Translating the Evanescence of the American Dream: Culturally Specific References and Realia of the Jazz Age in the First Polish Translation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Valentina Elmekawy
MA Student, University of Rome "Tor Vergata", Italy
Professor Elisabetta MARINO, PhD (coord.)

DOI: 10.61215/GAMC.2025.4.10

Abstract
This paper aims to analyze the first Polish translation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's third novel, The Great Gatsby, published by Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz in 1962, with a focus on the translator's strategies in reproducing culturally specific references and realia of the early twentieth century American society, idiomatic expressions and stylistic nuances. Particular attention is given to the political and cultural context of Cold War-era Poland, which may have influenced translation choices such as the omission of ethnic identifiers or the general attenuation of language. The study reveals the translator's tendency towards domestication and explicitation with the purpose of increasing the readability of the novel for the target audience, often at the expense of its stylistic and cultural richness.
Keywords: *The Great Gatsby, Polish translation, Jazz Age, cultural references in translation, domestication*

Introduction

In 1962 *The Great Gatsby* arrives for the first time in Poland with Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz's translation, who, 37 years from the publishing of the third novel by the turbulent Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) in the United States, gives birth to its first Polish version, *Wielki Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's novel is a work that is deeply rooted in the context in which it was conceived, the so-called *roaring twenties*: a seemingly wild decade, of apparent freedom, luxury, marked by female emancipation and a bohemian lifestyle, but also overshadowed by great social insecurity. It's mainly the Great War, entered by the United States in 1917, that sweeps away every point of reference, that ruins that much desired American Dream, that Fitzgerald depicts in all of its evanescence: his main character is a self-made man, even if it is often implied throughout the novel that he didn't always go through completely legal lengths to become one. That is also why he is seen and perceived by those who surround him, rich people that have inherited their wealth for generations, as *other*, a foreign body in the aristocratic West Egg, *the less fashionable of the two* (Fitzgerald 3), according to Nick Carraway, the often unreliable narrator

of Gatsby's story. Not only is Gatsby a lonely man, essentially, he is also a man who is trapped in his own past, a prisoner of the memory of the love that he once shared with Daisy, and so intent on reconstructing the past that the present inevitably slips from his hands, in a frenetic crescendo that finally comes to a head with Gatsby's own death. Symbolic in this sense is Gatsby's funeral, disregarded by most people and celebrated under a liberating, redeeming rain that closes the novel as if to dissolve that patina of irrationality that is so characteristic of the Jazz Age.

The Great Gatsby is a novel that requires a significant creative effort: it contains many allusions (as well as implicit criticism) to prohibition-era America, among other things. Toponyms, books and magazines' titles, personal names, slang and colloquialisms: it is up to the translator to decide whether to opt for strategies of domestication or foreignization, whether to bring the text closer to the target audience or to widen the distance between the two. Not of minor importance is also the fact that Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz translates *The Great Gatsby* in times that are anything but peaceful in Poland, and more in general in Eastern Europe and in the whole world, that of the Cold War: Poland, or more precisely the Polish People's Republic (1952-1989) is on the other side of the iron curtain, Stalin has been dead for almost a decade but the country is still far from the fall of communism. As is inevitable, the socio-political circumstances affect the translation choices: many expressions acquire a certain level of formality that is utterly absent in the source text. An interesting instance is the way Tom Buchanan addresses George Wilson, Tom's mistress's husband, in the second chapter of the novel: the English *old man* becomes *panie Wilson* in Polish, which means 'Mr. Wilson's is an utterance that does not sound credible coming from a man who is anything but formal, and just a few pages later, he breaks Mrs. Wilson's nose. This episode in particular loses much of its intensity in the translation, which is moreover contributed to by the inversion of the sentence constituents. The inversion is since, in Polish, the present participle does not occur as frequently as it does in English.

