LITERATURE

❧

Jerzy Skwarzyński

JERZY.SKWARZYNSKI@GMAIL.COM

The Translation Minefield
On Specific Translation Challenges Posed by the Graphic Novel Form

Abstract: The comic book genre, or, to be more precise, medium (Chute and Dekoven 2012), like any other, creates many formal elements which influence the interpretation of the story and set particular technical boundaries to the amount of text presented: for example, through the size of speech bubbles. In this article, I outline how both features have an effect on the process of translation by comparing Adrian Tomine's well-acclaimed (Diaz 2007, Fułek 2010, Goodreads n.d., Windolf 2007) graphic novel, *Shortcomings,* with its Polish translation by Agnieszka Murawska entitled *Niedoskonałości*. I also evaluate on the quality of the choices made by the translator.

Formal components of the comics, such as the composition of frames on a page as well as the composition of images within the individual frames, the use of color or the design of diegetic space (Lefèvre 2009), constitute how the readership (including the translator) combine the elements on the page, fill in the extradiegetic space, and thus interpret and receive the story (McCloud 1994). It is not just the text in the speech bubbles that has to be translated – it is also the way in which it corresponds to images, transitions between frames, symbolia, narration boxes or the lack thereof (Baetens 2002). Moreover, the technical constraints, such as the size of speech bubbles and narration boxes, are another feature of the medium which translators must conform to. Finally, the question of cultural references and the readers' knowledge assumed by the author may pose a difficulty, which, upon translation of a graphic novel, can be solved in a number of ways, which Murawska exemplified in *Niedoskonałości*.

In this article, I attempt to show that, in terms of translation, the elements of "articulatory grammar" (Zanettin 2008) are of utmost importance and cannot be ignored. The images and design, unlike the text, will not be replaced in any translated edition; thus, the translator must ensure that the translated version corresponds to those elements just as the original text does. Murawska's translation of *Shortcomings* is a notable example of such rendition.

Keywords: multimodal translation, graphic novel translation, comic book translation, articulatory grammar

The status of comic books and graphic novels changed throughout the last couple of decades. From an ostracized medium deemed responsible for juvenile delinquency and a downfall of morality among the young readers in the 1950s, it became a respected form of art and literature, which can be exemplified by Art Spiegelman's *Maus* winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. A position of a comic book author and translator has undergone similar shifts. Today, often elaborate and thought-provoking graphic novels pose difficulties for translators not only on account of literary finesse, but also due to unique form and various constraints it dictates. In this article, I present translation challenges posed by this form-driven medium, by comparing the original and the translation of one of the most highly-praised graphic novels of recent years. I also evaluate on the quality and appropriateness of the translated version.

Shortcomings was written and penciled by Adrian Tomine between 2004 and 2007. It was originally published in his series of comic books 'Optic Nerve' in volumes 9 to 11 (Goodreads, *Shortcomings*). It was released in one volume in 2007. A year later, the novel was translated into Polish by Agnieszka Murawska and published by a Polish publishing house specializing in comic books and graphic novels, Kultura Gniewu.

Its main character, 30- year- old Ben Tanaka, is a grumpy and pessimistic university cinema manager. His relationship with Miko, an organizer working with Asia-related cinematographic events, deteriorates, as all he contributes is negativity and indifference to his partner's needs and emotions. Moreover, he has a weakness for blonde Caucasian women, which does not escape Miko's attention. When she is accepted to an internship in New York and leaves Ben in Berkeley for four months, he starts to date white women. First, he meets Autumn, a punk girl working in his cinema. Having been rejected, he turns to Sasha, a student met during a party, who gives in to his advances, but leaves him eventually. Throughout the book, he discusses his romantic (or, to be more precise, mostly erotic) vicissitudes with his only friend, a Korean graduate student, Alice Kim.

Adrian Tomine is widely recognized among the comic book readership. He gathered mostly positive reviews for *Shortcomings*; he was described as 'an expert at hooking the reader without tricks or obvious effort' and 'a mild observer, an invisible reporter, a scientist of the heart' (Windolf, 2007), who 'captures in all its excruciating, disappointing absurdity a single moment and makes from it our world' (Diaz, 2007). What makes this novel so unique, is the way in which the 'graphical and pictorial conventions' (Zanettin 2008, 18) were employed to create what Lefèvre calls a 'diegetic space,' which is the realm in which the story takes place, and 'extradiegetic space,' i.e., all that is not included within frames but still influences the reception: for instance, the gutter or the readers' real world (Lefèvre 2009, 157–161).

