

ON TRANSMITTING EXPRESSIVENESS IN BELARUSIAN-ENGLISH POETIC TRANSLATION

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Abstract

The present article deals with various lexical, grammatical, stylistic problems encountered by translators while transmitting aspects of expressiveness of the original text (on the example of Belarusian-English poetic translation). The focus of attention is on basic transformation types, which are illustrated by the original and colourful examples. The author of the article considers not only purely linguistic aspects of translation, but also relevant pragmatic adaptation.

Keywords: poetic translation, linguistics, pragmatics, equivalence, expressiveness

1. Introduction

The process of translating from one language into another presents a great number of problems due to the multitude of the components that contribute to such a process. These components include ‘the message for transmission’ (i.e. the original text itself); ‘the one, who transmits the message’ (the author of the text); ‘recipient’ (the intended reader); the translator who performs the role of a ‘mediator’ as he or she brings the message from the author of the source text (ST) to the readers of the target text (TT); and ‘languages’ themselves, both source and target.

Taking into account all components, one should not forget that the text material forms the basis for translating processes (Catford 1965, Nida 1964). It is the text itself that the translator works with, doing a number of logical and successive transformations, which help obtain the desired result. The result can be seen in the form of ‘equivalence’, a measure of semantic similarity between ST and TT (Komissarov 1990), i.e. in the sameness relationship between them (Nida 1964).

However, the problem of equivalence must not only be discussed at a linguistic level but also at the pragmatic one. In the text we not only meet separate words, but a phrase or a number of phrases that have emotional, figurative and associative implications (Komissarov 1990). The process of translation involves considerations of the situational context, cultural background and communicative tasks. According to Newmark:

Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original text (Newmark 1982: 39).

Thus, the pragmatic adaptation of the translation underlines that translation receptors (TR) understand the implication of the message and are aware of its figurative or situational meaning.

From the point of view of transmitting expressiveness, Belarusian-English translation presents particularly interesting data for analysis. It involves a number of lexical, grammatical and stylistic peculiarities, as evidenced in the later sections of the present paper.

2. Theoretical background

For users of a language its words are not just indifferent, unemotional labels of objects or ideas. Users of a particular language will develop a certain attitude to the words that they use often to express their feelings and emotions, and they will associate words with certain beliefs and traditions (Sakalova 2011).

Creating a belles-lettres text the author endows the words with special meaning to produce certain effect upon the Receptor, to affect intellectual, emotional and volitional sphere of his or her personality. Thus, in a linguistic analysis such texts must be viewed as a communicative act and its expressive function must be specially taken into consideration (Maslova 1997).

Undoubtedly, the more expressive the ST, the more complicated it is to translate it. For the purpose of logical and emotional intensification of the word, phrase or larger piece of discourse the author can use various morphological, word-building, lexical, syntactical forms, which exist in the language, different stylistic devices (metaphor, epithet, exclamatory words, oxymoron, simile, euphemism, etc.).

Consequently, people engaging in literary translation will inevitably encounter the problem of transmitting expressiveness of the ST. Here is an emotion-loaded comment by a translator of poetry Vera Rich¹, who commenting on her Belarusian-English work, wrote:

These are the forces of Byelorussian poetry, the water of life, the physical waters of Byelorussia with its marshes, lakes and great rivers, and the symbolic waters of birth and of death; the midsummer fires of the night-pastures, the glow of winter cottage windows – and that overwhelming spiritual fire of patriotic love and fervor for the land of one’s birth.

But it is the task of the translator to channel that water, and to carry the torch of that fire into another language and another idiom. How can this be done or attempted?” (Rich 1971: 21-22)

She continued:

¹ Vera Rich (24 April 1936 – 20 December 2009) was a British poet, journalist, historian, and translator from Belarusian and Ukrainian. Her “Like Water, Like Fire: An Anthology of Byelorussian Poetry from 1828 to the Present Day” published in London 1971 became the world’s first anthology of translations of Belarusian poetry (Ya. Kupala, Ya. Kolas, P. Browka, K. Krapiva and others) into a Western European language. Later she published “The Images Swarm Free”, a collection of translations of verses by prominent Belarusian authors: Aleś Harun, Maksim Bahdanovich and Žmitrok Biadula.

