

English laughter in Polish. Problems with humour in the translations of works by Charles Dickens*

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When asked how to translate the humour of Shakespeare, Stanisław Barańczak replied: 'So that it makes one laugh'.¹ Although Barańczak wrote about dramatic plays, his remarks are also relevant to other literary genres. In the years-long dispute of whether to translate with fidelity or not, the author clearly stands by the translator's right to partial freedom, in order for the translated joke to work, and so that we laugh when reading the piece or watching its adaptation in the theatre.² The advantages of such a permission (granted by critics, readers and viewers) for a certain amount of liberty granted to the translator are exemplified by Barańczak's outstanding translations of William Shakespeare's plays. Of all Polish translations, his are widely present on the Polish theatre scene of the recent years, and it is in the theatre that they 'prove themselves' best. The issues of translating prose, especially humour and satire, are equally as intriguing and complex,³ as demonstrated by numerous critical works, which set out to scholarly explain what is, and whether we still laugh at, the humour in foreign novels, translated into Polish.⁴

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1 S. Barańczak, "Jak tłumaczyć humor Szekspira?" [How to translate the humour of Shakespeare?] in: idem, *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu. Szkice o warsztacie tłumacza poezji* [Saved in translation. Drafts on the techniques of a poetry translator] (Cracow: 2004), p. 234.

2 Ibidem, p. 248.

3 See: S. Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London, New York: 2004), pp. 110–119.

4 See: G. Grzegorzczak, "Humor, dyskurs, translacja. W jaki sposób obcość przejawia się w tłumaczeniu tekstów humorystycznych?" [Humour, discourse, translation. How foreignness appears in the translations of humorous texts?] in: *Przekładając nieprzekładalne II* [Translating the untranslatable II], eds. O. and W. Kubiński (Gdańsk: 2004), pp. 77–89; A. Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska, "Degrees of domestication – Bridget Jones in Polish translations" in: ibidem, pp. 303–310.

Polish translations of the prose by Charles Dickens,⁵ however, rarely become of interest. This is surprising, as Dickens is one of the most popular English writers, and belongs to the canon of world literature. This article endeavours to fill this gap, even if only to a small degree. The issues of Polish translations of Dickensian prose are vast, which is why, in this work, I narrow it down to one work and one figure: that of Wilkins Micawber, one of the characters of the novel *David Copperfield*. This choice was dictated to me by critical works⁶ in Polish and English, which unanimously saw the evidence of Dickens's talent for humour in the creation of this specific character. I found a further argument in favour of a close examination of this character in Polish and foreign-language dictionary collections of literary quotes. They cite Micawber: one ironic sequence in *Skrzydlate słowa* [Catchphrases],⁷ and two more in the Oxford *Dictionary of Quotations*.⁸ The presence of this character in the studies in various languages, which selected hundreds of quotations from tens of literary and non-literary works, is a testament to his great popularity. According, in turn, to Wikipedia (the internet encyclopaedia), the surname 'Micawber' operates colloquially as a synonym for the outlook of a person awaiting good fortune with hope.⁹

David Copperfield, the eighth novel by Charles Dickens, was published in twenty episodes in the years 1849–1850.¹⁰ It is one of the most popular and best books by Dickens. It was translated into many languages, reworked for the stage, and adapted to the needs of young readers. It combines seriousness and humour, presenting both cruel and romantic scenes, both familial warmth and a painful lack thereof. In Poland, translations of Dickens started around 1840. Translations would usually be published several or a dozen or so years after the original had been

5 To date, Janina Kulczycka-Saloni looked into them in works devoted to the reception and translations of Dickens in Poland. See: eadem, "Z dziejów Dickensa w Polsce: 'Emancypantki' a 'Bleak House'" [The history of Dickens in Poland: *Emancipated Women* and 'Bleak House'] in: *Prace Polonistyczne* [Polish Studies], series 5 (Łódź: 1947), pp. 3–39; "Dickens w Polsce" [Dickens in Poland] in: *Przegląd Humanistyczny* [Humanist Review] 1970, vol. 5, pp. 27–40. Moreover, Mirosława Kocięcka wrote about the problem of early reception of Dickens in Poland, in the article "Z dziejów recepcji Dickensa w Polsce XIX w. (do r. 1900)" [From the history of reception of Dickens in Poland of the nineteenth century (up until 1900)] in: *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 1962, no. 6 (33), pp. 149–158.

6 See: R. Dyboski, *Sto lat literatury angielskiej* [A hundred years of English literature] (Warsaw: 1957), p. 139; G. Saintsbury, *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. 13: *The Nineteenth Century II*, Cambridge 1916, p. 327; A. Horsman, *The Victorian Novel*, Oxford 1990, p. 124.

7 See: *Skrzydlate słowa. Wielki słownik cytatów polskich i obcych* [Catchphrases. The great dictionary of Polish and foreign quotations] eds. H. Markiewicz, A. Romanowski (Cracow: 2007), p. 112.

8 See: *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. G. Cumberlege (Oxford: 1953), pp. 174–175.

9 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilkins_Micawber [as of 31.10.2008].

10 See entry: *David Copperfield* in: *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. R. Schlicke (Oxford: 2000), p. 150 and In: *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. M. Drabble (Oxford: 1985), pp. 272–273.

printed. The first Polish version of *David Copperfield* was published in 1857, and its author was Franciszek Salezy Dmochowski.¹¹ Later, there appeared translations by Wilhelmina Zyndram-Kościałkowska (1889), Karolina Beylin (1922), Cecylia Niewiadomska (1927) and Teresa Świdorska (1928). Apart from translations, Polish adaptations of the novel were also created. Jan Dąbrowa reworked Dickens's novel for the youth,¹² Wanda Peszkowa and Wanda Skarżyńska prepared similar versions in the English language.¹³ The text by Peszkowa was most likely heavily inspired by the English version of a German work titled *David Copperfield's Youth*.¹⁴ The many similarities attest to this: the structuring of the novel into very short chapters, the many plot simplifications, and most importantly, the restricting of the novel to just the story of the childhood and early youth of David, with a short summary at the end of the later life of the protagonist. Another reworking for young people is the translation by Niewiadomska. The pedagogic objectives of such adaptations and their aiming at pupils is evident in the elimination of both the sad and funny scenes. Dickens for the Polish youth is essentially stripped of humour.