The elements of Zanettin's 'graphical and pictorial conventions,' also referred to as the 'articulatory grammar' (Zanettin 2008, 18), include features specific to the comic book, used and played with according to the authors' vision and the genre a particular piece represents. What needs stressing is the fact that 'comics' is not a name of a genre, as many wrongly state; it is a medium (Chute and Dekoven 2012,

175). Zanettin goes a step further, arguing that the print form is a medium and a comic book is a sort of a media discourse (Zanettin 2004, 94). Be that as it may, the form of comics influences both the way of presenting the story and the way in which it is received (ibid.). According to McCloud, it is the reader who fills in the extradiegetic space with his perception and experience, thereby making the sequences of images tell a story (McCloud 1994, 65–69).

Indeed, Tomine uses the comic book conventions in *Shortcomings* advisedly. The novel is characterized by formal minimalism and realistic depiction of diegetic space. Panels are of similar size and shape: always square or rectangular. There are six to nine of them on every page. Panel frames are regular, quite thin, unobtrusive. Breaches and bleeding out of panels never occur.
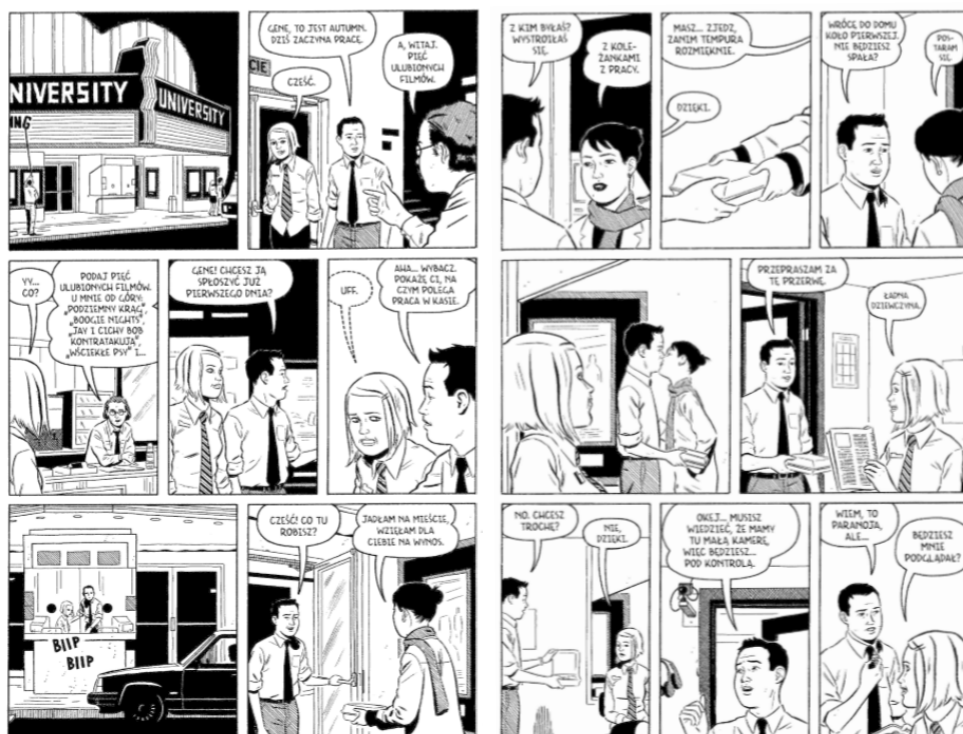

Fig 1. An example of a page composition in Tomine's *Shortcomings*.
Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, pp. 20–21.

Tomine employs a wide selection of transitions between his panels. According to McCloud's typology (1994, 70–72), the most commonly used is Action-to-Action, although other types, excluding Non-sequitur, which 'offers no logical relationship between panels' (ibid., 72), occur as well:
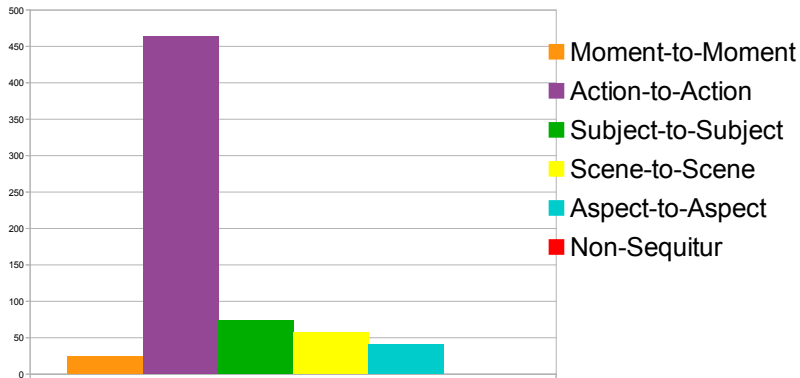
Fig 2. Panel transitions in Tomine's *Shortcomings*.