> EN: *Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose* (Fitzgerald 22)
> PL: *Tom Buchanan zamachnął się i uderzył ją otwartą dłonią prosto w nos* ("Tom Buchanan swung at her and hit her with his open palm right in the nose")

The violence remains, obviously, but it is somehow mitigated: Tom still hits his mistress, but the translator chooses to leave out the fact that he broke her nose. A more literal translation of the passage might be the following: '*Szybko i zręcznie, Tom Buchanan złamał jej nos.*' The past participle is missing in this case as well, since it might make the sentence sound too unnatural; instead, it is replaced by two adverbs, "fast" and "deftly," which make it sound smoother. Tom Buchanan, the epitome of the most vulgar and crude machismo, had every

intention of hitting his mistress and causing her physical and, most certainly, psychological pain.

The purpose of this research is to analyze and contextualize the translation strategies operated by the translator, with particular attention in regards of those culturally marked elements of the source text that might become an obstacle in the rendering of the Polish version: from the context of prohibition America to the gambling world, from the references to early Twentieth century American popular culture to racial issues. By comparing the English original and its Polish translation, we want to highlight that translation is never a mechanical process. It does not just involve transferring words from one language to another. However, it is an interpretive act influenced and shaped by time and space, as well as by the translator's perception of the world, even when the story narrated belongs to a distant and very different country.

1. Culturally specific elements of the Roaring Twenties

1.1. The Prohibition era

It is evident in Demkowska-Bohdziewicz a certain tendency to explicate every aspect that might sound strange and unknown to the Polish audience. This happens especially in the case of allusions to real events of the time, when celebrities, books, and magazines are mentioned: these are all realia that the average Polish reader of the Sixties might not be aware of. After all Demkowska-Bohdziewicz, unlike other translators that years after her transposition also undertook the challenge of translating Fitzgerald's novel, almost entirely avoids using footnotes: more often than not footnotes interfere with the flow of the narration, forcing the audience to suspend the reading, and above all they dissolve the so-called invisibility of the translator, who is forced to reveal oneself to explain a detail or allusion that might not be entirely clear to the target audience. In her translation, Demkowska-Bohdziewicz uses only one footnote to explain one of the few terms she leaves unaltered from the source text, borrowing it from English because it is closely linked to the American political situation of the Twenties. The fourth chapter of the novel kicks off with yet another extravagant party at Jay Gatsby's enormous mansion, during which his guests waste no time in gossiping about him:

> EN: *"He's a bootlegger," said the young ladies [...] "One time he killed a man who had found out that he was nephew to Von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil. [...]* (Fitzgerald 37)
> PL: *– To bootlegger* – mówiły młode damy [...] – Pewnego razu zabił człowieka, który go zdemaskował. Okazało się, że to kuzyn Von Hindenburga i powinowaty samego diabła. [...]* ("He's a bootlegger," said the young ladies [...] "One time he

> killed a man who exposed him. It turned out that he's Von Hindenburg's cousin and related to the devil himself. [...]

The translator borrows the English term "bootlegger", whose meaning she explains in he footnote:

**bootlegger (ang.) – przemytnik alkoholu w Stanach Zjednoczonych* ("alcohol smuggler in the United States")

The term is strictly connected to the American society of the Twenties, particularly the era of prohibition, which was first introduced in the United States in 1919 with the Volstead Act. Between 1920 and 1933, the act established a federal ban on the manufacture, sale, importation, and transportation of alcoholic beverages. The ban, however, led to the flourishing of illegal trades, and the novel makes countless allusions to the possibility that Gatsby might have accumulated his wealth through alcohol smuggling. In fact, just a couple of chapters later, Nick Carraway recalls one morning when a journalist from New York came by Gatsby's house to extort some details about his past, driven by the many urban legends that were built around Gatsby's persona that summer. One of these in particular suggested once again Gatsby's involvement in a smuggling network with Canada:

> EN: *Contemporary legends, such as the "underground pipe-line to Canada" attached themselves to him [...]* (Fitzgerald 59)

As a matter of fact, an underground tunnel connecting the United States and Canada and enabling the illegal transportation of alcohol never really existed: in his novel, Fitzgerald hints at a legendary myth that was quite popular in the years of prohibition, according to which alcohol was being transported between the two countries through an underground pipeline.

