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Problems of Translating into Russian

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Problems of Translating into Russian

Abstract

The general traditions of Russian literature has been based on the requirement that any literary translation should be good literature in itself as well as preserving the author's manner of writing. It seems that understanding of J.R.R. Tolkien and his books is growing very slowly in Russia. There have never been any professional literary works on Tolkien or the problems of translating his works. A number of approaches to translating are connected with this fact. A short history of this subject shows that both the author's attitude and fairy-story reality should be reproduced correctly and with care. I am going to compare Russian published versions of *The Lord of the Rings* (by V. Murav'ev & A. Kistyakovskii, by V. Matorina, by N. Grigorieva & V. Grushetskiy, and by Z. Bobir). The following are discussed: • The author's and translator's attitudes to the story they tell (horror and humour, fairies and dragons) • Reliability of Middle-earth elements - how this is achieved by different approaches (hobbits' names and manner of speech, Elvish languages and so on) • Folklore and the nature of the hero: ways to find analogies • The laws of Faerie must not be changed! A fully adequate version should find solutions for all these problems; but really the more is done the better the translation.

Additional Keywords

fairy-tales; reality; Russian literary and folklore tradition; Russian translations

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Tolkien became known here among a small group of translators and philologists in the middle of the 70s. From the very beginning it has been clear that this outstanding author made an appreciable contribution to English and world literature. His works were dedicated "simply to England; to my country" (Tolkien, 1990, p. 144), but the stories about Middle-earth were founded on folklore materials including all the rich folklore of the European North-West, and the philosophical and moral problems of his works were of great human importance. It is a tradition of Russian literature that a literary translation should re-create the original's forms and content using the artistic means of another language to achieve adequate comprehension of the literary work under other cultural circumstances. *The Lord of the Rings* was closely connected with the mythological, heroic, historical and literary tradition of Western Europe so it was natural to suppose it would be hard to translate.

So it's not surprising that *The Lord of the Rings* was mentioned for the first time in 1976 in a review "Tolkien i kritiki" written by translator V. Murav'ëv. It considered *A Tolkien Compass* (Lobdell, 1975) and works by Robley Evans and Randel Helms. He saw sources of Tolkien's creative work in the fact that

our age is an age to make decisions, an age when good

and evil are directly opposed . . . This feeling has inspired Tolkien's book. And the fact that his understanding of the demands of the time was expressed through fairy-story, myth, heroic *epos*, didn't harm his purpose . . . His fantasy is definitely earth-grown. Based on folklore and mythology he tried to get a synthesis of a centuries-old collective imagination . . . Tolkien's epic has an invisible basis, that is, its magical-faery, historical-linguistic support . . .²
(Murav'ëv, 1976, p. 110)

V. Murav'ëv regards Middle-earth as a "faery-ordinary" world existing in four dimensions: in geography, history, morality and linguistics.

The genre of *The Lord of the Rings* was considered in papers and a thesis by another famous translator, S. Koshelev (1981). He defined the book as a philosophical fantasy romance with elements of a fairy-tale and heroic *epos*.

The way Russian readers comprehend Tolkien and his books at present depends partly on the way Tolkien became known here. So I'd like to present a short history of translations of Tolkien into Russian. I think it would be better to do no more than to explain in brief how and why certain names have been translated by different translators. Any translation has many more difficulties and problems

¹ Editors' note: some revisions to this paper have been made by the editors.

² All Russian quotations are translated by Natalia Grigorieva.

than just those connected with the names. The merits or defects of a translation partly depend on the way the names were translated I don't think it can describe translation by itself. Nevertheless they are significant, sometimes showing the method used by translator.

The first of Tolkien's books in Russian was *The Hobbit* (Tolkien/Rakhmanova, 1976) published in 1976. N. Rakhmanova's method was the traditional one for literary translations of fairy-tales. The names and places were simply transcribed for the most part, such as "Baggins" – Вэггинс, "Rivendell" – Райвенделл, Dale – Дэйл.