According to McCloud's research, these proportions are unusual, since most European and American comic book artists limit themselves to three transitions: Action-to-Action, Subject-to-Subject and Scene-to-Scene (McCloud 1994, 75–76). Nevertheless, the situation might have changed, as the study was undertaken over two decades ago. Even if the proportions of transitions employed has changed, it does not influence the fact that the translator ought to consider their function and influence on the reception of a piece. In the case of *Shortcomings*, the ratio of transitions and the order in which they are used indicate the prevalence of longer scenes set in one location. Together with reserved composition, lack of color and simple panels, it makes the story go at a moderate pace, unveiling it steadily and methodically. all those constituents make reading the graphic novel feel a lot like watching a film. The translated dialogue, as the original does, should comply with that convention.

Narration boxes appear only on the top three panels on the first page, which turn out to be a representation of the final scene of the film that protagonists watch. Thus, we can conclude that the boxes include the off-screen narration of the film which is 'audible' to the characters. The lack of narration boxes in panels describing the action of the actual novel refers to Gaudreault's theory of monstration mentioned by Baetens. Monstration is a way of enunciation, i.e., 'the very act of producing a sign, a message, an utterance, etc.' (Baetens 2002, 146–147). Monstrative enunciation presents the receiver with the protagonists' actions unaccompanied by any narrative additions; the story 'seems to narrate itself' (ibid., 149). *Shortcomings* is a textbook example of such presentation.

Minimalism in Tomine's work manifests itself also by symbolia, or rather the lack thereof. They only appear in form of short lines beaming radially from characters' 'sighs,' as depicted in the following example:

Fig 3. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 100.

Motion lines are scarce and subtle and appear usually when Ben slams the phone or throws something on the ground:

Fig 4. Tomine, A. (2012) *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 104.

Fig 5. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 73.

They only appear in the panels depicting the protagonists being tormented by strong emotions. This suggests that the lines do not simply depict the movement, but also represent characters' psychological state.

The way of penciling characters is also minimalistic. On McCloud's Pictorial Vocabulary Pyramid (1994, 52–53) the faces of Tomine's characters would be placed along the Representational Edge, close to its middle. Due to the realistic yet simple style of drawing, the author depicts wide range of emotions vividly.

The 'articulatory grammar' does not only play the part of enunciating the meaning, but it also constrains the translator. Their task is to provide a version which is not only loyal to the original, but also corresponds to those formal elements imposed by the author in the way the original text does.

Spatial constraints are a good example of such limiting factors. Sometimes it may be challenging to fit the translated text in a speech bubble. Changing their shapes and sizes is not a common practice; not only is it costly, but it can also ruin the original composition of a panel or even an entire page. The solution provided in *Shortcomings* is, wherever necessary, making the font smaller, like, for example, in the second bubble in the Polish version of the following panel:

Fig 6. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 68.

Fig 7. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 68.

Another element of pictorial conventions exercised in *Shortcomings* is sound effects. Onomatopoeic expressions were 'translated,' i.e., replaced by echoic words which comply with Polish conventions, as exemplified by the following excerpts:

Fig 8. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 58.

Fig 9. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 68.

Fig 10. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 37.

Fig 11. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 37.

The final convention I want to point out is Tomine's way of showing how speech bubbles sometimes overlap and bleed into the text from other bubbles when protagonists interrupt each other:

Fig 12. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 52.

Fig 13. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 52.

This convention was maintained in all cases but one:

Fig 14. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 50.

Fig 15. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 50.

This changed the way the scene may be perceived. Autumn's interruption in the original amplifies the tension caused by her refusal to kiss Ben. The translation lacks this sense of uneasiness.

Apart from the Zanettin's 'articulatory grammar' and the constraints it imposes, the language and cultural references pose challenges in *Shortcomings*. Allusions to other works appear; some of them are quite straightforward, as in the following frame:

Fig 16. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings*.
London: Faber and Faber, p. 20.

Fig 17. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*.
Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura
Gniewu, p. 20.