In the translation into Polish, Demkowska-Bohdziewicz gives an interesting example of modulation:

> PL: *Współczesne legendy, jak na przykład legenda o "podziemnych kontaktach z Kanadą", same do niego przylgnęły [...]*

By modulation we mean "*a variation of the form of the message, obtained by a change in the point of view*" (Vinay, Darbelnet 89). In the example aforementioned, the translator goes from a concrete metaphor to an abstract concept, from an underground pipeline to "underground contacts", thus relinquishing the evocative image to better convey the idea of secret connections and illegal dealings. After all, we can assume that the urban myth about an underground tunnel between the United States and Canada was not known to Poles at the time. In all likelihood, a literal translation of pipe-line into *rurociąg* would not have evoked in the reader any mental association with

prohibition or with the idea of alcohol smuggling. However, we may argue that the strategy applied by the translator also involves what Klaudy and Karoly call implicitation: "*implicitation occurs, for instance, when a SL unit with a specific meaning is replaced by a TL unit with a more general meaning*" (Klaudy, Karoly 15). Pipe-line is, in fact, a specific term that cannot be misunderstood for anything else. In Polish, we have a more generic and abstract noun that has little to do with pipes and ducts, yet ideally implies an illegal, secret, and dishonest scheme.

The Great Gatsby never fails to depict the luxury, the craze, and excess that are so characteristic of the Roaring Twenties. There is another instance from chapter IV that we would like to discuss: the chapter starts with Nick's long record of the guests' names at Gatsby's parties, there to spend a night of total revelry. Among those stands out the name of one James B. ("Rot-Gut") Ferret (Fitzgerald 38), who, despite being a marginal character, comes to have an emblematic role due to the nickname that was given to him, a nickname that once again explicates the close interdependence between the unrestrained world portrayed by Fitzgerald and the illegal alcohol trade. In the Polish translation, however, "Rot-Gut", an alcoholic drink of inferior quality (Collins Dictionary), is omitted. In translation, the omission of a word happens "*because it has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot easily be paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons*" (Baker 86). Still, a close match of "Rot-Gut" exists in Polish, and it is gorzała, a colloquial term that designates low-quality alcohol, typically homemade vodka. Replacing "Rot-Gut" with *gorzała* would undoubtedly have a domesticating effect (similarly like translating the names of some of the characters: Catherine for example becomes Katarzyna, Lucille becomes Lucylla, Thomas becomes Tomasz), but Fitzgerald's intention would have been transferred to the target text as well: that of implying the connection between American society of the Twenties and the illegal trade of alcohol.

1.2. The Black Sox Scandal

Among Gatsby's guests, there is also a certain Meyer Wolfsheim, "a small, flat-nosed Jew" (Fitzgerald 42), as Nick Carraway describes him. In the translation, Demkowska-Bohdziewicz omits Wolfsheim's ethnicity, describing him merely as a "mały człowieczek o płaskim nosie" ("a little flat-nosed man"). It is a detail of not little importance given the fact that Fitzgerald modeled the character of Wolfsheim on real-life Jewish mobster Arnold Rothstein, still to this day considered the main person responsible for the Black Sox Scandal, a name that refers to the corruption of eight Chicago White Sox players, the baseball team expected to triumph at the 1919 World Series. Faced with Nick's curiosity about Wolfsheim's occupation, Gatsby admits:

> EN: *"Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler." Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: "He's the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919"* (Fitzgerald 44)
> PL: *– Meyer Wolfsheim? Nie, on żyje z hazardu. – Gatsby zawahał się, a potem dodał zimno: – To on w tysiąc dziewięćset dziewiętnastym zrobił tę machlojkę na jesiennych rozgrywkach baseballowych.* ("Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he makes a living from gambling." […] "It's him who in 1919 made that swindle at the autumn baseball games")