Wilkins Micawber can be described most simply as a man of good heart, who is perennially in debt. According to his wife, Emma (who, now and then, dramatically reasserts that she will never forsake her husband and strongly believes in him), Micawber possesses extraordinary abilities, and is only unhappy because the society will not see his talents and utilise his skills in various fields. When the reader is first introduced to them, the Micawbers have four children (a boy, a girl, and twins). In the later parts of the novel, Emma is expecting another child, and the father of the family finally ends up in jail because of his debts. It is worth digressing here and adding that, when devising the character of Micawber, Dickens modelled him on his father, John, who also went to prison for some time, having exposed his family to debt.¹⁵ And it is exactly prison that is depicted in an interesting way in *David Copperfield*: as a place where man lives calmly, in a friendly atmosphere, and where his elementary needs are met. Micawber's family also relocates to jail. They lead a decent life there, peacefully and safely.

11 The novel was titled *Wspomnienia sieroty. Dawid Copperfield* [Memoirs of an orphan. David Copperfield] and was probably a translation from the French. See: W. Krajewska, *Recepcja literatury angielskiej w Polsce w okresie modernizmu (1887–1918). Informacje, sądy, przekłady* [Reception of English literature in Poland in the Modernist period (1887–1918). Information, opinions, translation] (Wrocław: 1972), pp. 130, 238.

12 C. Dickens, *David Copperfield*, reworked for young people by J. Dąbrowa (Warsaw: 1949).

13 Idem, *David Copperfield's boyhood*, shortened and reworked by W. Peszkowa (Warsaw: 1952); idem, *David Copperfield*, ed. by W. Skarżyńska (Warsaw: 1966).

14 Idem, *David Copperfield's Youth* (Wien–Leipzig: 1923).

15 G. Cordery, *David Copperfield* in: *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. D. Paroissien (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: 2008), p. 377.

Upon leaving prison, the Micawbers move to Canterbury. There, Micawber does business with Uriah Heep, a dangerous and deceitful man. It is, therefore, not a surprise when he betrays Micawber, but thanks to an investigation he carries out, the trickery of Heep is exposed, and our hero regains his dignity and happiness. He does, admittedly, end up in prison again, but only for a short time. As a result, the Micawber family decide to emigrate to Australia.¹⁶ There they live happily and industriously, and Micawber builds a career as a judge. This, in short, is the story of Micawber, which will intertwine with the fate of the eponymous character at some point in the novel (chapter eleven¹⁷). When little David, forced to earn his keep after his mother's death, rents a room at Micawber's, he will start a new and better (at least for now) chapter in his hard life. Micawber as a comic character will play no small part in this.

I will formulate in a few points the way comedy works in connection to the character of Micawber in selected Polish translations of *David Copperfield*, and explore the way the texts present Micawber: does he make us laugh the same in these texts and, if so, how? Is it through his behaviour, what he is saying, or how he is saying it? Does the 'Polish Micawber' gain more of or lose his characteristic way of being, when compared with the original? Does he introduce a similar comedic aspect to the novel?

MICAWBER'S LIFE (AS IF) IN THEATRE

Micawber is perhaps the most mobile character in *David Copperfield*. His existence in the novel is reminiscent of the theatrical stage, which the actors enter and exit, play their part and leave. Micawber's 'entering' the pages of the novel and 'exiting' them is continuous and takes place in a linear order: from chapter eleven, where he appears for the first time, up until the novel's finale, where the now adult David receives a letter from Micawber from Australia. Whenever Micawber sojourns somewhere 'beyond the stage' (his stays in Plymouth and Canterbury), the letters he continually writes and sends to his friends remind us of/confirm his presence. When David first meets Micawber, he describes him in the following way:

16 Representation of Australia as a place of emigration is a rarity in the works of Dickens. *David Copperfield* is the exception, as it was usually prisoners who were forcefully transported to Australia. See: entry *Australia* in: *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, pp. 27–28.

17 In the earlier parts of the novel, the writer portrays the dramatic nature of the child's life: the little half-orphan lives with his mother and nanny Peggotty. Their life together is modest, but happy, until the mother gets married again, to Murdstone, a cold and cruel man. The stepfather, who openly loathes him, sends David to school.

spozstrzegłem tęgiego, niemłodego mężczyznę w ciemnym surducie, czarnych pantoflach i obcisłych spodniach, z głową szeroką i zupełnie łysą, z ogromną twarzą, którą zwrócił ku mnie. Odzież jego była zbrukana, tylko kołnierz od koszuli wyglądał imponująco białą, w rękę trzymał łaskę ozdobną sutymi kutasami, na kamizelce połyskiwał monokl, dla ozdoby, jakim się potem przekonał, przewieszony, gdyż używał go rzadko i nic wcale przez niego nie widział.¹⁸

spozstrzegłem tęgiego, niemłodego mężczyznę w ciemnym surducie, czarnych pończochach i obcisłych spodniach, z olbrzymią, zupełnie łysą głową, z ogromną twarzą, którą zwrócił do mnie. Odzież jego była zniszczona, ale kołnierz koszuli imponująco sztywny. W rękę trzymał łaskę, ozdobioną licznymi chwościkami, a u pasa wisiła mu lornetka, która, jak to później zauważyłem, służyła jedynie do ozdoby.¹⁹