Gene, Ben's co-worker, enumerates his favorite films. The translator's task was to provide their existing Polish versions:

Nevertheless, other instances of cultural references that appear in the book are less straightforward and may require knowledge from the reader's part. A good example is Kim's commentary to Ben's two dates with Autumn:

Fig 18. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings.* London: Faber and Faber, p. 45.

Humbert Humbert is a main character of Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*, which tells the story of an adult man who falls madly in love with Dolores, a 12-year-old girl, as she resembles his own childhood girlfriend, Annabel, who prematurely died of typhus. By referring to this character, Kim exaggerates the age difference between Autumn and Ben, which is eight years. The reader has to be able to at least associate the name 'Humbert' with *Lolita*, and know roughly what the book is about to understand both Kim's intention and Ben's reaction to it. In the Polish translation this allusion has been accurately transferred; thus, the translation requires from the target text reader the knowledge which the original text requires from the source text reader. Both Tomine and Murawska presupposed certain cultural awareness from the recipients' part.
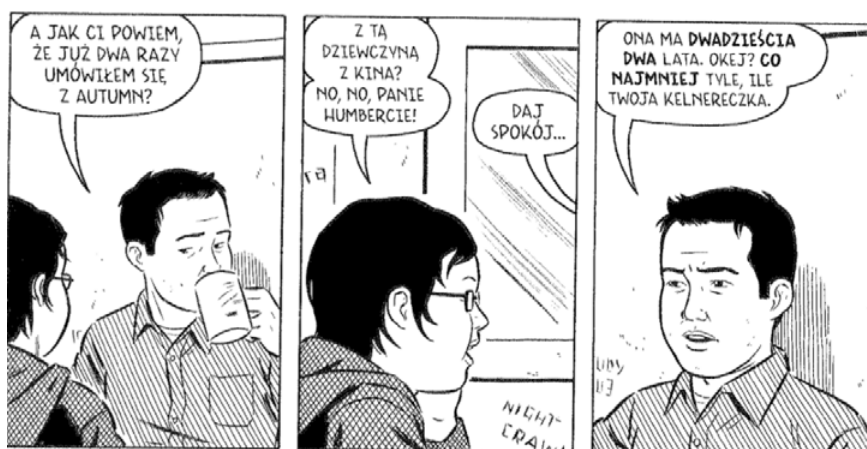

Fig. 19. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 45.

A similar reference is also made by Kim, when she reflects on living in New York:
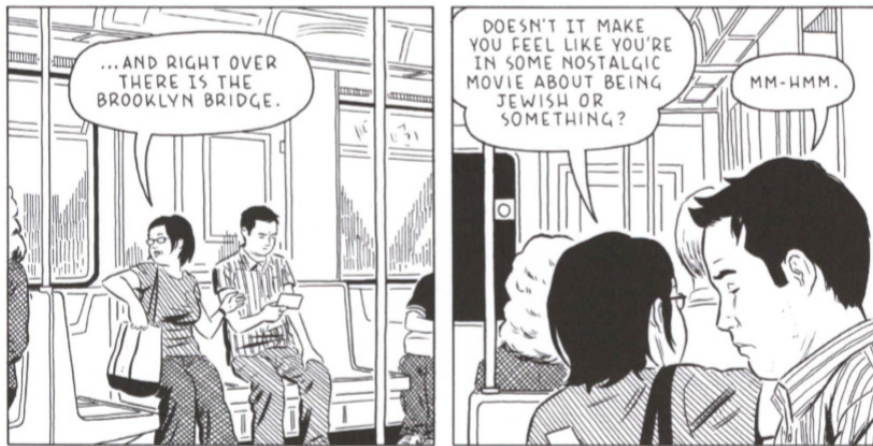

Fig 20. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 79.

Arguably, a significant number of the most notable films by Woody Allen, such as *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), and *Radio Days* (1987), just to name a few, can be humorously described as 'some nostalgic movies about being Jewish or something.' This interpretation is supported by the fact that the scene takes place in Allen's beloved city, New York, which is the setting of most of his films from the 70s, 80s and 90s. The allusion has been retained in the translation:

Fig. 21. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa:
Kultura Gniewu, p. 79.

In both versions the reader has to see the links between the city in which the action takes place and Allen's filmmaking style.

In most of the cases, Murawska let the reader notice the references without her explanations, but there is one instance in which she employed explicitation and decided to add paratext. It is Ben's comment regarding girls at the party he comes to with Alice: most of them are homosexual, so he has no chance of dating them. He refers to the Coleridge's famous poem:

Fig 22. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings.* London: Faber and Faber, p. 55.

