Abstract: The existing Polish translations of Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories, created in the early 20th century, seem faulty nowadays, mainly due to the loss of various stylistic features of the original. One possible explanation may be a generic absence: a lack of comparable prose style in Polish at the time. In my article I attempt to point out the drawbacks of the two Polish translations of Kipling’s “The Cat that Walked by Himself.” I also present my own, alternative, version.

Keywords: Kipling, stories, translation, children’s literature, stylistic features, genre

Introduction

“The Cat that Walked by Himself” is one of Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Stories, first published in 1902. It is a collection of fanciful “origin stories” explaining a number of natural and cultural phenomena. “The Cat that Walked by Himself” tells the tale of how animals were domesticated and how the cat was allowed to live with humans while remaining wild. The stories were first created by Kipling for his children, especially for his eldest daughter Josephine.¹ Polish translations quickly followed: Maria Kreczowska’s² version appeared as early as 1904; another translation, by Stanisław Wyrzykowski, was published some time before 1916 (the National Library of Poland holds only its second edition, dated 1916, which contains a selection of the stories). In 1921, an unsigned “literal” translation was issued in a series of foreign language study aid books – as

¹ Cf. the British Library website.
² In later editions, the translator is identified as Maria Krzeczowska.
I consider it non-literary, I will omit it from my analysis. Contemporary Polish editions usually combine stories translated by Kreczowska and by Wyrzykowski. “The Cat that Walked by Himself” tends to be presented in Kreczowska’s rendition.

In Polish literary tradition, there is no direct equivalent of the genre Kipling used for his stories: they lack a clear moral; they are not folklore-based; they do not claim to relate any real events. They are thus distinguished from *bajka* (fable), *baśń* (fairly tale) and *legenda* (legend), respectively. They aim at amusing their reader, the child. Kipling employs a mix of registers, bathos, parodies of different styles; he includes non-standard vocabulary and phrasing as well as onomatopoeia. He plays both on literary conventions and language. This style variation must have been surprising for the early 20th-century translators, as Polish children’s literature of that time, viewed mainly as a didactic tool, was stylistically impoverished by comparison.

When Kreczowska created her translation, Polish children’s literature was still dominated by Polish Positivism, which insisted on didacticism and cultivation of social virtues, such as diligence, frugality and readiness to sacrifice oneself for the common good. Artistic merit was less important. Fantastic elements were also systematically avoided, so as not to disturb one’s “simple understanding of the world” (cf. Deotyma qtd in Kuliczkowska 1983: 49). Of course, the decision to translate the fantastic *Just So Stories* in itself transcends the prevalent thinking, but still quite a few of the translation omissions may be attributed to positivist ideas on children’s literature. Some of the weaknesses include: the flattening of style, the loss of numerous parody elements and humour as well as the lack of regard for euphonic qualities, which are especially prominent in “The Cat that Walked by Himself.”

Even though it is difficult to determine when exactly Wyrzykowski translated *Just So Stories*, the translation was most probably created after or during the “modernist revolution” in children’s literature, which happened from 1906 to 1909 (Kuliczkowska 1983: 141). This Polish version must have been rather popular – by 1928 it had already four editions, so we can safely assume that the elusive first translation was not published much earlier than the second one. The modernist revolution introduced fantastic elements into Polish children’s literature for good; it also changed the way this type of literature was perceived – now it was treated similarly to literature for adults. Consistently with Modernism’s aesthetic tendencies, Wyr-