I found there a stoutish, middle-aged person, in a brown surtout and black tights and shoes, with no more hair upon his head (which was a large one, and very shining) than there is upon an egg, and with a very extensive face, which he turned full upon me. His clothes were shabby, but he had an imposing shirt-collar on. He carried a jaunted sort of a stick, with a large pair of rusty tassels to it; and a quizzing-glass hung outside his coat, – for ornament, I afterwards found, as he very seldom looked through it, and couldn't see anything when he did.²⁰

The descriptions of Micawber's appearance in the above translations do not differ significantly. Compared to the original, the first descriptive fragment maintains a relatively higher fidelity. Both, however, lack the three phrases that present the character in a humorous way. It is the simile 'with no more hair upon his head than there is upon an egg' and the epithets 'very shining [head]' and 'extensive face'. Reductions to the translated text limited its potential to provoke laughter. The differences in the translations are slight, but significant. In Kościółkowska's version, Micawber appears in 'obcisłych spodniach' ['tight trousers']. In Beylin's version, he appears in 'czarnych pończochach i obcisłych spodniach' ['black stockings and tight trousers']. What seemed to one author as a type of tight, men's trousers, looked more like 'stockings' to the other. In its translated version, Dickens's realistic information adds an unintentional element of mild comedy, which does not alter the meaning of the original. But in another translation the word 'pończochy' ['stockings'] creates an image of a man clad in the attributes of women's attire. This is not just comedic; it ridicules and degrades the character. The English author did not expect, and the English reader did not experience, such an effect. Here it is

18 K. Dickens, *Dzieje, przygody, doświadczenia i zapiski Dawida Copperfielda, juniora rodem z Blunderstone (których nigdy ogłaszać drukiem nie zamierzał)* [The life, adventures, experiences and notes of David Copperfield, junior from Blunderstone (which he never meant to publish in print)], translation by W. Zyndram-Kościółkowska in 1889 (Warsaw: 1967), pp. 145–146. In the next parts of this work, citations from this edition will be marked with the abbreviation 'W. K.', with the page number.

19 Idem, *David Copperfield. Powieść* [David Copperfield. A novel], translated by K. Beylin (Warsaw: 1989), p. 147. Citations from this edition will be marked with the abbreviation 'K. B.', and page number in Arabic numerals.

20 Idem, *David Copperfield*, Penguin Books (London: 1994), p. 137. In the next parts of this work, citations from the English version of the novel will be taken out of this edition, with the page specified (all emphasis in the citations are introduced by the author of this work: A. B.).

apparent how translations can introduce comedic elements due to insufficient knowledge of the reality of the era. In the illustration by Hablot Knight Browne in the first edition of *David Copperfield*, Micawber's figure appears asymmetrical,²¹ and the lack of proportion between the large torso and excessively slim legs is reminiscent of Renaissance fashion.

The English reader (and illustrator) saw the comedy in the contrasts of the character's appearance. The translation by Kościalkowska conveys this contrast as a mismatching of a white collar with dirty clothing, and the later translation by Beylin captures it as a mismatching of a prim collar and damaged apparel. The second translator depicts the character with attributes typical for an intellectual or official of her time. The binoculars, however, make every reader imagine an object which is big enough as to be surprising to be seen attached to the waist, which is simply funny. Here, the translation introduces a surplus of the character's comedic nature, which is not present in the original. Things and objects changed appearance over time, and so a translation of a text distant in time introduces a certain potential for comedic readings, which was not seen by the author or his contemporary translators.

Niewiadomska's translation does not appreciate the appeal (from a reader's point of view) of the concretisational qualities of a Dickensian style of presenting a character. It completely bypasses the theatricalised way of a character's entering onto the novel's stage, reducing the narrative information to a dispassionate announcement, that David has met 'dobrych ludzi, ale obciążonych długami i w ciągłych kłopotach o pieniądze' ['good people, but burdened with debt and in perpetual trouble with money'].²²

One of the most interesting scenes, played out masterfully by Micawber-actor, takes place in prison. There, David visits him for the first time, and gives the following account of the meeting:

Pan Micawber czekał na mnie u furty i poprowadził mnie do swojej celi, zalewając się gorzkimi łzami. Zaklinał mnie, pamiętam, aby mi smutny los jego pozostał na zawsze upomnieniem, że ten, co posiada rocznego dochodu 20 funtów, może wydać tylko 19 funtów, 19 szylingów i 6 pensów, lecz biada mu, jeśli wydaje 21. Po czym wręczył mi szylinga na portera, dał kartkę do żony i oddał się wesołości [W. K., p. 154].

Mr. Micawber was waiting for me within the gate, and we went up to his room (top story but one), and cried very much. He solemnly conjured me, I remember, to take warning by his fate; and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a-year for his income, and spent nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy, but that if he spent twenty pounds one he would be miserable. After which he borrowed a shilling of me for porter, gave me a written order on Mrs. Micawber for the amount, and put away his pocket-handkerchief and cheered up [p. 145].

21 See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilkins_Micawber, loc. cit.

22 Ch. Dickens, *David Copperfield. Powieść* [David Copperfield. A novel], reworked by C. Niewiadomska (Lviv–Warsaw: 1927), p. 102 (later quoted with the initials 'C. N.' and the page number).

Pan Micawber czekał na mnie przy furcie i poprowadził do swej celi, zalewając się gorzkimi łzami. Zaklinał mnie, pamiętam, aby mi smutny los jego pozostał na zawsze upomnieniem, że ten, co posiada rocznego dochodu 20 funtów, może wydać 19 szylingów i 6 pensów, lecz biada mu, jeśli wyda je 21. Potem pożyczył ode mnie szylinga na porter, dał kartkę do żony, otarł łzy, schował chusteczkę do kieszeni i natychmiast się rozweselił [K. B., p. 156].

