



Translating a poem from Polish

'Kurczę blade' by Wanda Chotomska (1929-2017)

Wanda Chotomska was a Polish children's writer, screenwriter and poet. She was born and lived in Warsaw, where she also studied journalism.

At the age of four Chotomska learnt to read from street signs. The first poem she wrote was about her father, who wasn't too impressed that his daughter wanted to be a writer. But she persisted and became Poland's most prominent children's author – a Polish Astrid Lindgren or Tove Jansson. Many libraries and schools in Poland are named after her.

Her daughter, Ewa Chotomska, is also known for her children's books as well as children's TV programmes.

1

Whether or not you speak or are learning Polish, the first step in translating a poem is to hear it in its original language – either read out loud by your teacher or on YouTube. Languages are living things and they constantly influence one another, so you might be able to pick up some familiar-sounding words. And even if you don't know a poem's meaning, you might be able to hear its 'music', rhythms, even rhymes.

Kurczę blade

*Kupił dziadek jajko w sklepie
I po brzuchu już się klepie.
Naszykował szklankę z cukrem:
- Kogel mogel sobie utrę!*

*Naglę co to? Awantura!
Dziura w jajku! W jajku dziura!
A w tej dziurze kurczę blade.
- Kurczę blade - krzyknął dziadek.*

*- Kurczę blade! Kurczę blade! -
i ze ściany porwał szpadę.
Wyskoczyło kurczę z jajka,
kurczę blade, to nie bajka!*

*Bo jak dziadek złapał szpadę,
to nie trudno o wypadek.
Leci kurczę blade z trwogi,
za kurczakiem dziadek srogi.*

*Złapał dziadek kurczę blade:
- Zrobię z ciebie marmoladę!
- Marmolada lepsza z jabłka -
powiedziała trzeźwo babka.*

*- Lepiej upiec kurczę blade
w piekarniku na obiadek.
Jak wsadzili je do pieca
to dopiero była heca.*

*Bo uciekło z pieca dziurką
i zostało tylko piórko.
Piórko blade, piórko blade,
które zjadł na obiad dziadek.*

Now read the poem aloud in your group, with your partner or by yourself. Get used to how it sounds, its music and rhythms. You may begin to sense what the poem is about. The language itself and the way in which the poem is read out loud may suggest something about what is happening.

2

Not all translators are fluent in the language they translate from, and sometimes they don't know the language at all – they use somebody else's word-for-word translation as a starting point.

So to begin your own translation of the poem, you can use the kind of word-for-word rough translation that translators sometimes call a 'trot'. This is a plain, literal English version of the poem, usually without any of the rhythm, mood or rhyme of the original. The English of a version like this will sound – like the version below – rough, stilted, awkward and sometimes slightly unreal.

A Pale Chick/O, Blimey

*Grandpa bought an egg in a shop
And is already patting his belly.
He got a glass with sugar ready,
'I will whisk some egg yolk with sugar!'*

*Suddenly, what is it? Some commotion/disturbance/turmoil/racket!
A hole/crack in the egg, the egg has a hole/is cracked!
A pale chick sits in the hole.*

'Oh, pale chick/oh, blimey,' grandpa screamed.

*'Pale chick/O, blimey, pale chick/o, blimey!'
And he grabbed a sword from the wall.
The chick jumped out of the egg,
Pale chick/O, blimey, this not a fairy-tale!*

*Cause when grandpa has a sword
It's not difficult for an accident [to happen].
The chick runs, pale with fright,
Followed by scary grandpa.*

*Grandpa got the pale chick,
'I will turn you into marmalade'
'Marmalade is better made from apples,'
Grandma said matter-of-factly.*

*'It's better to roast the pale chick
In the oven for lunch.'
When they put it in the oven,
Another commotion/disturbance/turmoil/racket broke out.*

*Cause it escaped from the oven through a hole
Only leaving a feather behind.
A pale feather, a pale feather
Was what grandpa had for lunch.*

In your group, try to re-trace the 'story' of the poem and to describe its general mood. Is it happy? Quiet and peaceful? Scary? Lively?

How does the poem make you feel?

With the English version in front of you, read it in Polish to your partner or your group, trying to speak the language as meaningfully as you can. You will find the poem begins to mean more and more.

3

Look at the title in the 'trot'. The first option is a literal translation, 'a pale chick/chicken', and the second is an idiom, 'oh, blimey'. (An idiom is a phrase which has a meaning different than the literal, as in 'out of the blue'). This is one of the most difficult things about translating this poem, as the whole story is based on those two possible meanings of the phrase 'kurczę blade'. Just imagine a poem about 'raining cats and dogs' featuring lots of... cats and dogs!

Do you have any ideas for the title?

You may like to consider some of other translators' attempts first.

The Cheeky Chicken
Chicken on the Run
Chicken on the Loose

Do any of those reflect the original duality of the title?

The trot of the whole poem sounds rough and awkward. Can you make the English flow better?

If you want, you can use a Polish-English dictionary.

Look at the syllable count and lengths of lines in Polish. Do the lines sometimes sound/look longer, sometimes shorter or are they similar lengths? Can you make it work in English?

Does the Polish rhyme? If so, is the rhyme A – A – B – B, A – B – A – B or something different altogether? Can you find similar solutions in English? If not, you might want to try a different rhyme scheme.

Please remember that not everything in a translation has to be ‘100% correct’ as compared to the original. It is up to you to decide if you want to retain all the details of the story at the expense of rhyme/line lengths or the other way round.

Read your provisional version or versions to the other students and briefly discuss what seems good or less good about them.

Try to find phrases that appeal to you. If you’re stuck, press on and come back to it later. Each group’s or individual’s version of the poem will be different. Feel free to experiment.

There is no one ‘correct’ way to translate a poem. YOU are the author of the English version and you make all the decisions. Have fun!

Anna Blasiak, 2018

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