tessera within the mosaic of a global narrative. Which is to say that Poland abroad will remain misunderstood - absent. Like a watercolor in the rain...

In that sense, the status and understanding Poland is to enjoy abroad is directly reflected in the status Poles themselves assign to their own narrative, something translators, I would like to believe, in observance of self-referentiality in their work, can meaningfully contribute to.

Thank you for your attention! - I now look forward to your comments.

---

<sup>1</sup> A singer-songwriter, the "bard of Solidarity". He was in his late 40s.

<sup>2</sup> One of the main TV news anchors.

<sup>3</sup> "He was our Bob Dylan".

<sup>4</sup> "Otóż" calls attention to what is to follow. It kind of resembles "and lo" in older English.

<sup>5</sup> "Ksobność" suggests referencing all of what you observe as if it were intentionally directed precisely at or to you. A kind of paranoia - that's why I add here the adjective "zdrowa", i.e., "healthy".

<sup>6</sup> Today's most acclaimed and influential German social philosopher.

<sup>7</sup> "Nomenklatura" refers to communism's system of cronyism that served the ranks of party-members.

<sup>8</sup> A brilliant Polish word that conjures up being taught by having someone beat you over the head with a shovel, "łopata".

<sup>9</sup> "Ba" means much the same as "alas", but it's not dated like "alas".

<sup>10</sup> In Polish the "ch" in "Lech" is pronounced like a hard "h" - not like our "ch" as in "chair".

<sup>11</sup> The provincial legislature.

<sup>12</sup> "Belarus" supplanted "Byelorussia" in 1992 not long after that country gained independence. The point is that "Belarus" is an anglicized version of the name of that country in the essentially non-existent "Byelorussian language" that was at that same time declared the single state language. By 1994, however, the Byelorussians in certified fair referenda re-declared Russian a state language - and "Byelorussia" is the anglicized version of the Russian name. So, Byelorussians themselves went back to the Russian version (i.e., "Byelorussia"), but we in the English world remain stuck with the folkloric name "Belarus".

<sup>13</sup> The Czechs are famous for "Czechifying" everything, here "Rowling" into "Rowlingova".

<sup>14</sup> Poles like to dub things in reference to "the big world". So, they say "the Polish Davos" of their regional economic summit, "the Polish Oscars" about their film awards, "the Polish Nobel prize" for in science, etc.

<sup>15</sup> This is the linguistic jargon for "recipient" or target audience.

<sup>16</sup> The "szlachta" is in fact, though only loosely, Poland's historical gentry class.

<sup>17</sup> Polish has no equivalents of "a" and "the", and even Polish professors of English can't quite master their usage. One such prof. told me that the rules for articles only cover about 75% of the cases one typically encounters - the rest is settled by the "feel" that only native speakers have.

<sup>18</sup> The name of one of Poland's best rock bands, one of the few (reasonably) popular Polish bands in Europe. They hail from the town of Mysłowice, which is what they've garbled in their name - supposedly to make it more "palatable".

<sup>19</sup> "Kompudełko" is a fusion of the Polish word for computer and the word for "little box". Lovely!

<sup>20</sup> Poles - almost all of them, young and old! - claim to have sensitive nerve endings in the lower back. Some national epidemic of lumbago...