Here we have another case of explicitation: Demkowska-Bohdziewicz provides a general description of the kind of event mentioned, with additional information that is not present in the source text, concerning the time of year when the event takes place, which is autumn, and the kind of sport involved, that is baseball, a noun she borrows from English but adapting it morphologically to the Polish grammatical system with a process of adjectival suffixation ('baseball' + feminine plural adjectival suffix 'owe' with a declension to the locative case, which results in 'owych'). Even sacrificing the direct reference to the 1919 World Series and therefore the implicit allusion to the Black Sox Scandal, the expedient works: the Polish noun 'machlojka', a term that stands for fraudulent activity, perfectly describes the illicit nature of the circumstance. Furthermore, Demkowska-Bohdziewicz's choice to perform a modulation on "He is a gambler", which she translates into *On żyje z hazardu* (literally "He makes a living from gambling"), rather than giving a literal translation, not only sounds more natural and fluid, but also gives the idea of gambling as a real profession, which is the most suitable solution given the character that is being portrayed.

Regarding the gambling world, just a few pages earlier, Nick asserts that the partygoers at Gatsby's mansion *came to gamble* (Fitzgerald 38); Demkowska-Bohdziewicz translates the statement into "ci przychodzili grać w karty" ("they came to play cards"). The translator here applied a metonymy, "*a figure of speech in which the name of one thing is used in place of that of another associated with or suggested by it*" (Collins Dictionary). A more literal translation of the verb 'to gamble' would have been *uprawiać hazard* or even *grać hazardowo*, two verbs that, to the Polish reader, might feel too forced and unnatural. The translator thus tries to preserve the gambling context but reduces its specificity to the common act of playing cards. The activity does not necessarily imply gambling, and the translation undoubtedly suffers from it: maybe the use of verbs such as *ryzykować* ("to risk", "to gamble") or *spekulować* ("to speculate") might have better rendered the idea, without sacrificing that feeling of unease, irrationality, and illegality that constantly lurks on the horizon.

2. Media, entertainment, and intertextuality

2.1. Celebrities and cultural visibility

The last section of the paper concerns the many references to American pop culture, celebrities, and dancers of the Jazz Age. In chapter III, yet another of Gatsby's parties is described in detail by Nick, who perfectly conveys the hedonistic nature of the gathering: the driveway full to the brim with limousines and Rolls-Royces, the rooms and gardens animated by flashing lights and bright colors, cocktail glasses floating from one guest to another, ecstatic laughter that echoes throughout the hallways of the house. At some point, the party seems to be disrupted by a woman who, intoxicated by alcohol, launches herself into a grotesque dance, *moving her hands like Frisco* (Fitzgerald 25). The author alludes here to Joe Frisco (1889-1958), an American vaudeville performer and jazz dancer, who became famous for his comic routines and whose name is omitted in the Polish translation. Demkowska-Bohdziewicz simply translates the phrase into *wywijając rękoma* ("swinging her arms"). The translator chooses to omit Joe Frisco's name since it probably would not resonate with a Polish audience, opting instead for a more generic expression that still evokes the dramatic and exaggerated behaviour of the woman described by Nick: a strategic choice that avoids an obscure reference for the Polish reader, yet still maintains the comic and grotesque effect that the author intended to depict.

A few moments later, the same woman gets mistaken for Gilda Gray's understudy from the Follies (Fitzgerald 25), an actress and dancer of Polish descent who has risen to prominence during the Roaring Twenties for inventing a dance called the *shimmy*. In Polish, this becomes *dublerka Gildy Gray z rewii Ziegfelda* ("Gilda Gray's understudy from Ziegfeld's revue"). The translator chooses to replace Follies, which stands for Ziegfeld Follies – a series of theatrical performances produced from 1907 to 1931 on Broadway – with the term rewia, which is undoubtedly more immediate to the Polish audience, as it explicates once again the nature of the show.

