

# TRANSLATING POLISH VERBAL NOUNS INTO ENGLISH

Jon Tappenden

I have found it very hard to produce a piece of writing that clarifies the issue of translating Polish verbal nouns. In fact, I have quite a few unfinished texts on the subject. When confronted with what in Polish is called *gerundium* or *rzeczownik odczasownikowy* (which will be referred to here as *verbal nouns*), the translator must decide whether the verbal derivative in the source text is best expressed by an English verbal noun, gerund, or other structure. See the box below for a definition of terms.

## DEFINITIONS

A verbal noun is a noun derived from a verb and morphologically similar to it (e.g., educate --> education). One type of verbal noun is the gerund, which is a non-finite verb form (one that is not marked for tense) used as a noun. In English the main device for deriving verbs from nouns is addition of a suffix, although vowel changes are sometimes involved. In English the term gerund is used to refer to the -ing form of the verb, as in "hiking is strenuous." Since every verb in English has an -ing form, in many cases gerunds and other verbal nouns referring to the same verb exist side by side (as in educating and education). There are some very subtle differences between such parallel forms in usage and meaning, leading to the complications discussed in this article.

Polish does not have a noun form that corresponds to the -ing gerunds. In Polish verbal nouns are referred to either as *gerundium* or *rzeczownik odczasownikowy*, and are all of the education type.

In this article the term *gerund* shall be used to refer to English -ing forms of verbs used as nouns; the term *verbal noun* shall be used to refer to all Polish verbal nouns and non-gerund English verbal nouns.

The fact that English nouns derived from verbs of non-Germanic origin with Latinate roots (ending in *-ation*, *-ance*, *-ence*, *-ment*, and *-ission*) exist side by side with the *-ing* gerund is a major hurdle for Slavic learners of English. Even advanced non-native speakers of English, including translators, may make errors in this area. In Slavic languages, such nouns derived from verbs are a very common way to refer to actions as grammatical subjects and objects, while in English there are many more grammatical forms to choose from, and the nuances of their use and rules for using them are a great deal more complicated. For this reason misunderstandings about nouns ending in *-ation*, *-ance*, etc. and the *-ing* gerund are very common for native speakers of Slavic languages. It may be assumed that the *-ing* form is interchangeable with English verbal derivatives ending in *-ation*,

etc., whereas these latter forms tend to be used in a more formal context than the *-ing* gerunds, and in addition the *-ing* form is more likely to convey a process, while derivative nouns have a more abstract connotation. There is also the issue of the agent implied by the *-ing* form, which will be discussed below. This complicates the whole field for Slavic users of English and translators alike, and manifests itself in errors and infelicities of this nature (to give a few typical examples):

*the coming of Christmas was expected*  
*the signing of the agreement was made after the reaching of the agreement between the parties*  
*thank you for the sending by you of the agreements*  
*the documents will be sent after their signing*  
*the conducting of business activity is conditional upon the obtaining of a license*

The difference in use and meaning of the English gerund and corresponding verbal noun can also be shown by comparing them in context:

*(his) specializing was important to him*  
*his specialization was important to him*  
*loving her was his undoing*  
*his love for her was his undoing*

As demonstrated below, when it comes to translating verbal derivatives into English we are heavily dependent on context, not only in a given sentence but also elsewhere in the text being translated. When translators come across a Polish verbal noun, they are inclined to translate it into English using the *-tion*, *-ence*, *-sion*, or other endings, or gerunds ending in *-ing*. We should not feel that we are bound by the grammatical form in the source text, however. We should always consider using an alternative structure. The form that I find lends itself to such use most frequently is the infinitive construction *to do* or *to be done*. When we use verbs to express Polish verbal nouns in English, a complication that arises is that we also have to incorporate an element of time which might not be expressed in the Polish phrase we are translating. (This issue is discussed below.) We also have to decide whether a word in Polish with a noun ending, commonly *-enie/-anie*, but also *-ictwo* and others, is acting like simple noun, a gerund, or a verbal noun. We can usually tell this intuitively from the context, but not always.