A slightly abridged version of "Leaf by Niggle", translated by S. Koshelev, was published in the popular magazine *Khimiya i zhizn* in 1980. The epilogue by Yu. Shreider called the story "a parable about creative work" (Shreider, 1980, p. 92) which is connected with the author's ordinary life. That is the reason why names with meanings were translated here. For example, Niggle was reproduced as Мелкин. In Russian it is associated with the word *Мелкий* (it means "small, modest, simple person") or with the word *Мел* (chalk) indicating that he is an artist. Moreover, *Мелкин* is phonetically close to the author's own name. So an autobiographical element of the story is stressed.

It is interesting that both translations and articles didn't get any attention from general readers or publishers or even literary critics, though they were done by professional translators and were really good. The first attempt to present *The Lord of the Rings* for Russian readers was done in 1982 by V. Murav'ev and A. Kistyakovskii (Tolkien/Murav'ev & Kistyakovskii, 1982). In those years the totalitarian state was still strong. It was impossible to publish the original exactly as it was, and a lot of changes were made to satisfy the censor's demands. For example, nearly everything connected with tobacco, strong drinks, and love adventures was cut out. I suppose the only reason to abridge "The Story of Beren and Lúthien" was the fact that Beren had to bring the bride-price of Lúthien to Thingol, and that was incompatible with socialistic ideology. It sounds funny now, but it was very serious in 1982!

Nevertheless this edition revealed Tolkien to general readers. Since then enthusiastic groups of young people have begun to be interested in Middle-earth and its history. They were remarkably persistent in getting information. Tolkien became a kind of "secret knowledge" for some young intellectuals.

In 1986 *Farmer Giles of Ham*, translated by Usova, appeared (Tolkien/Usova, 1986). This fairy-tale, constructed as a witty literary game and full of numerous historical and pseudo-historical allusions, presents certain difficulties for translation. Some of them seem insuperable. Even the word "farmer" itself cannot be conveyed completely. The word "Фермер" is connected in Russian with "the capitalistic agricultural practice" and is definitely understood as a "new" word, no older than the nineteenth century. So Farmer Giles and a knight meeting has a kind of comical effect, but I am not quite sure the author would have planned it that way.

In 1987 *Smith of Wootton Major*, translated by E. Gippius and Yu. Nagibin, was published. The foreword by Yu.

Nagibin declared that

this is a fairy-story for grown-up children who are on the threshold of manhood. Those readers are endowed with a gift of understanding everything. This small story is amazingly rich in sense and the children for whom it was written would read much more in it and would get into depths that adults don't dream of.

(Nagibin, 1987, p. 43)

A fairy-story is as real as a "Secondary World". The translators are as serious and respectful to it as the author himself.

This difference in the methods of translation depends on the difference between the stories themselves. Moreover, it's closely connected with the translator's personality and his individual understanding. I think that a translation's quality may be indirectly estimated by the number of other versions which appear after its publication. It is significant that no one serious attempt was made "to improve" or "to correct" these versions. It means for me that in spite of all their differences, every one of them answers the main Russian literary requirements for translated works. Any literary translation should convey the content and sense of the original and it should be appreciated by readers as a good literary work.

Thus nearly all the "small prose" of Tolkien had been satisfactorily translated and published before 1988. Nevertheless general readers remained hardly any more familiar with Tolkien than ten years before. Those who were carried away by Tolkien reading the first Russian version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* had been concentrating on studying *The Lord of the Rings*. It was accessible for a limited circle of people who were more or less familiar with English and luckily lived in large cities where it was easier to get the necessary information. When it became clear that the two other volumes of the book wouldn't be appearing in the near future, "home-made" translations appeared. It's difficult to ascertain their number exactly. We know of about ten of them, though I'm sure there have been many more. They were made by enthusiasts who hadn't expected to see their works legally published. Most of them were made in accordance with the translator's own way of understanding, sometimes even for their own liking. But they have never kept them to themselves. Actually these "home-made" translations were distributed widely among close and distant relatives and friends. For these purposes typewriters and photocopiers were used; when personal computers and discs appeared vast horizons opened for "samizdat" or "independent (of the political system) publishing". It's impossible to count the number of people who heard about Tolkien in this way. I suppose there were about twenty thousand of them.