We should also take note of the fact that Gilda Gray's name, unlike Joe Frisco's, is maintained in the target text. As already mentioned, Gilda Gray was born in Poland, and her real name was actually Marianna Michalska. However, there is more: she was the first Polish woman to gain fame in Hollywood, followed by international success, which most likely made her an identifiable figure in the very country where she was born. The same cannot be assumed with certainty about Joe Frisco, whose popularity mainly remained confined to the United States.

2.2. Books and magazines

To take into consideration is also the Polish rendering of the titles of magazines and books that are regularly mentioned in the novel. In the earliest pages, Nick Carraway visits Daisy Buchanan, his second cousin, once removed, and her husband, Tom; they are joined by Daisy's friend and golf champion Jordan Baker. The four talk about everyday things, until Tom poses Nick a question that leads to a long, rather bigoted, and one-sided argument about ethnic minorities:

> EN: *Have you read "The Rise of the Colored Empires" by this man Goddard?* (Fitzgerald 8)
> PL: Czytałeś Goddarda *Rozkwit Azjatyckich Imperiów*? ("Have you read Goddard's *The Growth of the Asian Empires*?")

The book that Tom mentions, as well as its author Goddard, does not actually exist; however, the fictitious work is inspired by a real book published in 1920 and titled *The Rising Tide of Color: the Threat Against White World-Supremacy*, written by American author and white supremacist Lothrop Stoddard (Fitzgerald plays here on the assonance between Stoddard and Goddard). In the aforementioned book, Stoddard not only promotes his eugenetic theories but also warns about the imminent collapse of white supremacy and colonialism due to the increase of the colored population and, as a result, the rise of nationalistic feelings in colonized countries and the development of industrialization in Asia.

In English, the word *colored* has a pretty negative connotation: in the United States, in particular, it was widely used during the racial segregation enforced by the Jim Crow Laws, and in many places, it might to this day be considered an insult. In the target text, instead of *colored* we have *azjatyckich* (feminine plural adjective *azjatyckie* 'Asian' with a declension to the genitive case): the process employed here is that of particularization, "*to use a more precise or concrete term*" (Molina, Albir 510), which leads to the replacement of a hypernym, a generic term, also called umbrella term or blanket term, in this case *colored*, which can be referred to all non-white ethnic minorities, with a hyponym, a more specific term belonging to the same class of the hypernym but hierarchically subordinate. In this case, replacing *colored* with *azjatyckich* 'Asian', narrows the discussion to the Asian continent only, leaving out all other ethnic minorities. The reason behind this choice might be traced back to the socialist ideology of the PRL and the Soviet Union: in a country, and geopolitical sphere, striving to abolish class difference and present itself as the defender of equality and fraternity, using a racially derogatory word such as

colored might have been frowned upon, especially when the ideology that the communist propaganda was trying to eradicate was the American one, a capitalist and colonialist doctrine.

A literal translation of the book title might be "*Powstanie kolorowych imperiów*": the term *powstanie*, 'uprising', certainly expresses the feel of threat that the original title conveys, more so than *rozkwit*, 'growth' or 'development', which has a more neutral, even positive connotation. Moreover, the adjective *kolorowe* was the term once used to refer in Poland to non-white individuals, and today is considered to be highly offensive. We may assume that the translator opted for a more neutral and less racially dense identifier to avoid explicitly racist references, which could disrupt the image that the Eastern bloc was trying to advertise. This results, however, in the sacrifice of an important part of Tom Buchanan's bigoted and rude characterization.

In the second chapter of the novel, Carraway tags along with Tom to his mistress's apartment. There, the narrator goes into an in-depth description of Myrtle Wilson's dining room, where the table is covered in a dozen magazines and books:

> EN: *Several old copies of Town Tattle lay on the table with a copy of Simon Called Peter [...]* (Fitzgerald 17)
> PL: *Na stole leżało kilka numerów "Town Tattle", egzemplarz książki pt. Szymon Zwany Piotrem [...]* ("On the table lay some numbers of *Town Tattle*, a copy of a book titled *Simon Called Peter* [...]")

