# Burrowing into Translation: Character Idiolects in Henryk Sienkiewicz's Trilogy and its Two English Translations

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## Abstract

Character idiolects in Henryk Sienkiewicz's trilogy were studied in the original and in two English translations by Jeremiah Curtin and W. S. Kuniczak. The method used was Burrows's technique of multivariate analysis of correlation matrices of relative frequencies of the most frequent words in the dialogue. The aim of the study was to verify the intuitions of traditional interpretations, to acquire a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon, and to obtain new insights into the nature of idiolect differentiation in Sienkiewicz. Multidimensional scaling plots for the original yielded patterns of idiolect differentiation by nationality, social status, gender, and age. Corresponding plots for the two translations preserved many of these patterns and exhibited strong similarities to each other. More studies including modified methods (including Burrows's Delta) are needed to observe further and explain why exactly patterns of similarity/difference between character idiolects are so strongly preserved in translation.

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## 1 Introduction

Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) owes his international reputation to *Quo vadis*, the historical epic of Neronian times which brought him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1905. However, in his own country he is, above all, the author of a trilogy of historical romances set in 17th-century Poland and constructed according to a relatively stable outline. In all three instances, a main love plot involves a Polish hero, his maiden-in-distress, and a fascinating villain—either a foreigner or a Polish traitor. This 'private' plot is presented against the background of a political, or public, plot, in which the characters of the former are highly involved. The political plot also uses historical personae, such as the Ukrainian national hero, Hmelnitski, or the Polish king, Jan Kazimierz Vasa, and collective characters of both sides, including Polish gentry soldiers, Cossacks, or Swedes. Thus in the first part of 'the Trilogy' (as it is referred to by Polish readers), *Ogniem i mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*), the Polish nobleman, Skrzetuski, must struggle to free his beloved princess Helena from the hands of Bohun, a noble and savage Cossack leader in the turmoil of a civil war between the Poles and the Ukrainians. This pattern recurs in *Potop* (*The Deluge*), where another Polish noble, Kmicic, in love with Olenka, finds his rival in a cosmopolitan and decadent magnate, prince Boguslaw, during the Swedish invasion of Poland. The final novel, *Pan Wolodyjowski* (variously translated into English as *Pan Michael* or *Fire in the Steppe*), is a similar

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story of frontier commander Wolodyjowski, his wife Basia, and Tartar prince Azja as a Polish–Turkish war gathers momentum. The cycle of Sienkiewicz's novels has other binding features. Of the several recurring characters, the old yet feisty and hilarious Polish noble, Zagloba, the Polish Falstaff, seems to hold the whole together in his spirited and stylized dialogue.

In his fictional yet carefully researched tales, Sienkiewicz obviously projects 19th-century nationalism onto 17th-century history. This is even more apparent when one remembers that Polish literature of the 1800s was one of the few vestiges of the independence of that previously powerful country, then partitioned by Russia, Austria, and Germany. In his final words in the cycle, Sienkiewicz declares that his aim was to 'uplift the hearts' (Sienkiewicz, 1991) of his countrymen.

Three different translations of the Trilogy were made in English. Of these, two are known to this day: the first and the most popular one by Jeremiah Curtin (produced between 1890 and 1893), and the most recent one by Polish-born American writer W. S. Kuniczak (1991). Curtin, who translated almost the entirety of Sienkiewicz's output and was largely responsible for the Polish writer's success in America, often came under fire for his word-for-word approach; indeed, eminent British critic, Edmund Gosse, described Curtin's translation as 'grotesquely inelegant' (Gosse, 1897). A hundred years after Curtin, Kuniczak consciously took a contrasting approach: 'In bringing this work forward into the final years of the 20th century I make some definite stylistic adjustments to modernize the way in which Sienkiewicz addresses his English-speaking readers' (Kuniczak, 1991). In fact, Kuniczak did more than that: trying to facilitate the reading of his target audience, he frequently used explicitation and overtranslation. As a result, his 'modern adaptation'—longer than the original by some 60%—moved a critic to complain that 'apparently unconcerned about the integrity of Sienkiewicz's work, Kuniczak substantially changes the language, style, and structure of the original' (Mikoś, 1992).

The fact that Sienkiewicz has fared so well in the original and in translations into dozens of languages has been ascribed, above all, to his vivacity of description and dialogue. Traditional interpretations have always stressed that 'many of the personae in the text of *With Fire and Sword* speak in their own and individual ways', as stated in Aleksander Wilkoń's fundamental study (1976). Wilkoń, himself a doyen of Polish studies, seems to echo an even more outspoken opinion by an even more illustrious and earlier scholar, Aleksander Brückner:

> Each of the characters of the Trilogy speaks his/her own individual language—a skill alien to earlier Polish novelists; every careful reader can guess from the very words themselves if they are uttered by the jesting sybarite Zagloba, by the meek yet cunning and avaricious Rzedzian, or by the Cossack knight, Bohun, in that longing folk tone of his (. . .); none of our novelists has ever characterized so many of his/her personae with as much subtlety and with as many different idiolects (Brückner, 1908).