Let us look at how the context helps us choose the form in which we can best express a Polish verbal noun or gerund in English. The late Lech Kaczyński's pronouncement *Panie Prezesie, melduję wykonanie zadania!* (which if translated literally would be, *I announce the task's completion*), spoken on election night in Poland on 23 October 2005, demonstrates how the Polish *-enie/-anie* form is typically used. Polish verbal nouns and gerunds function differently in Polish than in English. In this particular context neither the verbal noun lexically corresponding to the Polish nor a gerund is satisfactory in the English translation. Either will be understandable but both will sound awkward, and, let's face it, therefore unprofessional. We need to come up with what a native speaker would naturally say on such an occasion. Use of an English verbal noun or gerund would be a waste of the opportunities for inventiveness that this phrase gives us. One could write *I [can] report completion of the task, I [can] report the completion of the task, or I [can] report that the task has been completed,* or any of many other variations. Let us think back to the context. It was election night, and this phrase was an expression of (political) triumph and satisfaction: *Mission accomplished! Happy to say, sir, mission accomplished. Mr. Chairman, we have done what we set out to do!* (the latter at the risk of making him sound like Margaret Thatcher).

Sometimes a Polish verbal noun can be translated quite conveniently using an English verbal noun—indeed, so conveniently that I think twice about using them out of fear of source-language interference. However, this fear is unfounded. These are phrases such as *dla/w celu uniknięcia wątpliwości*, which is literally *for the avoidance of doubt*, and *w odniesieniu do, w nawiązaniu do* (*in reference to, in relation to*). *Po -eniu/-aniu* (as in the phrase *po wykonaniu*, for example) can also relatively conveniently be translated using a verbal noun. But in each instance, before opting to use the verbal noun, translating the phrase as *after the completion of*, or a gerund, to produce *after completing*, we need to consider whether *having done/completed* might be more appropriate. Where the context does not indicate the subject of the verb (agent) or the tense for the English verb, we are restricted to the phrase *after/upon the completion of*. If detailed context is available, we can begin to write things like *once he has/had done something* or *once something is/has been/had been done*. We do not need to use the gerund or verbal noun if the context provides enough information; English works better when we use verbs. So we can use wording in English that in fact goes beyond the meaning conveyed by the Polish gerund or verbal noun alone.

The Polish word *przez* (which expresses “by” [someone]) often co-occurs with *po* (*trans*), for example in the phrase *po wykonaniu [czegoś] przez [kogoś]* (literally *after the doing of something by someone*), in which case an English translation using a verb structure sounds awkward, as it results in wording like *something having been done by Paul*. This means we need to revert to the active voice for *po wykonaniu przez* and write *once Paul had done...* As mentioned above, to arrive at this formulation we must depend on detail provided by the context, as *wykonanie* does not indicate time and might not indicate the agent, (although in this case it does). The best rendering might be *once Paul had done, once Paul has done, or once Paul does*. The word “following” with a verbal noun is useful: *following confirmation, following the signing of the agreement, etc.*, because no time or agent issue arises.

When dealing with Polish verbal nouns in which an agent is indicated, the agent has to be conveyed in the translation. The Polish phrase *lubie śpiewać* means *I like singing*. These two phrases correspond because the person speaking is the agent. *Śpiewanie*, as a gerund, implies an agent in the same way as the English *singing* in the sentence *singing is good for the soul* (*śpiewanie jest dobre dla duszy*). *Śpiew*, on the other hand, requires a different approach in order to convey the meaning properly because of the absence of an agent (it being a regular noun, no agent is expressed). This word would be rendered correctly if used in the phrase *someone heard singing* (*heard* is active here, not passive) or by using the English word *song* in the general sense, as in: *the story is told through song and dance*. A translator therefore needs to exercise caution and be mindful of the agent issue. It is tempting to translate *lubie śpiew* as *I like singing*. But *lubie śpiewać* means that the speaker *likes to sing his- or herself*, whereas *lubię śpiew* means that the speaker *likes to hear (other people) singing*. *I like singing* would therefore be a mistranslation of this phrase.

Words such as *suggest, advise, possibility of, and intention of* generally work in the same way as the equivalents in Polish. The Polish phrase *proponuję załatwić to inaczej* and the perhaps less common *proponuję załatwienie tego inaczej* are neutral when it comes to expression of the agent, which we infer solely from the context. In English we would say *I suggest doing it differently* or *I suggest dealing with the problem in a different way*, a phrase that is neutral with respect to agent. Since *I suggest that this be dealt with in a different way* does not indicate the agent either, it would be an appropriate translation as well. Where the source text provides information elsewhere as to the agent performing an action, we

can insert it even though the Polish verbal noun itself does not convey this, and write *I suggest that [...] deal with the problem in a different way*. My justification for making an extra effort to make such an addition where the source text permits is that it supports coherence. If inserting extra information that is provided by the context but not conveyed in a particular word makes the text flow better, then we should do so.