The translation by Beylin was, without doubt, inspired by that by Kościółkowska: a careful reading of both volumes of the novel proves this. In some sections, the differences against the earlier version reveal Beylin's deeper understanding of the psychology of the created character: consistently comic in every detail. Dickensian humour, maintained by Beylin, reveals the 'directing-acting' virtuosity of the poor imprisoned wretch, when, as he gives the boy advice about the need to be frugal, just a moment later he deliberately (as expected?) ignores it, and having scrounged some money in this cunning way, the cheered-up actor leaves 'the stage'... to go for a beer.

Kościółkowska utterly destroys the beauty of this humorous and essentially joyful scene, stating with the solemnity of an experienced pedagogue that the imprisoned kind soul has found a recipe to improvement his fate, and that he will live by it in future. In terms of style, the change introduced by the translator clashes with the reader's expectation of some kind of 'progress' at the end of the meeting, which is set up by the theatricalisation of the character's behaviour (expressive gesticulating) as well as the kind and considerate approach of the narrator to the poor incarcerated soul. From a psychological point of view, it is also hard to believe that Micawber, having no money, could and would want to give money to David, and for the purchase of a tasty drink at that. It is easier to believe that it was the other way around. This is thanks to Dickens's style of creating characters, gifting them with comic traits, so that, in the reader's concretisations, the appropriate receptive approaches are built to experience joy, cheer and laughter. In one version of the translation, the character gives a shilling for a beer, but in the other, he borrows it. The poor man gifting a shilling with a grand gesture is a satirical image; the same character borrowing money right after a lecture on practical economy is frivolous, a trifler and an impractical person, departing from the rules he preaches, while at the same time being someone likeable and presented in a humorous light.

Micawber the comic actor will continue to reveal his stage 'might' (directed as for the theatre and carefully played) for transforming serious life events into a funny show. He succumbs to changeable moods surprisingly often, moving swiftly from crying to being joyful (just as his wife does: 'zemdląła na mój widok, a dla pocieszenia ugotowała grzanego piwa z jajami' ['she fainted upon seeing me, and

then, to lift the spirits, she made mulled beer with eggs’], K. B., p. 157). Micawber even threatens twice to cut himself with a razor. In chapter eleven, the debtor, harassed by his creditors, grabs a razor in despair with an ominous hint at suicide, only to ‘w pół godziny potem czyścić starannie buty i wyjść z domu pogwizdując tkliwą lub wesołą piosenkę’ [‘carefully clean his shoes half an hour later, and leave the house, whistling a wistful or joyful tune’] [W. K., p. 149]. The character returns to normality just as easily after the drama of the creditors’ visit, ‘pogwizdując piosenkę, z właściwym sobie wyrazem dystynkcji’ [‘whistling a tune with his typical gracefulness’] [K. B., p. 151]. Both translations modify the thought behind the original:

» Mr. Micawber would be transported with grief and mortification, even to the length (as I was once made aware by a scream from his wife) of making motions at himself with a razor; but within half-an-hour afterwards, he would polish up his shoes with extraordinary pains, and go out, humming a tune with a greater air of gentility than ever [p. 140].

Micawber will declare a suicidal thought once more, also heavily weeping, in chapter seventeen:

na te straszliwe słowa pani Micawber zarzuciła mężowi ręce na szyję, błagając, aby się uspokoił. Zalał się łzami, co mu nie przeszkodziło zaraz potem łzy otarłszy, zadzwonić na służącego i zamówić nazajutrz na śniadanie półmisek gorącego puddingu z cynadrami i porcję raczków [W. K., p. 239].

na te straszliwe słowa pani Micawber zarzuciła mężowi ręce na szyję, błagając, aby się uspokoił. Zalał się łzami, co mu nie przeszkodziło otrzeć łzy, zadzwonić na służącego i zamówić nazajutrz na śniadanie półmisek potrawy z cynaderek i porcję raków [K. B., p. 245].

At this dreadful hint Mrs. Micawber threw her arms round Mr. Micawber’s neck and entreated him to be calm. He wept; but so far recovered, almost immediately, as to ring the bell for the waiter, and bespeak a hot kidney pudding and a plate of shrimps for breakfast in the morning [p. 222].

It is, therefore, not unusual that the expressiveness of his theatrical gestures, situational behaviours and language, starts to affect Micawber’s closest circle. It is a trait of a master. David, for example, discovers with surprise that he gained a Micawber-like manner of writing pompous and extensive letters. Captain Hopkins is ‘infected’ by his theatricality (he bows back to Wilkins’s bows), Micawber’s cellmate assumes the rhetoric traits of his ‘master’ in a humorous, demagogic scene of gaining support for a petition (authored by Micawber): with excitement, louder and more emphatically than usual, he formally and solemnly reads out the letter to the inmates who are still hesitant. Micawber’s ideas, most often irresponsible

and careless, do bring results this time. The petition is approved, Micawber is released from prison, and his creditors reassured. It would seem that the unfortunate character will finally breathe a sigh of relief, proud of his success (the approved petition), and happy to be free. Will it be so, however? The criterion of probability in life is defeated (luckily) by the element of Dickens's comedy.

While the character is plagued by financial issues, problems and difficult situations, he behaves spontaneously, changeably, unpredictably: like a funny madman, one could say. Out of the many set-pieces showing him in this light, I have chosen only one as an example: Micawber at a joyful meeting with his friends (chapter twelve), which is momentarily interrupted by the news brought by David; upon hearing of his worried wife:

- » Mr. Micawber was in an alarming state, upon which he immediately burst into tears, and came away with me with his waistcoat full of the heads and tails of shrimps, of which he had been partaking.
 – ‘Emma, my angel!’ cried Mr. Micawber, running in to the room; ‘what is the matter?’
 – ‘I never will desert you, Micawber!’ she exclaimed.
 – ‘My life!’ said Mr. Micawber, taking her in his arms. ‘I am perfectly aware of it. [...] Ah, this has been a dreadful day! We stand alone now – everything is gone from us!’
 Mr. Micawber was so deeply affected by this proof of her devotion [...] that he hung over her in a passionate manner, imploring her to look up, and to be calm. [...] Mr. Micawber pressed my hand, and groaned, and afterwards shed tears [p. 150].