And yet in spite of these widely accepted opinions, traditional research did not go far beyond them; certainly, no quantitative analysis has been made. This situation is almost too tempting for anyone interested in techniques of computer stylometry. Apart from the obvious interest in a first application of such methods to a literary text in Polish, and apart from the status of Sienkiewicz in the culture of Poland, this problem seems to be almost ideally suited for the application of Burrows's established method of comparing character languages, or 'idiolects', by means of multivariate analysis of correlation matrices of relative frequencies of the most frequent words in the dialogue. The aim of such a study would be to verify the intuitions of traditional interpretations, to acquire a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon, and to obtain new insights into the nature of idiolect differentiation in Sienkiewicz.

Yet the additional interest of the author of this paper as a practitioner of literary translation[1] opened another avenue of research: to apply the same procedures to translations and to find if the patterns of similarity and difference travel across

linguistic boundaries—if differences between characters' 'idiolects' could be preserved in translation. The case of Sienkiewicz and his two Englishizers (to take another step in Burrows's neologisms) seems highly compelling when one remembers that the work of Curtin and Kuniczak differs not only by a whole century but also in the approach to translation. It would be virtually impossible to find two translations of a single text more unlike—in other words, it would be difficult to tell the same story in more divergent ways.

Finally, perhaps the best reason to undertake this project is the fact that computer stylometry and/or authorship attribution have, so far, rarely ventured into translation studies. Even other computer-assisted projects on translation are scarce and represented by those of Opas and Kujamaki (1995) and Maczewski (1996). It is a happy coincidence that the few exceptions in stylometry/authorship attribution include Burrows's (2002b) own studies on English versions of Juvenal and his and collaborators' earlier work on Beckett's self-translated trilogy (*sic*) (McKenna *et al*., 1999).

## 2 Methods

Burrows's technique, first presented in his study of Jane Austen's novels in 1987, has become a standard in the closely related fields of stylometry and authorship attribution. The calculation of relative frequencies of most frequent words in a text or fragment of text and the analysis of the correlations between them by means of various multivariate analytical procedures, such as factor analysis or multidimensional scaling, has served in numerous studies on a wide range of texts. More recently, numerous limitations and modifications have been voiced (e.g. Hoover, 2002); significantly, Burrows (2002a) himself presented Delta, a new measure of stylistic difference. Even more recently, evaluations of evaluations and possible enhancements of that newest method have already begun to appear (Hoover, 2004).

The present paper adopts what is now called the 'old' Burrows technique for a very simple reason. The various novel features of this project include the technique's first application to Polish and to the relatively uncharted area of computational stylometry in literary translation. Both seem to require a 'safe', i.e. more established and time-proven approach. To use Burrows' Delta, for instance, before the more traditional approach, would be to add yet another variable to an already complex problem. This does not mean that the new measure should not be the next thing to do, as our knowledge of its behaviour and reliability expands.

For this study, the most frequent words (MFWs) in the dialogue of all three parts of Sienkiewicz's cycle and their two English translations were identified in the entire text. Excel spreadsheets and macros were used to identify MFWs in the dialogue of thirty-five major characters in each version, and to calculate those words' relative frequencies. These results were then combined to create correlation matrices, which in turn were processed by the Multidimensional Scaling tool in the Statistica 6.0 package. The results were presented in two-dimensional graphs to examine the patterns of distances between the idiolects of selected characters at various configurations: all major characters, recurring characters, characters participating in the public/political plot, characters in the love plot, and female characters. Various numbers of MFWs (30, 100, 200, 250) were tried for best results; a more detailed discussion of this problem was dealt with in another study (Rybicki, 2000). While results seemed fairly stable for all of these numbers for the two English translations, those for the Polish version seemed less consistent at smaller MFW numbers. This is why the results presented below are those for 250 MFWs. Also, another set of MFWs common in the translations by Curtin and Kuniczak, this time at 200 MFWs, was used to compare the dialogue of characters between the two English versions in a single graph.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 The thirty-five major characters

Figure 1 presents the idiolects of thirty-five major characters of all three parts of Sienkiewicz's trilogy. It contains some interesting features that will remain quite stable in various configurations of characters. First, character distances are the greatest for the first part of the trilogy, *With Fire and Sword*,

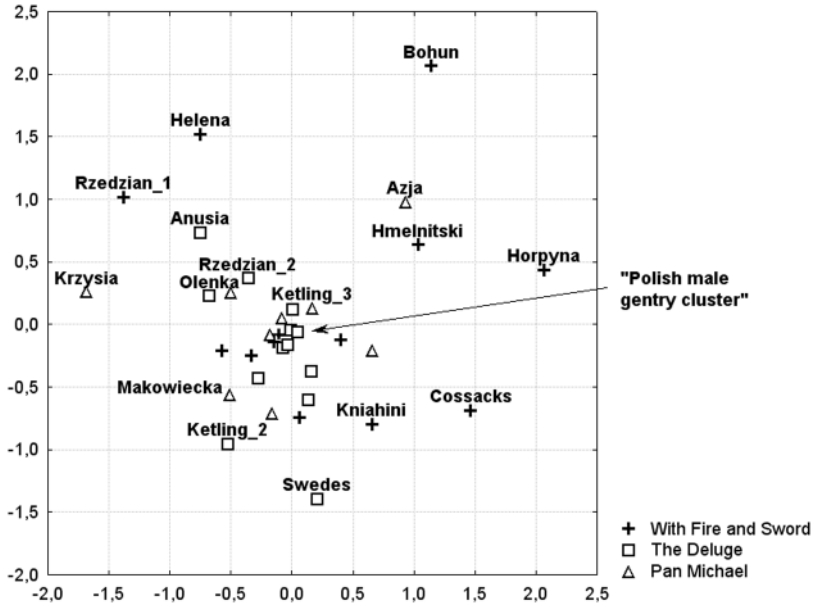


**Fig. 1** Idiolects of major characters in Sienkiewicz's original (Numbers following names denote characters in corresponding parts of the cycle.)