Fig 23. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości.* Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 79.

Murawska translated the whole phrase 'Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink' into 'Woda, woda, wszędzie woda, ni kropli do picia' (**Water, water, everywhere water, none drop to drink**) and added the following footnote: "'Woda, woda, wszędzie woda, ni kropli do picia': znane powiedzenie angielskie wywodzące się z poematu 'Pieśń o starym żeglarzu' Samuela Taylora Coleridge'a" (**"Water, water, everywhere water, none drop to drink": famous English saying from the epic poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge**). This retains the cultural reference to the English literary text and fully conveys the connotative meaning of Ben's utterance.

As it has been mentioned, the interplay between the text and image in *Shortcomings* primarily conveys emotions. This is why Murawska had to be especially cautious, so as to keep all the nuances justifying the protagonists' reactions and what triggered them.

The register and style of some utterances is crucial in the development of particular scenes; they are sometimes explicitly referred to by other characters. A good example of such a situation is the following dialogue:

Fig 24. Tomine, A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 14.

'Whatever' translates into Polish as "cokolwiek." It cannot be used in this context in Polish as the phrase "polityczne cokolwiek" (**political whatever**) is not something a Pole would say. The use of the word 'whatever,' when a speaker is not able or cannot be bothered to find an appropriate, meaningful way to express themselves, functions in English, but in Polish it would not seem natural. Murawska chose the expression 'hocki klocki'; the word 'hocki' is an old Polish onomatopoeic expression which signifies 'jumping'; 'klocki' means 'blocks,' as in 'the LEGO blocks.' Together, these two words rhyme, and stand for meaningless, silly matters, unworthy of any attention. It is not a literary expression; in fact, it sounds a bit awkward and obsolete. For these reasons, it fits perfectly in Ben's complaining about Miko's interest in politics:

Fig 25. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 79.

The expression shows Ben's helpless anger at the change in Miko's behavior, which seems crucial, as the theme of his inability to accept changes recurs in the book. Moreover, it is linguistically appropriate and fits the context of the conversation.

Another example of an advised translation choice is Murawska's handling of a joke, which Ben tells Kim to exemplify the racist stereotypes about Asian men's sexuality. Let us compare the English and Polish versions:

Fig 26. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 57.

Fig 27. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 57.

The joke in the English version is based on the difference between the words 'Caucasian' and 'Asian,' which, apart from the meaning, is the syllable 'cauc' at the beginning of the former. The pun bases on the alleged correspondence between the length of these words and the size of Caucasians' and Asians' penises as well as the homophonic resemblance between 'cauc' and 'cock.' It is impossible to convey it literally into Polish, as 'Caucasian' translates into 'biały" (**white**) and 'Asians' into 'Azjaci.' There is no similarity between the two. Murawska's solution is well-conceived, as it conveys the same preconceptions and also regards the size of phalluses in a racist, though humorous, way, even though it is realized in a completely different way. The reaction of the Polish readers is likely to be the same as that of the readers of the original.

The appearance of passages in Asian languages with no translation in the original is also important in terms of creating tension and depicting characters' emotions, as seen in the following excerpt:

VERY NICE TO MEET YOU, BEN.

IT'S GREAT TO MEET YOU BOTH!

그 남자가 일본인이란 말이야?

딱 보면 몰지, 왜 몰라?

이런 뒷담은 안 하면 안 될까?

왜, 그런거 물어보면 안 되는거냐?

한국인이면 그냥 대놓고 얘기하지.

아이고...훗시나 했더니 역시나... 창 피해 더이상 못 참겠다!

WERE YOU GUYS ARGUING, OR IS THAT JUST THE WAY YOUR LANGUAGE SOUNDS?

HEY...I SAID, WERE YOU GUYS ARGUING, OR-

SHUT UP.

Fig 28. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings.* London: Faber and Faber, p. 27.

Assuming that an average English-speaking reader does not know Korean, we can conclude that the passages in this language are intentionally incomprehensible to them. The only way to draw conclusions from the conversation is to follow the punctuation and the characters' mimicry and gestures. Murawska kept this important feature by leaving the passages in Korean (and, in other scenes, also Japanese) not translated:

Fig 29. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości*. Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 79.

This issue may be interesting in the Korean and Japanese translations of *Short-comings*, as their readers will understand these passages, which is against Tomine's intention.