Once again, the translator resorts to the technique of explicitation by adding the phrase "a book titled" to clarify the nature of a realia that the Polish audience might not be aware of. *Simon Called Peter* is, as a matter of fact, the title of a novel written by British author Robert Keable and published in 1921, a few years earlier than *The Great Gatsby*. At the time, Keable's novel became a huge success, greater than Fitzgerald's novel itself. Despite the outrage caused by its scandalous plot, which is largely autobiographical, the novel tells the story of Peter Graham, a priest who initiates a love affair with a nurse in France during the Great War. The title of Keable's novel is a biblical reference to Simon Peter, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus and conventionally considered the first Pope of the Catholic church.

It is not a secret that Fitzgerald despised Keable's work; nevertheless, he mentions the book precisely to hint at Tom and Myrtle's extramarital affair. On the one hand, the literal translation of the title preserves the biblical reference; on the other, though, the "literary" allusion to adultery is lost, since Keable's novel has never been translated in Poland, so the reference might not be immediate for a Polish reader.

Conclusions

Overall, we may say that the first Polish translation of *The Great Gatsby* is a complex and significant work on both linguistic and ideological levels. Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz had to deal with a novel that is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of early twentieth-century America: the many cultural references and historical implications, even the slang, are all elements of the source text that are not always easy to transfer to a completely different language and context and need to be adapted, in one way or another. The analysis carried out in this paper shows the translator's tendency to alternate between domestication and foreignization, between explicitation and omission. These are not random choices, but deliberate ones: each of the techniques and strategies adopted by the translator reflects her desire to make the target text as accessible and comprehensible as possible to the target audience, that is, the average Polish reader of the Sixties. This often implies that the cultural density and the implicit socio-political criticism subtly carried out by Fitzgerald get lost in the translation process. Fundamental elements such as the depiction of the failure of the so-called American dream, moral decadence, and racial subtext are often toned down, adapted, or even altered to fit a particular context: socialist Poland, which imposed both linguistic and ideological boundaries.

Works cited

Baker, Mona. *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1962. Trans. Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz. Warszawa: Comfort Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1991.

Gross, Dalton, MaryJean Gross. *Understanding the great Gatsby: a student casebook to issues, sources and historical documents.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Klaudy, Kinga, Krisztina Kàroly. "Implicitation in Translation: Empirical Evidence for Operational Asymmetry in Translation." *Across Languages and Cultures* 6. (2005): 13-28.

Molina, Lucia, Amparo Hurtado Albir. "Translation Techniques Revisited: A Dynamic and Functionalist Approach." *Translator's Journal* 47. (2002): 498-512.

Newmark, Peter. *A Textbook of Translation*. New York: Prentice-Hall International, 1988.

Szwebs, Weronika. "Tłumacz jako marka? O tym, co zastąpiło kryteria w internetowej recepcji przekładu Wielkiego Gatsby'ego Francisa Scotta Fitzgeralda." *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem* 22. (2016): 95-116.

Vinay, Jean-Paul, Jean Darbelnet. *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*. Trans. Juan C. Sager, M. -J. Hamel. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995, pp. 84–93.

Online sources

"A scandalous novel that changed a cleric's life." *Church Times*. 16 Dec. 2022.
"Meyer Wolfsheim – Arnold Rothstein, Scott Fitzgerald and The Great Gatsby." *The Monocled Mutineer*. 4 Dec. 2022.
"Taniec pięknej Polki podbił Amerykę. Gilda Gray została królową Shimmy." *Viva.pl*. 29 May 2023.
"When W.E.B. DuBois made a laughingstock of a white supremacist". *The New Yorker*. 19 Aug. 2019.