and the smallest for the second, *The Deluge*. The compact cluster of characters in the middle of the graph is mainly composed of male Polish gentry characters, while peripheral positions are occupied by three classes of personae: women (including protagonist Helena, secondary characters Krzysia and Anusia, and the witch Horpyna), enemies (antagonists Bohun and Azja, another major character Hmelnitski, and collective characters (Cossacks and Swedes), and servants (Rzedzian 1). Other female characters, Olenka, Basia, and Kniahini, are also at the outskirts of the central, and predominantly male, cluster.

A corresponding graph for Curtin's translation of 1890–3 (Fig. 2) seems to preserve some features of the original. While idiolect diversity of *Ogniem i mieczem* is no longer so marked, that of *The Deluge* 'translates' quite faithfully. Even more visible is the repetition of the peripheral position of women, enemies, and the servant Rzedzian, even if the male Polish gentry cluster, although still central, is now less compact than in Sienkiewicz. In perhaps the clearest departure from patterns of the original, collective characters group in the same part of the graph, with Polish gentry idiolects joining those of their enemies.

The plot for Kuniczak's version of 1991 (Fig. 3) is strikingly similar to that of Curtin in almost all patterns observed. The pairs Helena/Krzysia, Bohun/Basia, and Horpyna/Kniahini remain in the same position, as do the triads of Azja/Ketling 2/Muszalski and Ketling 3/Anusia/Rzedzian. This similarity is equally evident when a set of 200 MFWs common for both English versions is used to create a common chart (Fig. 4). The plots for each version behave in a way strongly consistent with the two previous figures. At the same time, the two versions are well separated from each other.

## 3.2 Old friends

While these patterns emerge quite clearly from graphs presenting the entirety of character idiolects in this study, limiting the number of characters in comparisons is a good idea to achieve greater clarity. Also, MDS (Multidimensional scaling) becomes more obviously precise when it has fewer dimensions to scale. The first choice in the case of any cycle of novels sharing certain characters

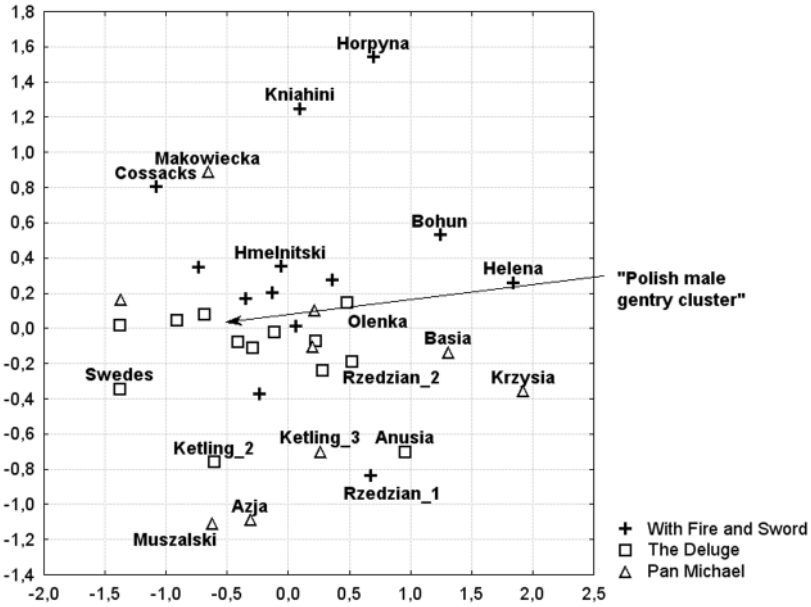


**Fig. 2** Idiolects of major characters in Curtin's translation

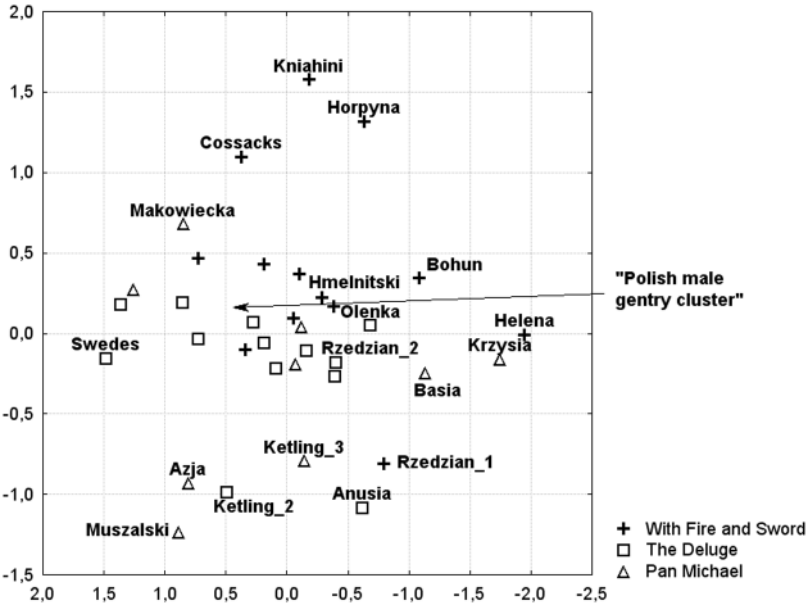


**Fig. 3** Idiolects of major characters in Kuniczak's translation

would be to examine the patterns of difference between such recurring characters. Since traditional interpretation describes some of the recurring characters as evolving, and some as more or less stable, there is in fact a whole set of hypotheses to verify. Thus Zagloba is usually thought to be a stable character, one that holds the entire cycle together. His best friend, Wolodyjowski, on the other hand,