This highly theatricalised scene has maintained this property in both translations, though with small modifications. In Beylin's translation, Micawber, who stands behind the table, conducts the improvised ‘chór’ [‘choir’] of his friends. Upon hearing of his wife's worry,

- » wybuchnął płaczem i pobiegł za mną w ubraniu poplamionym rakami, które przed chwilą spożywał.
 – Emmo, aniele mój! – wołał wbiegając do pokoju. – Co się stało?
 – Nigdy cię nie opuszczę, Micawber! – krzyknęła.
 – Życie moje! – zawołał biorąc ją w ramiona. – Jestem tego pewien!
 [...] Ach, cóż to za okropny dzień! Jesteśmy teraz zupełnie opuszczeni, pozostawieni samym sobie!
 [...] pan Micawber wzruszył się tak bardzo, że łzy jego mieszały

się z naszymi [...], uściskał mi dłoń wylewając wiele łez [K. B., pp. 162–163].

In Kościalkowska's version, Micawber 'biesiaduje' ['feasts'], sitting by the long table 'wtórując śpiewającym chórem' ['joins in with those singing in a chorus']. In the English text, as well as in Beylin's translation, Micawber does not join in, but leads the singing ('Micawber was leading the chorus', p. 150), which highlights his leadership abilities (the aforementioned scene of writing a petition also points to this) and his willingness to stand out from others. When he finds out about his wife's concern,

- » rozplakał się i wybiegł za mną z surdudem pokrytym odłamkami skorupki raków, które właśnie spożywał.
 – Co ci jest, aniele mój, Emmo! – wołał wpadając do celi.
 – Nie opuszczę cię nigdy, nigdy! – wołała rzucając mu się w objęcia żona.
 – Świąć ci wierzę, aniele mój! Przekonany o tym jestem. [...] Dzień to był wyjątkowo ciężki. Pozostaliśmy sami, przez wszystkich opuszczeni... [...]
 Pan Micawber zdawał się być tak wzruszonym tym wybuchem małżeńskiej wierności, że ściskając żonę błagał, aby się uspokoiła [...], wyrzekał, płakał [W. K., p. 160].

The quoted dialogue in Kościalkowska's translation (also in other chapters) brings the form of a libretto to mind,²³ due to the stilted behaviours, 'directed' unnaturalness of utterances (heightened by the emotional surplus) and theatrical movements of both actors (exulted gestures of the spouses). The translations maintain the comedy of the characters and the situation (the shells on the clothing are equally as important as the proclamation of feelings), as well as the language (the 'explosion' of marital loyalty, and therefore a combination of uniqueness, spontaneity and the aspects of long lasting).

Micawber seems particularly operetta-like, as, in the original, he brings laughter by his loftiness, and sometimes artifice, of language, gesture or behaviours. In Kościalkowska, those characteristics are more emphasised still, or even overdone, which suggests that the reader should see Micawber's life issues with seriousness and empathy while still maintaining the laughter.

23 The translation of Dickens's *Hard Times* by Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski is similar in this respect. The dialogue parts often sound like text intended to be sung on stage.

When it seems that life is finally starting to get more calm and orderly for the Micawbers, and the behaviour of the head of the family starts to change,

- » Mr. and Mrs. Micawber were so used to their old difficulties, I think, that they felt quite shipwrecked when they came to consider that they were released from them. All their elasticity was departed [p. 150].

Beylin translates this as follows:

- » Micawberowie tak się przyzwyczaili do swoich kłopotów, że bez nich było im markotno. Cała ich żywotność znikła [K. B., p. 163].

This is truly English humour: to be concerned about the lack of problems. Kościółkowska, in turn, simplifies this fragment, to the detriment of the character's traits: 'tak się przyzwyczaili do biedy, że się nie mogą pogodzić ze zmianą okoliczności' ['they got so used to poverty, that they cannot come to terms with the change of circumstances'] [W. K., p. 160]. Leaving out the elements of liveliness, energy and dynamism, the translator deprived the Micawbers of the most important quality of their 'stage' image, and at the same time, of the source that gave jest, gag and humour. The comedy of language in Dickens and the translation of Beylin amused the reader and evoked fondness for the character; in Kościółkowska's translation, we are left with a dry report, without a shadow of a smile.

MICAWBER'S TABLE MANNER

I have mentioned Micawber's way of being in the novel, his continual appearing and disappearing. Micawber's speeches, letters²⁴ and preparing of punch function in a similar 'pulsating' way in *David Copperfield*. The character loves to make addresses: spontaneous, long, colourful, full of metaphors and emotional phrases. Micawber is proud of his oratorical talents, as evidenced by his non-verbal behaviours accompanying him while making a speech. Some translations, such as the aforementioned edition by Niewiadomska, or the anonymous translation from 1865 published in *Biblioteka Rodzinna* [The Family Library], eliminate the speeches to a large degree, or shorten or summarise them in the other characters' statements, for example:

24 These favourite activities of Micawber are widely discussed in works of literary criticism. See, for example: G. Storey, *David Copperfield. Interweaving Truth and Fiction* (Boston: 1991) (here especially chapter six, titled "Voices", pp. 58–68).