This "underground" dissemination of *The Lord of the Rings* coincided with the process of "perestroika". For the first time in Soviet history there was no need to take censorship into account. Public consciousness was changing slowly towards spiritual freedom. These factors brought about a significant peculiarity in the "home-made" translations. Though literarily weak, they attempted to imitate a fairy-story reality as if it were "reality", not as a kind of convention invented

by the author or borrowed from folklore to incarnate his own ideas.

The "Tolkien boom" reached Russia twenty-five years late. The present situation, when millions of copies of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are being published, a lot of "Tolkien Societies" are arising and "Hobbit Role-Playing Games" are taking place is, I suppose, similar to yours between 1965 and 1968. For twelve years, from 1976 to 1988, no more than 200,000 copies of *The Fellowship* and *The Hobbit* were sold. Since 1989 millions of copies have been sold. All Tolkien's works which were published before 1973 and are therefore free of author's royalty payments have been published here except *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* and the scholarly works of Tolkien. Unfortunately on the back of the wave of deep interest undisguised hack-work has appeared. Such is the translation by Z. Bobir named *The Lords of the Rings* (sic). It looks like an incompetent compilation of the old "home-made" translations. Another is one of the "pirate" *Silmarillions* which is abridged and literarily weak. The name of the translator isn't shown at all! "Pirate" editions are becoming a real nuisance. There are two of them now, and nobody knows what will follow!

Three versions of *The Lord of the Rings* translations are now legally published. Ours is the one published completely in 1991 (Tolkien/Grigorieva & Grushetskiy, 1991). It includes three volumes and nearly all the "Appendices". It was reprinted twice in 1992 in four books (including *The Hobbit*) and in three hardback volumes. The original version of *The Fellowship of the Ring – Khraniteli* – was radically revised by V. Murav'ev after the death of A. Kistyakovskii. It appeared in 1988 (Tolkien/Murav'ev & Kistyakovskii, 1988), the second volume, *Dve tverdini*, appeared in 1991 (Tolkien/Murav'ev, 1991). The third volume still hasn't been published³. The translation of V. Matorina has just been completed in Khabarovsk (Tolkien/Matorina, 1991, and Tolkien/Matorina, 1992).

I'm now going to discuss these three Russian versions of *The Lord of the Rings*. But first of all I ought to note that as I'm a translator myself I'm afraid I'm not impartial, though I will attempt to be more or less objective.

In the "afterword" to the *Khraniteli* version of 1982, the translators see the idea of the strife between Good and Evil in the book as a traditional fairy-tale motif. Folklore elements drawn into the author's fantasy helped him to invent a wonderfully bright and coloured magic world. His personal experience of life, including two world wars, brought moral sense into this world. "A wealth of fantasy is displayed especially in the invention of Elvish languages and, for example, in such a hero as Tom Bombadil . . ." (Murav'ev & Kistyakovskii, 1982, p. 330). So it was only natural for translators to continue "the author's wonderful game of fairy world invention" (Murav'ev & Kistyakovskii, 1982, p. 328). By the way, *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll has been translated in a similar way, when the word-play of the original was created anew by means of the

Russian language.

The brightness and expressiveness of that translation by V. Murav'ev and A. Kistyakovskii still remains matchless. For example, their translation of Gollum's appeal to himself is worth a lot! "My precious" – *Моя Прелесть*. The word *прелесть* has two meanings in Russian. One of them is "beauty, charm", another (church) – "temptation". *Торбинсы из Торбы-на-Круче* ("Bagginses from Bag End"), *Скромби* for "Gamgee", *неввысоклик* for "halflings" (unexpectedly it is very hard to find the proper word: most of them sound unpleasant in Russian), and *Лихолесье* for "Mirkwood" naturally entered Russian "tolkienistics". Some translators prefer to retain them in their versions (as V. Matorina does). But "wealth of fantasy" leads the translators too far, it seems. They've gone beyond the author's fantasy. The translators' activity is especially noticeable in the fragments that have no visible folklore antecedents. So the Shire was turned into *Хоббитания*, and Hobbits find themselves in close relation with rabbits or hares. "A Hare" is as traditional a hero of Russian nursery-tales as "a Rabbit" is of English. The process of "rabbitisation" has turned "Took" to *Крол*, "Brandy Hall" to *Зайгород* (from *заяч* – "a hare"), "Crickhollow" into *Кроличья Балка*.