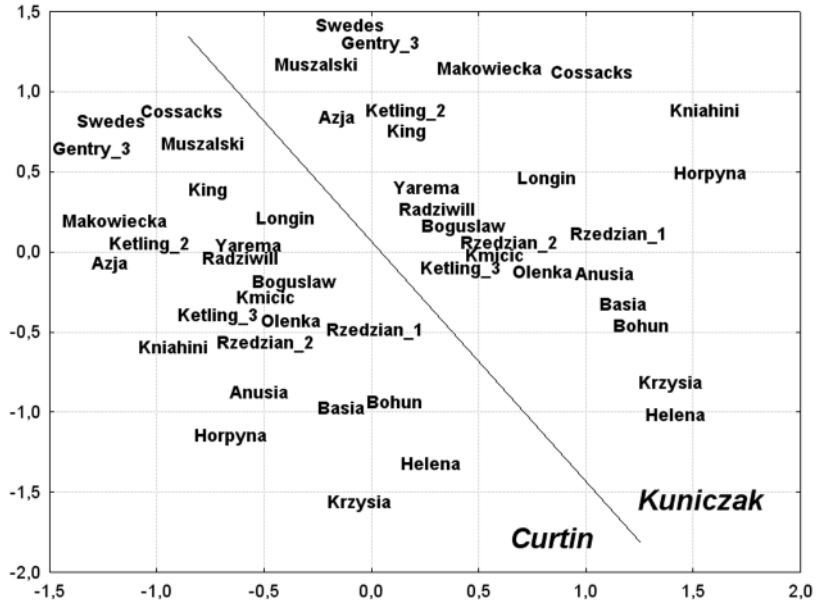


**Fig. 4** Idiolects of major characters in the translations by Curtin and Kuniczak

develops from almost a minor character and figure of fun in *With Fire and Sword* to a heroic persona in the last part of the trilogy. Skrzetuski, the main protagonist of part one, fades into the background in part two. The servant, Rzedzian, rises in society and the romantic Scottish exile, Ketling, in part two should remain equally romantic in part three.

Figure 5 verifies these hypotheses for Sienkiewicz's original with interesting consistency. Zagloba indeed remains very much the same in *Pan Michael* and *The Deluge* as he is in *With Fire and Sword*. The foreigner, Ketling, although not as stable, remains well away from the other (Polish) characters. The most significant evolution is that of Rzedzian: it seems that the leap from servitude to society is quite well reflected in the graph. Less dramatically, Skrzetuski and Wolodyjowski also move in expected directions; they tend to occupy a similar place on the graph in their heroic versions (in the first and third parts of the cycle, respectively). The collective Polish gentry character, although somewhat evolving, remains in one corner of the diagram.

The same configuration for Curtin's translation (Fig. 6) is a mixture of difference and similarity to the original. Zagloba and Wolodyjowski still constitute a centre of the plot, but the former is now somewhat less stable. Rzedzian's evolution is again significant, but it does not bring him any closer to the (less evident) noble central cluster—very much like Ketling. Both versions of Skrzetuski are also highly distinctive, yet, contrary to the original, neither lies close to the centre. The top left position of the gentry characters is perhaps the most striking similarity between Sienkiewicz and Curtin.

In many respects, Kuniczak's version lies midway between the original and the rival translation (Fig. 7). Zagloba is stable again; Rzedzian's evolution does bring him somewhat closer to the aristocratic club, and Ketling still cannot make it. Skrzetuski behaves almost exactly as he does in Curtin, and gentry retain their place again.

## 3.3 Politics

Another set of comparisons was made for characters participating in the public plots of the three novels. The obvious question was whether the idiolects would be grouped according to a principle of nationality, or whether 'enemy' characters would all be well apart from those of the 'good' Poles—as