Nevertheless, there are some minor mistranslations as well. One of them appears in the restaurant scene, when Kim flirts with the waitress, and Ben interrupts, asking what type of oil was used to cook the fries:

Fig 30. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings.* London: Faber and Faber, p. 15.

Fig 31. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości.* Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 15.

In the original, the waitress enjoys talking to Kim, and pays little attention to Ben, probably due to his uninviting demeanor. In the second frame presented above, she speaks directly to Kim, which is amplified by Kim's response. In the translation, the waitress' body language loses its impact by the use of the plural 'you' in her offer. Kim's response is general; she answers not only on her own behalf, like in the original, but for both herself and Ben. This translator's decision changes the outcome of the scene, which, in the original, shows how Ben's unpleasantness puts others off. This has been lost in translation.

Another example of misjudged translation (or rather, an editorial error) that takes away from Ben's portrayal appears in the scene at the church, when he pretends to be Kim's boyfriend so that her parents think she is heterosexual:

Fig 32. Tomine A. (2012). *Shortcomings.* London: Faber and Faber, p. 26.

Fig 33. Tomine, A. (2010). *Niedoskonałości.* Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu, p. 26.

Captions have been put in the wrong bubbles. The reader who cannot compare the translation to the original will not see this mistake. Ben is the one who whispers, 'Man... Look at all these Asians!'; we cannot see his face, but his whispering and all that we know about him by this point suggest racist contempt in his voice. The same sentence said by Kim has a completely different overtone: it sounds like a humorous, yet innocent observation. Again, this changes the way in which Ben is portrayed.

The 'mediagenius' theory describes how an author's style, the way of storytelling and the comic book medium are inextricably interwoven (Baetens 2002, 145–146). Thus, all those elements influence the readers' interpretation and reception of any comic book or graphic novel. Translators are responsible for the version they create and for possible deviations from the original denotation or connotation of utterances. Nevertheless, from the formal perspective, comics seem to be a translation minefield, one of the most difficult formats of texts to translate, since so many different components of the work have their impact on the interpretation of the story from the readers' (including translators) part.

Features such as the size of the speech bubbles, the connection between the text and the characters' facial expressions, but also the knowledge of the readers' pop-cultural awareness assumed by the graphic novel author can be a formidable translation challenge. Moreover, the graphic novel format makes it possible to commit technical errors, such as switching the characters' lines in the speech bubbles. A mistake of such nature cannot be made upon translation of a text representing any other medium.

The translator's task is to retain the original's features, so that the translated version interacts with images and conventions applied in the way the original text does. If it had not been for some mistranslations and editorial errors, some of which have been presented above, Murawska's Polish version of *Shortcomings* would,, be close to exemplary.

References

Baetens, J. 2002. 'Revealing Traces: A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation'. In Varnum, R. & Gibbons, C.T. (eds.) *The Language of Comics. Word and Image*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, pp. 145–155.

Baker, M. 2011. *In Other Words*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Chute, H. & Dekoven M. (2015). 'Comic Books and Graphic Novels'. In Glover, D. & McCracken, S. (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 175–195.

Diaz, J. 2007. *Adrian Tomine's Shortcomings* [online]. Available at: <http://www.publisher-sweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/5846-adrian-tomine-s-shortcomings.html>. [Last accessed: 10 May 2016].

Fułek, T. 2010. *Niedoskonałości* [online]. Available at: <http://www.alejakomiksu.com/artykul/5135/Niedoskonalosci/>. [Last accessed: 10 May 2016].

Goodreads (n.d.). *Shortcomings* [online]. Available at: <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/227350.Shortcomings>. [Last accessed: 10 May 2016].

Lefèvre, P. 2009. 'The Construction of Space in Comics'. In Heer, J. & Worcester, K. (eds.) *A Comic Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, p p. 157–162.

McCloud, S. 1994. *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art.* New York: William Morrow.

Tomine, A. 2012. *Shortcomings*. London: Faber and Faber.

Tomine, A. 2010. *Niedoskonałości.* Trans: Murawska, A. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu.

Windolf, J. 2007. *Asian Confusion* [online]. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/books/review/Windolf-t.html>. [Last accessed: 10 May 2016].

Zanettin, F. 2004. 'Comics in Translation Studies. An Overview and Suggestions for Research'. In *Traduction et Interculturalisme. VIIe Séminaire de Traduction Scientifique et Technique en Langua Portugaise*, pp. 93–98.

Zanettin, F. 2008. 'Comics in Translation: An Overview'. In Zanettin, F. (ed.) *Comics in Translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, pp. 1–32.