The elvish language, as it was supposed to have been "invented by the author", underwent material changes. The Elvish name "Glorfindel" has been understood possibly as an English word and has been translated *Всеславур*, converting an Elf into a Russian knight. "Galdor" became *Гаральд*. I don't know the reasons for this conversion. "Lothlórien" was translated partly. So Elvish "loth", "a flower", was translated by *цвет*, phonetically close to Russian *цвет, цветок* and Ukrainian *квиток*.

The fabulous world allows liberties with distances, and the legendarium, too. So, 20 miles changes to 20 leagues(!) which tired hobbits travel in a single day; the unfortunate Amroth is at the same time lying buried under Cerin Amroth and travelling over the Sea.

Any translation will have some mistakes, but here they form a system which definitely destroys the special style and soul of the book. That is inadmissible. I'd like to show one more inaccuracy which has been noticed by a few readers. It remains in the corrected version of 1988. It is typical. I am speaking about the fragment in which Orcs attack the Fellowship at Moria. In the original there is:

Legolas shot two through the throat. Gimli hewed the legs from under another that had sprung up on Balin's tomb. Boromir and Aragorn slew many. When thirteen had fallen the rest fled shrieking, leaving the defenders unharmed . . .

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 343)

In the translation (translated back) it is:

Legolas shot two with his bow. Gimli hewed the legs from under another that had sprung up on Balin's tomb. Boromir slew three orcs and Aragorn five and Gandalf slew one[!]. The orcs wavered, draw back to the door

³ It appeared in September, 1992.

and fled shrieking . . .”

(Tolkien/Murav'ëv & Kistyakovskii, 1988, p. 400)

That is definitely impossible for Gandalf the Maia who was sent to Middle-earth by the Valar and was forbidden to kill, as is clear from *Unfinished Tales*.

In the revised version published in 1988 most of the errors and abridged fragments were corrected. Unfortunately, it didn't reverse the process of “rabbitization”. V. Murav'ëv explains in his foreword to the book that “Hobbit” was constructed from two words – “homo” and “a rabbit” – and even names of hobbit-races were derived from images of the Hare in Russian folklore. Thus there appear *Струссы* for Stoors (derived from “coward”, *трусищка* – that's the traditional nick-name for a Hare in children's stories), *лапитуны* for “Harfoots” and *беляки* for “Fallowhides”. The last is one breed of hare in Russian. The translator explains that “the Hobbits came from a fairy-tale – an improvised home-made nursery-tale, in which a plush rabbit is taken from a toy-box and is placed into a doll's house . . .” (Murav'ëv, 1988, p.19). When the narration was growing in some sense of “reality”, it's main hero-Hare grew in significance and “humanity”, but he didn't turn into a man. So the manner of the *Khraniteli* version swings between drama and farce, and it is immutably “unreal” and far-fetched. Tom Bombadil talks in silly rhymes and behaves like Petrushka – a Russian folk farce-hero, like the English “Mister Punch”. He reminds one of a jester or a trickster. I don't think it's a proper analogy.

It seems that the second volume was translated by V. Murav'ëv alone. *Dve Tverdini* was done in a more “naturalistic” manner, at any rate the fragment about orcs and battles. But the translator's desire for a “realistic” tone sometimes leads him to rudeness and abuse. The author himself recommended avoiding them, and if curses would be more or less comprehensible in the orcish manner of speech, then Elves, I suppose, are well-mannered people. But in Murav'ëv's translation even Legolas talks roughly without any need, like this: “– That's all, Aragorn! Black *svoloch'* close up! Let's go!” (Tolkien/Murav'ëv, 1991, p. 162). The English “bastard” is similar by expression to Russian *svoloch*. By the way, the original text is: “‘All who can have now got safe within, Aragorn,’ he called. ‘Come back!’” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 561). I dare not show you examples of “orcish” vocabulary.