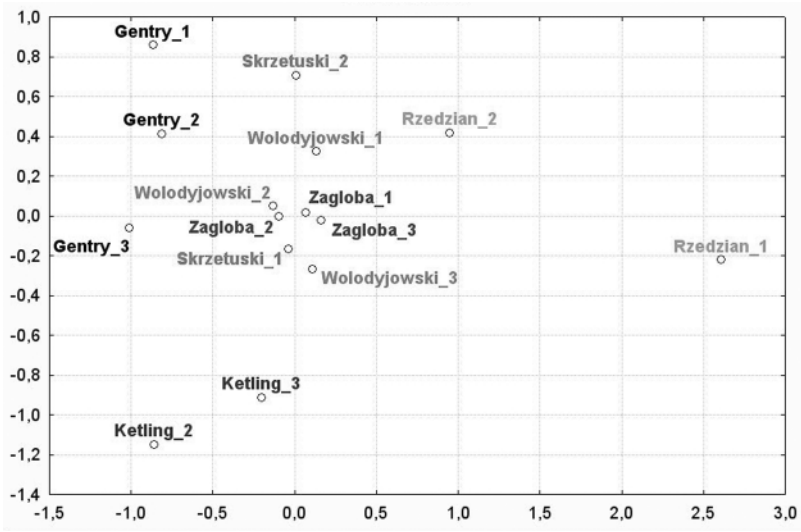


**Fig. 5** Idiolects of recurring characters in Sienkiewicz's trilogy

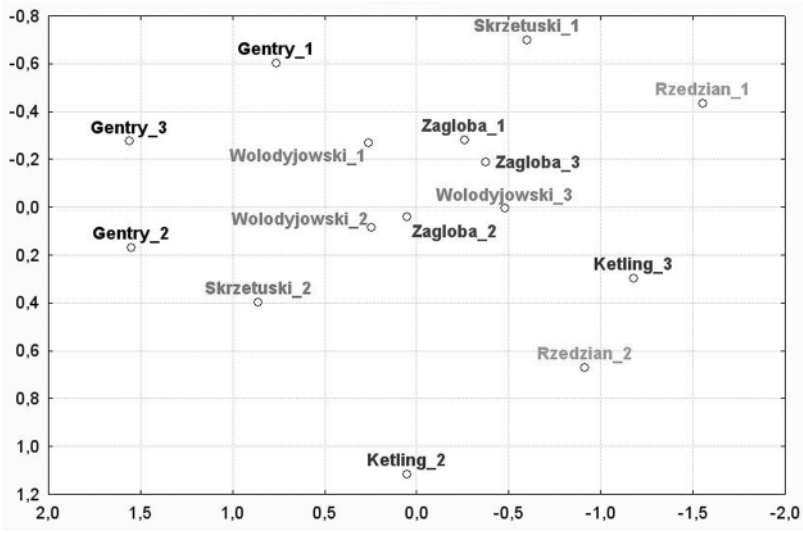


**Fig. 6** Idiolects of recurring characters in Curtin's translation

could be expected from the initial comparison of all thirty-five personae.

Figure 8 gives a very clear answer: as Swedes, Azja, Hmelnitski, Bohun and Cossacks, all orbit around and away from the closely-knit Polish cluster, the only villains in the Polish camp are two Polish traitors, Radziwill and his cousin Boguslaw, both from *The Deluge*. In fact, the former is quite close to Yarema, a very similar but not treacherous magnate in *With Fire and Sword*.

Curtin very much repeats the same pattern (Fig. 9), only with a slightly less compact Polish cluster; Radziwill and Boguslaw still belong. The four enemy idiolects remain at the periphery of the graph; Hmelnitski, by contrast, comes closer to the Poles. In fact both translations now exhibit

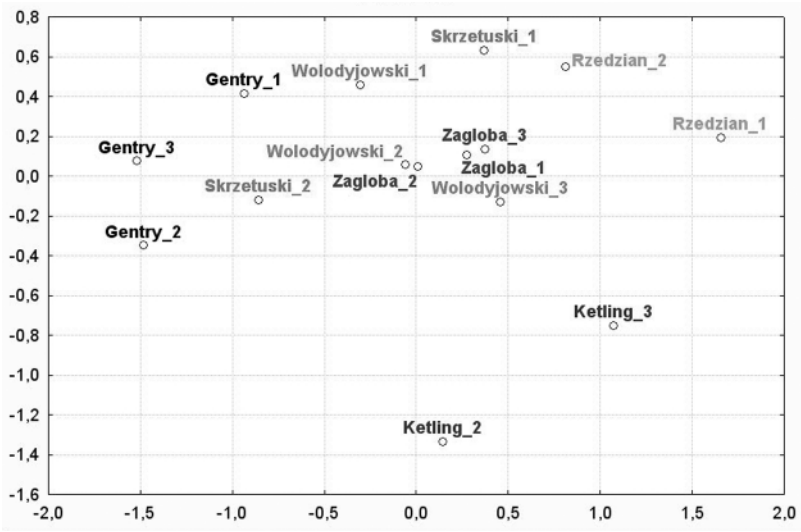


**Fig. 7** Idiolects of recurring characters in Kuniczak's translation

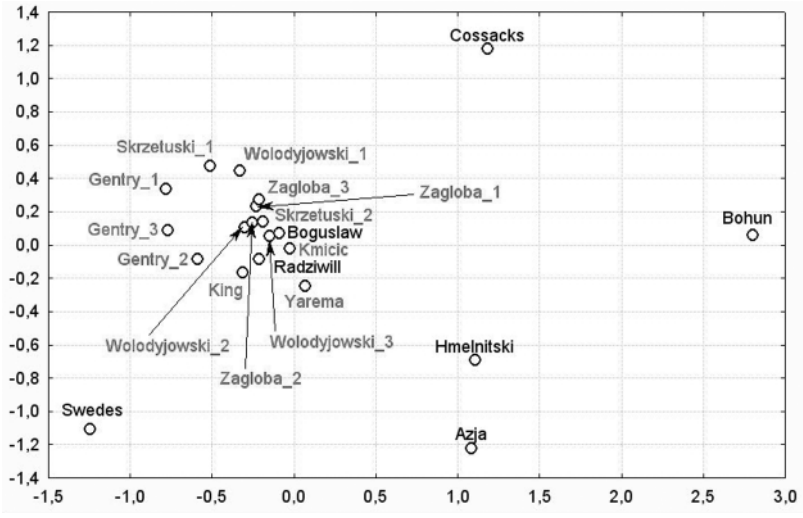


**Fig. 8** Idiolects of characters involved in the public plot of Sienkiewicz's trilogy

something of an evolutionary sequence: in Fig. 10, Kuniczak's Poles are again more diversified than those in the original, while Hmelnitski comes even closer to their central cluster, once again surrounded on four sides by Azja, Bohun, the Cossacks, and the Swedes. To associate this pattern with the view of Polish history of the 17th century as presented in Sienkiewicz's trilogy—that of Poland surrounded on all sides by threatening neighbours—would be perhaps going too far.