Writing now as a translator, let me say that, a poet myself, I would feel a betrayal of my task in producing any version that did not reproduce the poetic form of the original. If a poet expresses his thoughts in a poem, the form, as much as the content, gives shape and meaning to those thoughts. (Rich 1971: 22)

These two quotations offered by the translator herself once more emphasise the necessity to strive and make any piece of poetic translation as understandable and intelligible as the original text is. Translation that will reflect the author's implications and that will ensure that the message sent is the message received. In order to achieve this task the translator has to resort to various transformations and to learn 'the basic rules of the craft'.

In the theory of translation there have been published many works devoted to the discussion of translational equivalence (Catford 1965, Nida 1964, Retsker 1974, Newmark 1982, Shvejtser 1988, Komissarov 1990, Breus 2000 and others).

It is clear that the translating process requires numerous interlinguistic transformations, i.e. the so called 'translational transformations', reconstruction of the elements of ST, its modification, possibly paraphrasing in order to achieve translational equivalence (Barhudarov 1975:6).

The following sections illustrate lexical, grammatical and integral transformations in translations of famous Belarusian poets into English.

3. Grammatical transformations

Every word in the text is used in a particular grammatical form and all the words are arranged in sentences in a particular syntactic order.

In a poetic text, however, the usage of certain grammatical forms and structures often aims at producing melodic, rhythmic effect, making prominent some parts of the contents that may be of particular significance for the receptors.

Let us have a look at selected examples. The first one is an excerpt from the poem by Yanka Kupala "Pakachaj mjańe, džaučynka" (Kupala 1996: 186).

(1) a.	<i>Plyv-ie</i>	<i>reča-čk-a</i>	<i>dalin-k-aj</i> , (Belarusian)
	wind-PRS-SG	waters- DIM-NOM-DEF	dale- DIM-ABL-DEF
	<i>Rybak</i>	<i>šmat</i>	<i>u</i> <i>jój;</i>
	fishes-NOM-PL-INDF	x	LOC them-SG
	<i>Pakachaj</i>	<i>miań-e,</i>	<i>džaučyn-ka,</i>
	love-IMP	me-ACC	maiden mine-DIM
	<i>Jak</i>	<i>ryb-k-i</i>	<i>ručej!</i> ²
	like	fish-NOM-PL-DEF	stream-DEF

"Down the dale the waters wind,
In them fishes gleam;

² To quote Belarusian texts the author of this article uses Belarusian Latin alphabet introduced by Branislaw Tarashkyevich for the first time in the 5th edition of the Tarashkyevich's grammar (Vilnya, 1929).

Love them then, O maiden mine
Like the fish the stream!” (Kupala 1982: 44)³

This example vividly shows grammatical transformations that the ST underwent. These include, inter alia, (1) ‘*replacement*’ of the word-form (as in the first, second line) and sentence elements (as in the second line), (2) ‘*addition*’ (the word ‘*gleam*’ were added in the second line and the word ‘*then*’ in the third line), (3) ‘*transposition*’ (the word-order were changed in the first and second lines).

It must also be remembered that in doing these transformations the translator pursued his task to capture the tone and the rhythm of the ST, which he eventually managed to achieve with significant success.

The next example illustrates how translators may handle grammatical forms and structures that have no analogous structures in the TT, i.e. how they deal with the so-called ‘*equivalent-lacking elements*’ (Komissarov 1990).