Sometimes this manner of speech changes to a high style hardly natural in ordinary speech. It's usual for Gandalf in this version, but it looks really funny when the Rohan guards speak no less imposingly.

Inaccuracy with the Elvish language began in “*Khraniteli*” and spreads here to the other languages, too. “Rohan” is translated *Ристания* (from Old Slavic *ристати* – to gallop) and *Мустангрим* (though *мустанг* is understood in Russian as an “American” word).

As for Rohan, a lot of historical analogies were used in the text. Some of them have a west-European origin and are understood as “foreign” by Russian readers. For example, “King of Rohan” turns to Scandinavian *конунг*. “Marshal of Riddermark” turns to French *сенешаль*. But some of the

Rohan names and place-names were left untranslated. Mostly they are understood as “English”, but sometimes transliteration plays a bad joke. For example, “Hornburg” turned into *Горнбург* which sounds German. So the translator's will mixes up in Rohan different countries, languages, centuries, etc.

I don't mean that it's a wrong approach to find analogies, including historical ones. Sometimes neutral terms need to be made concrete, such as the title “King” used in countries with different social systems. In my opinion, it is necessary to do this, but it is really difficult to avoid wrong or contradictory analogies. V. Murav'ëv has noted that Tolkien's books don't have any accidental events or arbitrary motives. Nevertheless V. Murav'ëv doesn't succeed in saving this wonderful integrity of the original. I think, it depends on the fact that the translator disbelieves in the very genre of fairy-story. This translation breaks one of the fairy-story principles which are discussed by Tolkien in his essay “On Fairy-Stories”. This principle is the serious attitude of the story-teller to the “wonders” of his faery world. This attitude implies knowledge of the laws of Faerie and the translator's “inner” confidence in them.

We have tried to do just that with our translation. The essence of our method may be illustrated by an analogy. Imagine that you are going to copy a painting using coloured pencils only. There are two options. You could re-draw the picture accurately reproducing every colour and every detail. Or you could attempt to see this landscape “as it was seen by the artist” trying to understand why it has been so dear to him and to draw the picture anew. We've done more or less the same with Tolkien's books as far as our poor artistic abilities allow.

Thus we've been forced to answer: why is it written this way and what is the sense of it? For example, what is the role of the Shire and Hobbits in the total narrative structure? From our point of view, the Shire is the “threshold” which opens the way to Middle-earth. Our attitude to the fairy-story is formed here. We are familiar with many things in this place or at least we can recognize them. The Hobbits, our guides to the Fairy Land, are psychologically close to, and understandable by, us. The author underlines that they “are relations of ours: far nearer than Elves, or even than Dwarves” at the very beginning, not without reason. It is acceptable to consider Sam Gamgee as “an ordinary Englishman”. I think it would be more exact to say “an ordinary man”. At any rate, the favourite hero of Russian folk-tales who is usually third son of a King or a farmer and is named accordingly “Ivan-tsarevich” or “Ivan-durak”, is as honest, direct, faithful, good-hearted, cunning and simple, thrifty and generous as Master Samwise.

That is the reason why hobbit's names and places should be translated. If you leave them unchanged, you automatically move your story to a very distant, unfamiliar and alien land. Moreover you lose some “speaking” (and humorous) names. I'd like to mention that all three Russian versions of *The Lord of the Rings* are similar here. But the effect of “familiarity” and “reality” was of especial meaning for us, so in achieving them we preferred to choose names

already existing in folk toponymics. *Торба-на-Круче* by V. Murav'ëv sounds splendid, but no one place in Russia could be called so, and *Сумкина Горка* in ours is nearly possible. Different *горы* and *горки* ("hills") are usual for us.