## 3.4 Eternal triangles

In traditional readings of the trilogy, the public plot serves as a background for 'private' love stories. At this point one would expect differences in nationality (as evident in the public plot) and

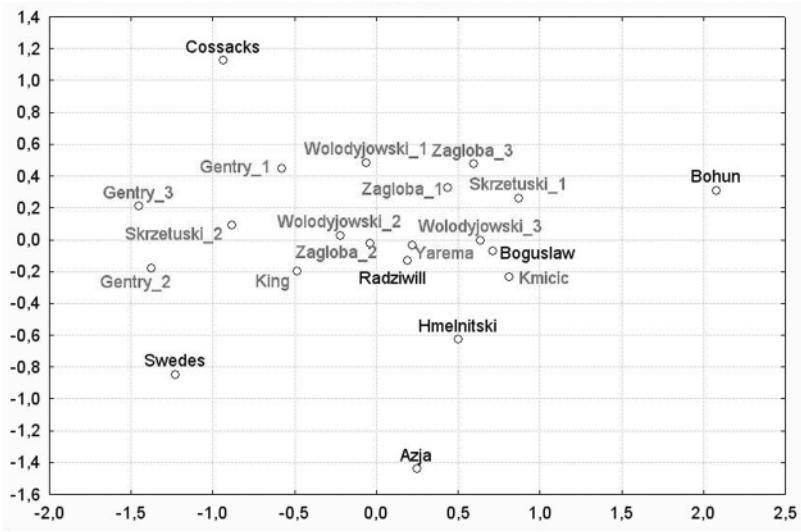


**Fig. 9** Idiolects of characters involved in the public plot of Curtin's translation

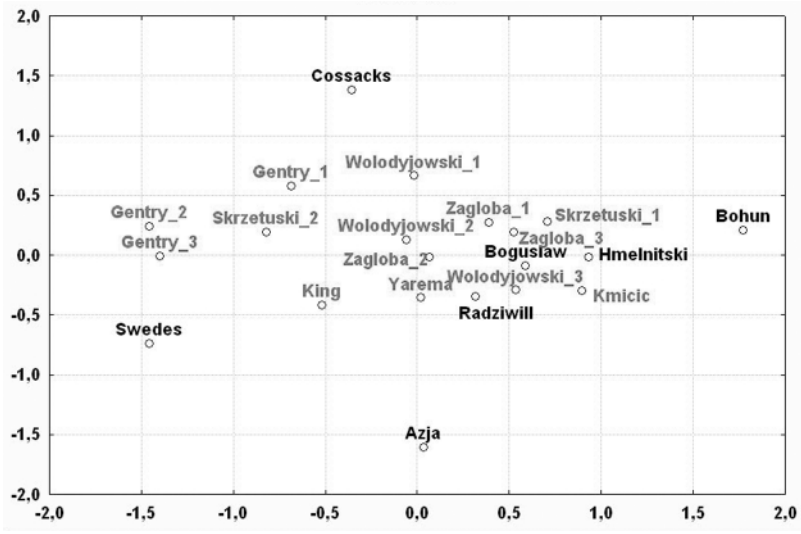


**Fig. 10** Idiolects of characters involved in the public plot of Kuniczak's translation

gender (as has already been seen in the first comparison of all major characters).

In the plot for the original (Fig. 11), the main division is that of ethnicity, as aliens/enemies, Azja and Bohun, are pushed so far out to the right that differences between its members become insignificant. Azja and Bohun are also differentiated in one of the two resulting dimensions, a possible reflection of the fact that they also differ in nationality. Then gender differentiation steps in, as the three heroines group to the left of the Polish men. Once again, Boguslaw's nationality is stronger than his enemy status. It should be noted that, just as in previous configurations, the differences between characters in individual parts of the cycle are the smallest in *The Deluge*.