A lack of equivalence in the Belarusian and English systems of parts of speech can be exemplified by the article which is a part of the English grammar and is absent in Belarusian. In poetic texts the usage of the articles in proper places can affect poetic organization of the verse, its rhythm and melody. As an example, here is an excerpt from the poem “*Symon Muzyka*” by Yakub Kolas (Kolas 1991: 31):

(2) a.	<i>Zvoń-ać</i>	<i>zvon-y</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>zvańicy</i>	(Belarusian)
	ring- PRS-PL	bells-PL-INDF	LOC	belfry-DEF	
	<i>Zvoń-ać</i>	<i>zvon-y</i>	<i>ŭ</i>	<i>čas</i>	<i>džańnicy</i>
	ring- PRS-PL	bells-PL-INDF	ADV	x	dawnlight-DEF
	<i>Nadviačerjem</i>	<i>jasna-blednym</i>			
	twilight-ADV-DEF	shining pallor			

“In the belfry bells are ringing.
In the dawnlight, bells are ringing.
In the twilight’s shining pallor” (Rich 1960:37)⁴

It is significant that the usage of articles in the TT is not only grammatically correct, but also helps maintain the rhythmic structure of the verse.

Of a particular interest are the English syntactical (infinitival, participial, gerundial) complexes which have no parallels in Belarusian. Thus, in some places, where it seems appropriate, translators can use such complexes, although, inevitably, the strategy will involve some kind of restructuring. The example below, again from Yakub Kolas’ “*Symon Muzyka*” (Kolas 1991: 32), shows grammatically correct usage of participial and gerundial constructions in the TT:

³ The verses cited as examples 1, 5, 7 were translated into English by Walter May.

Walter May (1912-2002), a poet, translator from Belarusian and Russian, famous for his anthology “Fair Land of Byelorussia: An Anthology of Modern Byelorussian Poetry” published in Moscow in 1976.

⁴ The verses cited as examples 2, 3, 4, 6 were translated by Vera Rich.

(3) a.	Z	<i>šum-am</i>	<i>lišća</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>travinak</i> (Belarusian)
	COM	rustling-ABL-NMLZ	flowers-PL-DEF	and	grasses-PL-DEF
	Z	<i>špev-am</i>	<i>krasak</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>bylinak</i>
	COM	humming-ABL-NMLZ	herbs-PL-DEF	and	flowers-PL-DEF

“With the flowers and grasses rustling,
With the herbs and flowers humming” (Rich 1960:38)

b.	<i>Na</i>	<i>ušočuly</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>ušpagadny</i> (Belarusian)
	x	all	feeling-ADJ	x all imprinted-ADJ
	<i>Ji</i>	<i>pryjemny</i>	<i>by</i>	<i>ušpamin-ak</i>
	x	pleasant	x	remembering-NMLZ.

“Feeling all, by all imprinted,
Ever pleasant with remembering” (Rich 1960:38)

In these examples, in the English version, gerund was used instead of nouns, and participles were used instead of adjectives.

It can be emphasised once again that the replacements indicated above had a special purpose, beyond simple grammatical equivalence; by doing such replacements the translator attempted to reproduce the motion of life, its beauty, rustling, murmuring sound of nature.

Thus, doing necessary grammatical transformations, the translator takes into consideration not only the linguistic aspect but also the expressive function of the poetic text. To affect readers’ feelings, their emotional state, make them live “this new life”, the life created by the author.

4. Lexical transformations

As a rule, the object of translation is not a list of separate lexical units, but a coherent text in which the source language (SL) words, together with context, make up an integral whole. Naturally, all words have individual meanings as defined in dictionaries, but the context may specify or modify the word’s meaning, neutralize or emphasize some part of its semantics. Before looking for an equivalent in the target language, the translator has to engage in a careful study of the context to identify the relevant meaning of the word, its interaction with other words in the ST and, eventually choose the equivalent which fits the context best of all.

Let us see how translators of Belarusian poetry succeeded in selecting target language (TL) equivalents for the words of the original, as evidenced in an excerpt from the verse by *Yakub Kolas* “*Rodnyja vobrazy*” (Kolas 1972: 105).