The English word *propose* is special because of the possible uses in English, which are *I propose having a party*, which indicates the agent *we*, i.e. *that we have a party*, and *I propose to do something*, in which the speaker is saying that he/she will undertake that action him/herself. The Polish word *proponuję* with a gerund is therefore a trap for the Polish-English translator. *I propose dealing with the problem in a different way* is “agent-neutral,” as is *I suggest dealing with the problem in a different way*, but *I propose to deal with the problem in a different way* is not, since “propose” is being treated there not as “suggest” but as “intend.”

In some cases the verbal noun can be ambiguous in Polish, as in the case of some advice once given to me that I remembered precisely, and only due to its ambiguity: *Warto rozważyć słuszność dojazdu samochodem*. If the speaker is against going by car the translation would be *I would think about whether going by car is a good idea*, and if the speaker is in favor it would be *I would consider going by car*. Only context can tell us which.

A word ending in *-anie* or *-enie* can have different functions in the same context. As a translator principally of legal texts I often come across *zabezpieczenie* as a noun meaning “injunction” (a document or court order) and shortly afterwards a phrase such as *w celów zabezpieczenia*, which is, strictly speaking, a gerund because it literally means “for the purpose of securing” but which I would translate as *as a safeguard to ensure, as a means of protection of, as security for*, etc., because this sounds better in English.

The question of singular and plural forms is also important. When the regular noun *zabezpieczenia* is in the plural we can use English noncount nouns, i.e. *collateral* or *security*, but we need to bear in mind that this is a count noun in Polish and that the author’s use of the plural might be deliberate. Instead of *collateral* or *security*, the author might have been thinking of *various kinds/forms of collateral/security*.

The possessive forms *jego, jej* in a phrase like *jego, jej wykonanie* do not convey possession. They act like the genitive of the noun that precedes the *jego, jej* in the same or previous sentence. It is common to come

across phrases like *jego, jej wykonanie* in Polish, meaning *the way something is done/made/produced*, or something’s *quality of workmanship*. Only the context can tell us whether to use a noun or a gerund here. *Zakończenie filmu* will be *the film’s ending*, but *czytanie książki* is *reading a book*.

Polish underived nouns and verbal nouns in the nominative before a noun in the genitive can indicate an act performed by somebody or an act done to somebody, and we are entirely dependent upon the context to determine which meaning is intended. The context also determines whether we use a verbal noun or a gerund. Compare:

*egzekucja saddama husajna* (act done to somebody)  
— *the execution of Saddam Hussein* or *Saddam Hussein’s execution*

*oświadczenie studenta* – (act done by somebody)  
— *the declaration made by/given by/submitted by the student*, and not simply *the declaration of the student*

*postępowanie Tomasza Judyma* — *Tomasz Judym’s conduct/actions*

*zabicie swych obywateli* — *killing its own people*

*spalenie tkanki tłuszczowej* — *burning off fat*

*jedzenie dzieci* — *children’s food/eating children*

With regard to this last example I found an article on the Internet entitled “Niedobre jedzenie dzieci” (children eating food that is bad for them) and another bearing the title “Jedzenie dzieci w Chinach” which was about reports, although it’s hard to believe, of cannibalism in China.

Chains of derived and nonderived nouns are very common in Polish, and most of the time the best way to translate them into English is to use verbs, but if a translator tries to use verbs every time he/she comes across a Polish verbal noun, he/she could find himself being drawn into syntactical acrobatics, poring over sentences that have become too complex. When the web gets too tangled, by all means use a verbal noun to keep the text reader-friendly (*following completion by* versus *once someone had completed something*), but never use the English *-ing* form without considering other options first.

Jon Tappenden was born in the UK and currently lives in Poland. He has a degree in German language (1995) and has been a translator from Polish into English since 2000. He has translated for a number of institutions and private companies and taught translation workshops at the University of Warsaw. A member of the Polish Association for Certified and Specialist Translators (TEPIS), in 2006 he set up his own company TAPPENDEN TRANSLATIONS, providing translations for law firms and translation agencies in the UK and working on EC translation tenders. He can be reached at [jon.tappenden@tdtranslations.pl](mailto:jon.tappenden@tdtranslations.pl) and more information about him can be found on his website: [www.tdtranslations.pl](http://www.tdtranslations.pl).