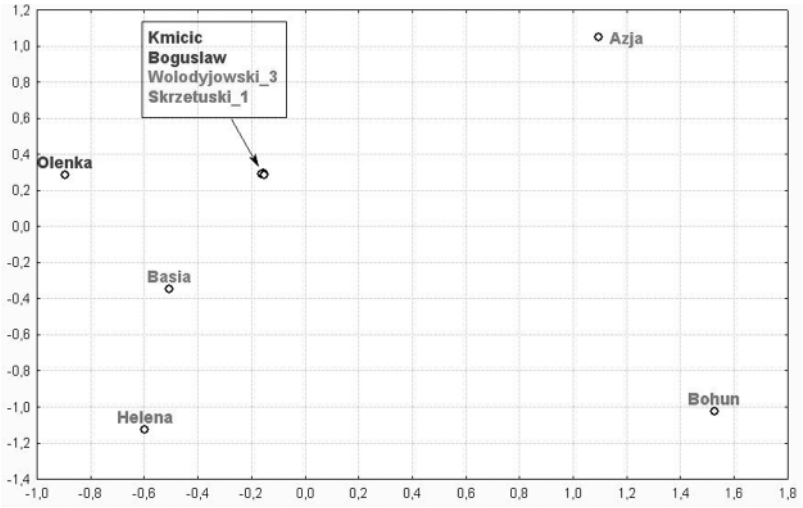


**Fig. 11** Idiolects of characters involved in the love plots of Sienkiewicz's trilogy

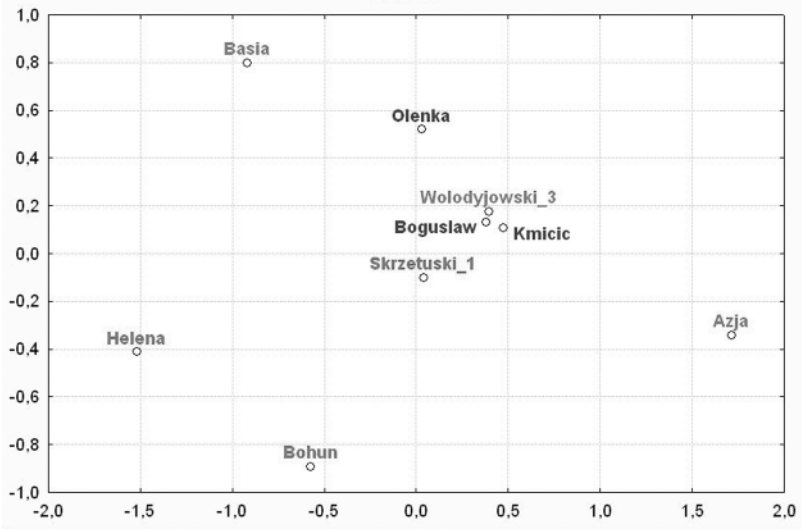


**Fig. 12** Idiolects of characters involved in the love plots of Curtin's translation

This last feature is faithfully translated by Curtin (Fig. 12); while the male Polish cluster loses a little of its identity, the proximities between its members are still very close. Female and enemy idiolects orbit around the centre, yet in a less ordered way than in the original, as Helena's scorned lover and kidnapper, Bohun, comes closer to her than does her eventual husband, Skrzetuski. The Polish male cluster is even less evident in Kuniczak's translation (Fig. 13), as it is approached by Bohun (now much closer to Skrzetuski than to Helena) and Olenka; once again, idiolect differentiation is least marked in the second part of the trilogy. This does not mean that Basia, Helena, Azja, and even Bohun leave their peripheral orbits.

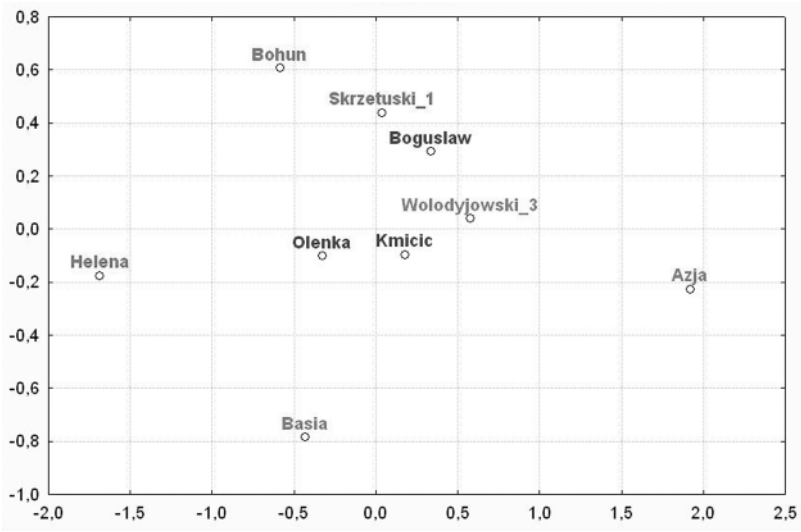


**Fig. 13** Idiolects of characters involved in the love plots of Kuniczak's translation

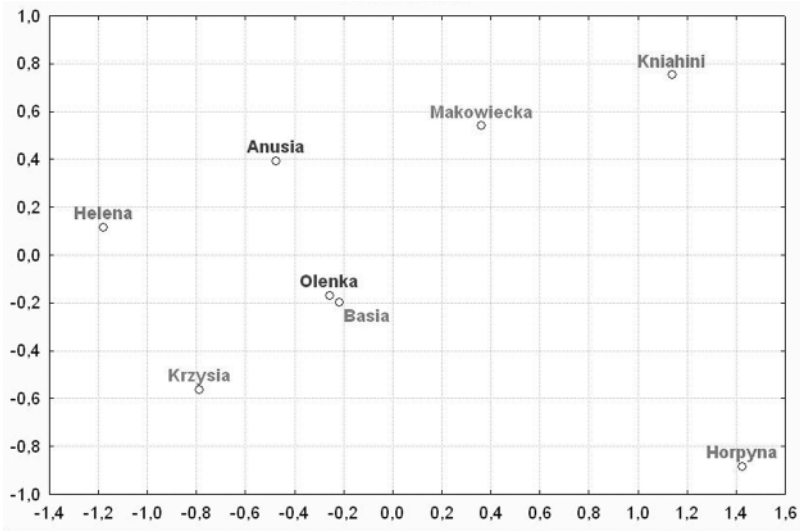


**Fig. 14** Idiolects of female characters in Sienkiewicz's original

## 3.5 Women

The final comparison was limited to idiolects of female characters, most of whom have already been shown to occupy peripheral positions in both the thirty-five character and eternal triangle configurations. Here, the expected differences were again those of nationality (Fig. 14).