(3) a.	<i>Čuecc-a</i>	<i>homan</i>	<i>mne</i>	<i>spielaje</i> <i>ńivy</i> (Belarusian)
	hear-PRST-INDF	glad conversation-ACC	1SGDAT	ripe harvest-DEF-POSS
	<i>Čichaja</i>	<i>žalba</i>	<i>paloŭ</i>	
	quiet-ADJ	complaint-DEF-ACC	leas-DEF-PL-POSS	

<i>Lesu</i>	<i>vysokaga</i>	<i>šum-hud</i>	<i>ščaslivy</i>
wood-POSS-PLT	tall-ADJ	drone-DEF-ACC	happy-ADJ
<i>Piesńja</i>	<i>mahutnych</i>	<i>duboŭ</i>	
Song-DEF-ACC	mighty-ADJ	oak-tree-DEF-PL-POSS	

“I hear the ripe harvest in glad conversation,
The quiet complaint of the leas,
The happy drone of tall woods’ murmuration,
The song of the mighty oak-trees.” (Rich 1971:62)

In this excerpt we meet a number of lexical transformations. Thus, in the first line there are two ‘lexical replacements’.

1. The first one is in the form of ‘generalization’, a word with a more general sense is used instead of one with a narrow sense (Komissarov 1990). For instance, the Belarusian word ‘*ńiva*’ (a field in which corn is grown) was changed into ‘*harvest*’, which has a wider sense as (1) the season when crops are gathered from the fields or the activity of gathering crops, (2) the amount of crops that are gathered (Oxford English Dictionary 2004).

2. The second one is in the form of ‘specification’ (Komissarov 1990). The Belarusian word ‘*homan*’ refers to natural sounds produced by tree leaves. Some figurative meaning is embedded in the word, as if leaves not only rustle, but also seems to talk to you, ‘in glad conversation’. In this context, the translator modulated the situation to be understood by the target foreign audiences.

Another interesting moment in this passage is the use of the English word ‘*lea*’ in the second line as an equivalent for the for Belarusian word ‘*pole*’. Vera Rich chose that word, instead of, for instance, ‘*field*’, although any English-Belarusian dictionary would translate ‘field’ as ‘pole’ (an area of cleared enclosed land used for cultivation or pasture). Certainly, ‘lea’ (grassland, pasture) fits the context best of all because of its expressive colouring and poetic function. This choice provides evidence that her search for equivalence in the emotional impact prevails over simple lexical equivalence. For a translator it is not enough only to choose the appropriate equivalent but reproduce the whole situation and the desired effect on TR.

One more example to handle context-bound words and its solution. The excerpt from *Yanka Kupala’s verse “A jana...”* (Kupala 1997:4:23).

(4) a. <i>Stolki</i>	<i>piešeń</i>	<i>nad</i>	<i>pieśnami</i>	<i>joj ja nap-ieŭ</i>	(Belarusian)
So many-ADV	songs-PL-ACC	LOC	songs-PL-ABL	x 1Pl sing-PST-SG	
<i>Stolki</i>	<i>dumak</i>		<i>zlažyŭ ab joj</i>	<i>važnych, tajomnych...</i>	
So many- ADV	thoughts-PL-ACC	x	of her	x secret-ADJ	affairs

‘So many songs upon songs which I sang,
So many the thoughts of her, secret affairs’... (Kupala 1982: 69)

These two lines are interesting for analysis. Thus, (1) a metaphorical expression ‘*piešeń nad pieśnami*’ in the first one was translated literally, ‘*songs upon songs*’ is its ‘calque’; (2) the adjectives ‘*važnych, tajomnych*’ in the second line modify the noun ‘*dumak*’, but

they also stand loose for emphasis and their significance in the sentence. The author by using the lines in this form structurally and lexically underlines that he was thinking about the girl, he cherished his thoughts, they were important and precious for him. In TT this crucial element of the ST was not rendered and it may even be claimed in the context that it may have led to some inaccuracies or, possibly not envisaged, ambiguity. In translation the effect is that it seems that the author was thinking about the girl and her secret affairs.

The cited example shows that translators may not always succeed in finding proper equivalents to translate words with a sufficiently and adequately wide range of reference.