V. Murav'ëv translates "Bree" as *Пригорье*, reproducing the dialect "a hill" with an invented literary word. We've found in a west-Russian dialect the word *Брыль* with the same meaning as the Celtic word and were pleased to discover how close phonetically they are! Prefixes *при* – "near, by" and *за* – "behind" – are typical for word-formation in Russian, but V. Murav'ëv over-uses them. *Пригорье*, *Приречье*, *Приречное* *Взгорье* or *Привражье*. The last two don't belong to the Shire, they are used for Eryn Muil, but it is difficult to guess this. As for us, we'd like to preserve the Hobbits' speech as a dialect of Common Speech and so we use for their names old or dialect words or construct something similar, as *Засумки* ("Bag-End") or *Скоцка* ("Buckhill").

I think misunderstandings with Common Speech and words related to it arise mostly if a translator doesn't follow as carefully as the author which language is really used and by whom.

As for the Elvish languages, the main problem may be defined this way: it's impossible to reproduce Elvish sounds exactly for two reasons. The first is the phonetic difference between the languages. Certain sounds don't exist in Russian (i.e. diphthongs and the *TH* combination). Some combinations of sounds can't be pronounced (i.e. the voiced consonants *V* or *B* at the end of the word). So even if you write *Гэндалв* in Russian letters, nevertheless it would be pronounced as *Гэндальф*.

The other side of this problem is that some words spelled "exactly" sound crude for Russian readers or produce some undesirable associations. So, "Durin" is so close phonetically to *дурень* (a fool) that it should be changed to *Дарин* or *Дьюрин*. The spelling of the name "Lúthien" was a subject for long discussion too. *Лутизэн* or *Лютизэн* are close phonetically, but both of them I consider unfitting. *Лютизэн* has unpleasant associations. It is similar to *лютость* (ferocity) and with *лютик* (a buttercup – it's a small yellow poisonous flower). *Лутизэн* is difficult for phonetic reasons.

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Лучизнь changes hard consonant *m* for soft *ч* and finds a splendid association with the word *луч* – "a ray". For me, that is a better decision.

So it's clear that if you are intending to learn Elvish, you'd better use the original. Any translation may be counted satisfactory if it preserves the integrity of Elvish languages.

The next set of problems is concerned with the understanding of the hero in different cultures. There are three possibilities.

Supposing another culture has a similar image already, as in the case of Sam Gamgee. Then it is easy to achieve similarity in understanding. It is more difficult if a hero is unknown to another culture. I think we could consider Merlin as a prototype for Gandalf in English culture. But there is nobody resembling Gandalf in Russian culture. And there are no creatures like Elves or Dwarves. We are naturally familiar with dragons, werewolves or Beorn through our own folklore, but we know about Elves "at second hand". So our "Secondary Belief" in them is more weak. But you should be especially careful if an image exists in another culture but has another sense. "Old Willow-Man" V. Murav'ëv translates *Вяз* ("an Elm"), V. Matorina – as *Старуха Ива* ("Willow" is a female in Russian, so it would be "Old Willow-Woman"), we – as *Старый Лох*. In Russian folklore a Willow is a young tenderhearted sad girl. She is usually named "weeping". It's very hard for us to imagine she would be evil and black. So V. Murav'ëv changes a tree. An Elm is a man but it never has grown by the water! We found a dialect word *лох* for this type of tree which is a masculine noun and has no association with the folklore willow.

In conclusion, the subject is very large and I have shown you only a few of its problems. I don't think any Russian translations we have at our disposal are wholly adequate compared to the original. I don't even think that such a translation could be done at all, but I see two possibilities which give me a hope. Maybe some translator of genius will come. Or, more realistically, we'll get a number of translations which taken together could express all the variety of Tolkien's genius.

Russian translations are given in chronological order:

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- Tolkien, J.R.R. Translated by V. Murav'ev and A. Kistyakovskii. 1982. *Khraniteli [The Fellowship of the Ring]*. Джон Рональд Руэл Толкиен. *Хранители. Летопись первая из эпопеи «Властелин Колец»*. Сокр. перевод с англ. А. Кистяковского и В. Муравьева. М., «Детская литература».
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