The most striking feature of the plot comparing idiolects of female characters in Sienkiewicz's original is the position of the Ukrainian witch Horpyna far away from all other characters included in this comparison. Another Ukrainian, Kniahini, the old princess, occupies another corner of the graph; the two are similar in one of the two

dimensions. In turn, Kniahini's closest neighbour is Makowiecka, a nice Polish old lady. The other women are all in the left half of the plot; they are also all young, marriageable, and eventually married Poles (with the exception of Anusia, who dies on the eve of her wedding). It is then quite legitimate to argue that, in this configuration at least, Sienkiewicz's idiolect differentiation by nationality works hand in hand with differentiation by age. The close proximity of Olenka and Basia might be explained in the context of the story by the two being the most active of the young women: while the rest are only there to be wooed, kidnapped, and saved, Olenka plots her own escape; Basia, to the disgust of early critics (Tarnowski, 1962), kills or maims her attackers herself and takes the initiative to secure her future husband's feelings. Once again, the two translations preserve this quite faithfully.

## 4 Conclusions

It can be said that the chief interest of this study was whether traditional readings of a work of literature can be traced in an analysis of character idiolect differentiation, based on techniques of computer stylometry using correlations between the relative frequencies of most frequent words, and whether this analysis can in turn provide new insight for more readings of the same text. This has been shown to be true by Burrows and his followers, and seems to be working quite well in a language that has, so far, remained untouched by computer stylometrists and authorship attributors. The plots above show a good agreement between expectations derived from traditional or 'intuitive' expectations and 'hard' data provided by MDS, especially in the ethnic and social conditioning of Sienkiewicz's dialects. Some features of this phenomena are very interesting indeed: these would include the fact that nationality is a stronger determining element than whether a character is 'good' or 'bad,' as could be seen in the example of two Polish traitors, Radziwill and Boguslaw. Another interesting observation was the evolution of idiolects of certain characters that recur throughout the series—an evolution quite consistent with traditional readings of such personae. But the graphs also seem to be pointing to other differentiating factors less frequently observed by traditional scholars, such as gender or, in the case of the last configuration, age.

Equally important was the second problem addressed in this study: whether the patterns present in the original would travel at all into the translations. The intuitive doubts in this respect were obviously associated with the fact that the 250 most frequent words in a work in the source language will never match their direct 'dictionary' counterparts in the target language—despite the fact that the two works are at least trying to say the same things. After all, few of the most frequent of the most frequent words in Polish have their immediate counterparts in English. For example, the English *and* is shared by the Polish *i*, *a* and *oraz* (the first two, in fact, differing in meaning); the Polish *nie* stands for the English *not* as well as *no*. This list of possible distorting factors could go on and on: Polish is a much more inflected language than English (as a result, very frequent words, like personal pronouns for instance, occur in more Polish cases than in English); it very often omits the personal pronoun as subject (and so there is much less of *ja* than of its English counterpart *I*); it has no articles, etc.

Yet the patterns of difference and similarity are almost mysteriously preserved in the translations—so well that the above-mentioned linguistic differences might be the sole reason for the small differences between the original and the translation. In the greater picture, characters differ one from another in the translations just as they do in the original. Interestingly, at times their differences are less different between translations than between either translation and the original.

The word 'mysteriously' is a risky one to put in one's conclusion of a scholarly paper, but it seems that it can be used more or less unashamedly here. After all, both texts on translation so far presented by Burrows seem to be more or less equally at a loss. While the earlier one tentatively cites van Leuven-Zwart (consistent changes on the microstructural level between the original and the translation affect the macrostructure), Bakhtin's dialogism and Steiner's 'semantic dissonance' (quoted in McKenna *et al.*, 1999), the later one on English translations of Juvenal stays away from theory.

Obviously, translation theory is something that will eventually have to step in and help explain our mystery; yet before it can even try to do just that, it must have more data to work on. Studies must now expand into all directions. Further work must be done on the reliability of the 'old' Burrows method (with Hoover's modifications) for translation-related problems; these should then be repeated with the use of his Delta, again not forgetting what Hoover had to say on the subject. Burrows has already shown how interesting it is to compare the work of the same person as author and as translator—this avenue should be explored as well.

In the context of this study, one of Sienkiewicz's translators, Kuniczak, has also published a number of novels set mostly in wartime Central/Eastern Europe. All projects based on Sienkiewicz would greatly profit from introducing as many translations in as many languages as possible, and *Quo vadis* alone would be excellent material. Perhaps the most frightening possibility would be to perform a computer-assisted stylometric study of one's own translations—and that is exactly the case of my future work on two very similar novels by John le Carré (*A Perfect Spy* and *Absolute Friends*) and my own translations of these.

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## Note

1 I have so far translated a total of 20 novels, including works by K. Amis, J. le Carré, D. Coupland, F. Scott Fitzgerald, N. Gordimer, W. Golding, K. Ishiguro, K. Oe and K. Vonnegut.