5. Selected interesting cases

It seems beyond doubt that the type of lexical and grammatical transformations, as discussed above are interconnected and appear in complexes in translating processes. By adhering to certain explicit or implicit rules, the translator strives to solve the difficulties in finding equivalent expressions in the context of dissimilarity of languages.

In the present section, particular attention is being paid to especially interesting aspects and nuances of Belarusian-English poetic translation, as illustrated in relevant examples.

One of the pitfalls of translation from Belarusian is the translation of apposition. Apposition is a grammatical construction, in which two elements normally noun phrases, usually written through hyphen, are placed side by side, the second of which serves as an explanation or modification of the first.

Here are the examples how the translator solved this problem.

(5) a. (taken from *Yanka Kupala's sonnet "Na vialikim šveće"*) (Kupala 1997:3:80)

<i>Jormaŭ</i>	<i>ńe</i>	<i>majstru-je</i>	<i>kryŭda-čaraŭnica</i> (Belarusian)
yokes of oppression	NEG	frame-PRST-SG	injustice – that foul witch-NOM
<i>Ńe</i>	<i>halubić</i>	<i>dumak</i>	<i>ćemra-aslapnica</i>
NEG	crush-PSRT-SG	thought-ACC-PL	blinding darkness-NOM

“Injustice – that foul witch, frames no yokes of oppression,
Blinding darkness will not crush thought and expression”. (Kupala 2002: 58)

b. (taken from *Yanka Kupala's sonnet "Ja lublju"*) (Kupala 1997:3:79)

... <i>ji</i>	<i>stan</i>	<i>hibki</i>	<i>džaŭčyny-krasy</i>
... and form-ACC-SG	lissome-ADJ		a fair maid-POSS

“... and the lissome form of a fair maid...” (Kupala 2002: 57)

As evidenced above, to make the translated version understandable for TR and render adequately the constructions with apposition, Vera Rich used ‘*explanatory transformation*’, lexical-grammatical restructuring that helps preserve pragmatic implications of a given word (Komissarov 1990).

Another interesting example of how translators can skillfully use the dictionary data and the information extracted from the context to solve their translation problems has been presented below.

(6) a. (taken from *Yanka Kupala's verse "A jana"*) (Kupala 1997:4:23)

<i>Utvaryŭ</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>jaje</i>	<i>ščašće z-nad ščašćaŭ svajo</i> (Belarusian)
make-PST-SG	GEN	her	my happiness, great, whole, and sweet
<i>Čaradžejnuju</i>	<i>kňažnu</i>	<i>z apoviešći džiŭnaj...</i>	
magic-ADJ	princess	to set heads in whirl...	

"I made her my happiness, great, whole, and sweet,
A magic princess to set heads in whirl..." (Kupala 1982: 69)

Metaphoric expression '*ščašće z-nad ščašćaŭ*' that Yanka Kupala uses in ST with all his skill and poetic talent is definitely a particularly important element in this line. Consequently, it is adequate, and also elegant in translation, where the fragment is necessary that the author's implications should be understood. The collocation of words '*z apoviešći džiŭnaj*' (noun with a preposition modified by an adjective) rendered as '*to set heads in whirl*' (infinitive complex) is able to produce successful equivalence.

On a technical note, it must be recognised that in both of these cases Walter May managed to skillfully use the strategy of '*integral transformation*' (Komissarov 1990). The examples cited above show that translators can often be authorised to introduce considerable structural and lexical changes while creating a text in the target language, and that they should be authorised to perform such practices not only in contexts where there are no direct lexical or structural equivalents, but also in order to provide pragmatic equivalence.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, to solve the problem of transmitting author's implications to the readers of the TT, translators of Belarusian poetry often burden themselves with linguistic, stylistic and pragmatic tasks and puzzles, the solution of which largely depends on whether they can correctly understand the context of the source text, relevant intricacies and interaction between words, culture-specific and culture-dependent figurative and associative nuances of the ST and the Belarusian language itself. The complexity of relevant tasks leads to the conclusion that a good poetic translator must be a versatile scholar and a talented poet.

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