» W nadętych i metaforycznych wyrazach, których powtarzanie będziemy [emphasis by A.B.], [Micawber] uwiadościł Traddlesa, że będzie mieszkał w Kantorbery, że Uriah Heep przyjął go za głównego pisarza i wykupił jego weksle.²⁵

Such translation techniques, undoubtedly make the profile of the character much poorer, which, in turn, means that the Polish reader laughs much less when reading *David Copperfield* than their English counterpart does. This is a shame, because Micawber's flamboyant speeches are humorous and often satirical in relation to the situation in Great Britain at the time. The translation by Niewiadomska too often highlights the pomposity of the character's statements by introducing additions: 'wykrzyknął patetycznie' ['he shouted bombastically'] (p. 39), or 'jak zwykle był tragiczno-patetyczny' ['as usual, he was tragic and pompous'] (p. 172). The following example of one of Micawber's solemn speeches (chapter thirty-six) in the two versions of the translation will show the specific linguistic mechanisms, which shape this pomposity of the scene of saying farewell to David:

– Kochany panie Copperfield! – rozpoczął pan Micawber, wstając z miejsca i kładąc palec do kieszonki kamizelki – towarzyszu mojej młodości, jeśli mogę się tak wyrazić, i ty, przyjacielu mój, szanowny panie Traddles, pozwolicie, że w imieniu moim, pani Micawber i mego potomstwa wyrażę gorące i niedwuznaczne wyrazy podziękowania za życzenia i w ten ostatni wieczór starego życia, w przededniu wędrówki, która zmieni nasz byt całkowicie (pan Micawber mówił tak, jak gdyby wędrować mieli o pięćset tysięcy mil) niech mi będzie wolno zwrócić słowa pożegnania do mych przyjaciół [...] chmura rozwiała się wreszcie i bóg światła znowu ukazał swe oblicze [K. B., vol. 2, p. 91].

– Kochany Copperfieldzie – podjął pan Micawber powstając z miejsca, oba wielkie palce trzymając założone w kieszonki kamizelki – kochany Copperfieldzie, towarzyszu mej młodości, i ty, wielce szanowny przyjacielu mój, Traddlesie! Pozwólcie, abym w imieniu własnym, tu obecnej żony mej, potomstwa naszego złożył wam najgorętsze podziękowanie za dobre życzenia, jakimi nas obdarzyć raczyście w przeddzień wyjazdu i rozstania – pan Micawber mówił tak, jak gdyby wyjeżdżał za ocean! – Rozpoczynamy nowe życie. U progu nieznannej przyszłości pozwolę sobie zrobić parę pożegnalnych uwag tu obecnym młodym przyjaciółom [...],

'My dear Copperfield', said Mr. Micawber, rising with one of his thumbs in each of his waistcoat pockets, 'the companion of my youth: if I may be allowed the expression – and my esteemed friend Traddles: if I may be permitted to call him so – will allow me, on the part of Mrs. Micawber, myself and our offspring, to thank them in the warmest and most uncompromising terms for their good wishes. It may be expected that on the eve of a migration which will consign us to a perfectly new existence,' Mr. Micawber spoke as if they were going five hundred thousand miles, 'I should offer a few valedictory remarks to two such friends as I see before me [...] the cloud has passed from the dreary scene, and the God of Day is once more high upon the mountain tops [p. 439].

25 Ch. Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Biblioteka Rodzinna. Powieści, zarysy historyczne i podróże, stosowne dla czytelników każdego wieku i stanu [The Family Library. Novels, historical sketches and adventures, appropriate for readers of any age or position], vol. 4 (Warsaw: 1865), p. 71.

wszystko to dziś minęło, rozpierzchno się jak chmury pod zwycięskiego słońca promieniem [W. K., p. 487].

Before we comment on the traits of this statement, let us have a look at the letters, which the character sends to his addressees: most often to David. Several times, keeping it a strict secret from her husband, but decidedly in his style, Emma Micabwer also writes letters, usually asking the recipient for help and advice. The below quotations (fragments of a letter to David, in which the author reveals his problems, traditionally financial now, in chapter forty-nine) will illustrate a sample of Micabwer's epistolary skill:

Nie zastanawiając się dłużej nad własnymi zdolnościami i zasługami, umiejętnością powstrzymania gromów i kierowaniu palącą błyskawic iskrą, pozwolę sobie zauważyć mimochodem, że najpiękniejsze marzenia moje rozwiane zostały, spokój zniszczony, strawiona radość żywota mego, serce zatrute, czoło na zawsze zasępione. Robak się w bujnym załagał kwiecie, przepełniła się gorczy czara, posiew podcięty u samych korzeni. Im prędzej to się skończy, tym lepiej [W. K., pp. 630–631].

Nie powołując się na żadne zdolności, które, być może drzęmią w mej naturze, nie ciskając na niczyją głowę gromów ani nie kierując w żadną stronę mściwego płomienia, powiem tylko, że wszystkie moje marzenia się rozwiały, że serce moje nie bije już na właściwym miejscu i że nie mogę wędrować już wśród ludzi z podniesioną głową. Robak załagał się w kwiecie. Czarę przepełnia gorzyc po brzegi. Gad czyha i wkrótce pochwyci swą ofiarę. Im prędzej, tym lepiej [K. B., vol. 2, p. 245].

Without more directly referring to any latent ability that may possibly exist on my part, of wielding the thunderbolt, or directing the devouring and avenging flame in any quarter, I may be permitted to observe, in passing, that my brightest visions are for ever dispelled – that my peace is shattered and my power of enjoyment destroyed – that my heart is no longer in the right place – and that I no more walk erect before my fellow man. The canker is in the flower. The cup is bitter to the brim. The worm is at his work, and will soon dispose of his victim. The sooner the better [p. 573].

What is striking in Kościółkowska's translation, are the poetics and lyricism, which shatter and dismantle the comic charge of this excerpt. Through the allusion to *Maria* by Antoni Malczewski (a Romantic poem), this translation is saturated with the aesthetics of horror, sinister foreboding and sadness. In the original, the comedy lies in the accumulation of common metaphors in a short fragment of text (let us add that this is a trait of all of Micabwer's letters in the novel analysed). The overuse of imagery and metaphor means that Micabwer, speaking in a lofty and flamboyant style, is close to a tragic pompousness, which contrasts sharply with his social standing, common behaviour and the every-day, banal nature of his problems. The loftiness of the style does not correspond to the person speaking. Kościółkowska (who, to remind ourselves, was born in 1844 and died in 1926) did not laugh at the way of speaking, gestures, or the clothing of Dickensian characters, because nineteenth-century culture was very close to her. It was part of her every-

day life. This was not the case for the later translators. The same letter, as translated by Niewiadomska, was merely summarised and quoted:

» malował w słowach tragicznych swój nastrój. Pozbawiony ‘pogody i spokoju ducha’, z ‘sercem zatrutym’, nie śmiać ‘podnieść czoła wobec swych bliźnich’, ani ‘patrzeć w przyszłość’, pragnie wychylić do dna ‘gorzki kielich’ i ‘spocząć w grobie’, gdzie ‘robak zgryzoty ustąpi swej roli łagodniejszemu robakowi ciała’. Żegnając świat ten jednak, pożąda raz ostatni ‘zerwać się z łańcucha’ i rzucić okiem w lepszą niegdyś przeszłość [C. N., pp. 215–216].

The translator, through a selection of quotes from Dickens, steers the reader’s attention and the aesthetics of reception. By reducing Dickens’s text, she made denser the parts which characterise Micawber as a buffoon using a florid, bombastic style. The English and Polish audiences, when reading the full translation, are not just amused by the parodical mimicking of oratorical customs, and feel a superiority against the ridiculed speaker. They also taste the beauty of the phrases and periods of eloquence, as well as their rhythm and sequences of images. The reader of the Polish translation, truncated for the youth, is looking at a text which is not that funny, and their attention is directed at the faults of style, which they should avoid. The teacher (translator) apportions doses of laughter to them, and she still applies a didactic filter to even those small substitutes of Dickens. Niewiadomska applies a similar practice several more times, for example in the climactic scene of the duel between Micawber and Heep (chapter fifty-two). Micawber reads out an extensive speech, in which he reveals the outcomes of his private investigation and proves the villainy of Heep. It is one of the most important scenes in the novel in terms of the plot of *David Copperfield*, in which evil is punished, Heep goes to prison, and Micawber performs an examination of conscience in front of the people gathered.²⁶

Thanks to the reported speech method used in place of letters and addresses, Niewiadomska managed to shorten *David Copperfield* to just 245 pages, while the original is almost a thousand pages long, and other, ‘full’ Polish translations are around 800 pages long. Not only those passages from the novel were shortened. Some subplots were also simplified. Niewiadomska and Jan Dąbrowa, in the version of *David Copperfield ad usum Delphini*, left out the important, and tragic in its

26 The events which follow the examined scene lead to a happy (for most characters) ending: the Micawbers emigrate to Australia, David marries Agnes, Uriah Heep and his servant, Littimer, are imprisoned.

consequences, story of the seduction of Little Emily by Steerforth. In Niewiadomska's version, David's childhood friends, Emily and her fiancé, Ham, are seen as an example of people of the lower social class, who start a family and live very modestly, but very happily together. The family portrayed in a sentimental way as the main area of interest and, at the same time, the main end of all human pursuits and endeavours²⁷ is a realist-dramatic aspect characteristic of the Victorian novel, a genre *David Copperfield* belongs to. Starting with his earliest novels, Dickens portrayed the ideal of home as a safe, joyous place, protecting man from the adverse fate.²⁸

Furthermore, in Niewiadomska's translation, Steerforth does appear, but remains a positive character until the end. In the novel's conclusion, the reader is informed he had died tragically during a heavy storm. Emily does not meet Steerforth, and therefore Ham does not suffer when his loved one leaves him for another man. Ham does not die tragically in a storm, in a kind-hearted attempt to save the man who took his happiness away. Those events do, however, occur in the original text, and in other Polish translations. In *Copperfield opracowany dla młodzieży* [Copperfield reworked for the youth] (227 pages long, including the illustrations), Emily's idyll is interrupted by the death of her fiancé, who loses his life in the storm at sea, together with Steerforth, as we are told by one sentence at the end of the novel. The subplot of Emily's seduction, however, is not there (most likely for pedagogical reasons), although this version does feature sentences such as:

» Tak więc złe skłonności, które za młodu opanowały duszę Uriasza, powodowały nim i później. Z przykrych niezmiernie wypadków w Canterbury nie wyciągnął należytej nauki i zmusił społeczeństwo do użycia środków zapobiegawczych, których w swoim czasie, licząc się z możliwością poprawy, chcieliśmy uniknąć! [C. N., p. 217].
[Therefore, wrong tendencies, which possessed Uriah's soul in his youth, motivated him later, too. He did not see the appropriate lessons in the terribly sorry events in Canterbury and made the society use preventative measures, which, at one time, bearing in mind the possibility of correction, we wished to avoid!] [C. N., p. 217].

The presence of such comments was motivated by the didactical-pedagogical purpose of the book and its potential audience, but also, perhaps, the political climate at the time (the edition in question was published in 1947).

27 See: G. Sinko, *Posłowie* [Afterword] in: *Dawid Copperfield*, translated by W. Kościalkowska, p. 793.

28 See: entry *Domesticity* in: *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, pp. 189–193. In the novel discussed, David finds familial warmth and security with the Micawbers.

Pedagogical aspects most likely also led to the absence, in both of the translations discussed here, of Martha Endell,²⁹ the prostitute with whom the following themes are connected in the novel by Dickens: unhappiness, a suicide attempt on the bank of the Thames, images of dark, dirty and poor areas of Longon, but also help for the humiliated Emily. In the nineteenth-century, Victorian England, prostitution was a 'great societal evil'. In literature and art, prostitutes were portrayed as fallen and sinful, dark women, in opposition to light women: 'domestic angels'. Agnes Wickfield is such a light 'angel' in *David Copperfield*, a long-time friend, and finally the second wife of David. In the novel, Martha is depicted as a lonely and sad woman, who nevertheless finds her happiness by emigrating to Australia and marrying a farmer. Martha is not portrayed as a woman who 'fell' to the lower steps of the social ladder by her own fault. In *David Copperfield*, Martha is not despised. Martha is sympathised with and helped by others. It is thanks to her that Emily is found and rescued.

Linguists studying the phenomenon of humour believe that the issue is particularly difficult to analyse, because it is only partly based on language.³⁰ To a great extent, its character is non-verbal. Cultural aspects and the multi-layered nature of this phenomenon are emphasised particularly strongly when a translation of a literary piece is the subject of analysis. In the translations of *David Copperfield* discussed here, the various differences in the text's stylistics are both visible and audible. The Polish reader of this text by Dickens is, in turn, amused and moved: and thankfully so, may we add, as this is also how the English reader reacts to *David Copperfield*.

A comparative analysis of several Polish translations of *David Copperfield* proves that semantic equivalence of Dickens's humour is easiest to achieve for translators in those comic situations where the effect of laughter is least dependent on the subtlety of language. The theatricalisation of the leading character is the best example here. In the translations, the comedy of the character depends, to a greater degree, on the familiarity with the realities of the era. Translations are either not as funny as the original, or they introduce elements of laughter where the original

29 The story of Martha was linked to the project of the Home for Homeless Women *Urania Cottage* (1847–1858), founded and administered by Dickens (jointly with Angela Burdett-Coutts), who was an active proponent of social reform. It was intended as a safe haven for prostitutes and women involved in crime. For more on this topic, see entry: *Urania Cottage* in: *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, pp. 590–591. Compare also: D. Suchoff, *Critical Theory and the Novel. Mass Society and Cultural Criticism in Dickens, Melville, and Kafka* (Wisconsin: 1994), p. 53.

30 See: W. Chłopicki, "Humor jako mechanizm pragmatyczny – na przykładzie anglosaskich opowiadań humorystycznych" [Humour as a pragmatic mechanism – in the example of English-language humorous short stories] in: *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Studia Slavica*, vol. 10, issue 374 (Toruń: 2005), p. 165.

was aesthetically neutral. Due to its strong connection to the cultural context of the original text, linguistic comedy is the hardest to convey. Similarly, in the versions written for the younger reader, such as the adaptation by Jan Dąbrowa, the humorous aspect relates mainly to situational comedy, and much less often to the comedy of language. The youth find it easier to laugh at amusing situations (for example, the continual calls of the charismatic aunt Betsey Trotwood to the servant to mind the donkeys) than at florid, pompous tirades by Micawber. Polish adaptations of the novel are simplified, shortened, and less nineteenth-century: this is because they lack the extensive and fascinating descriptions of cities, villages and landscapes of nineteenth-century England. The realism of Dickens's novel (and especially the richness of language and individualisation of characters) was stripped back to a great extent. The full Polish translations of the novel are quite numerous. The translation by Kościalkowska discussed here is dominated by pathos and loftiness, and the humorous aspect is, in turn, lesser than in the original text. The version by Karolina Beylin, more accessible for the modern reader, depicts Micawber as less lofty, and more amusing.

The English social convention stipulated a limited and subdued range of movement and gestures (that is, non-verbal methods of expression) for gentlemen. Micawber's mobility goes beyond the expectations of such a convention, and his continual changing of location and posture amused the English, because it contrasted with the model of a gentleman. In the English version, Micawber is a certain type of literary figure; in the Polish translations, he is a psychological make-up. English-language criticism points to his lively movements, and so it must have been that trait that it found most surprising. Micawber behaves like a character of *Commedia dell'arte*. Here, Dickens's humour discreetly criticises the violation of the agreed norms and characterises Micawber as someone inauthentic. Micawber is, therefore, more an Italian actor than an English gentleman. Polish social norms were more liberal in this aspect. Simply the lively movements and talkativeness of Micawber were not that funny, hence the translations' inclusion of narrative comments explaining the pathos and artifice. But this is less amusing.

Thankfully, however, the Polish translation of *David Copperfield* takes turns at amusing and moving the readers. Dickens could be just like Shakespeare: every era has its Shakespeare and, we must add, its Dickens. Since the nineteenth century, new translations of works by both authors keep being created, and a comparative analysis thereof shows many significant changes, both in terms of stylistics and semantics. One interesting scholarly task would be an analysis of the remaining Polish translations of *David Copperfield*, especially the translation by Teresa Świdorska, which stands out from the others. Translations of Dickens, explored from the perspective of a selected theme or specific characters, certainly deserve

more attention that they have been paid to date. This is because the ‘Polish Dickens’ is an important phenomenon, still alive in Polish literature.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Polish translations of Charles Dickens's prose, with a specific emphasis on the humorous aspects. It examines the issue using the character Wilkins Micawber from the novel *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), considered one of Dickens's best comic creations. A comparison of the original with several translations that differ in style: Wilhelmina Zyndram-Kościałkowska (1889), Cecylia Niewiadomska (1927) and Karolina Beylin (1989) shows that Dickensian humour is most easily conveyed through situational comedy (theatricalisation of characters' behaviour), while it proves particularly more challenging to find Polish equivalents of verbal comedy, cultural context and the realities of the period.

KEYWORDS: translation, humour, English literature 19th–20th century, Dickens Charles (1812–1870)