

**Some Like it Hot – Goblin-Style:
“Ozhivliazh” in Russian Film Translations¹**

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This article is about English-to-Russian voiceover translating as a translation technique and a medium that responds to and shapes sociocultural identities. It is also about a trend in Russian film translating to enliven – in various degrees – the translation text as compared with the more neutral language in the original films. And, finally, given the multiple translations of the same cultural products, films included, it is an attempt to make a case for a strand of research and translation quality analysis that that may be called “translation variance studies.”²

There are several terms for voiceover translation in Russian: “zakadrovnyi perevod,” “perevod-ozvuchka,” “odnogolosyi perevod,” “perevod Gavrilova” (after the name of one of the early prominent practitioners of the trade), and “voisover.” In English, in addition to “voiceover translation,” the terms “single-voice translation,” “single-voice dub or dubbing,” “lectoring,” and “Gavrilov translation” are also used.

Russia is almost exclusively a “voiceover” country as opposed to “subtitling” countries such as Finland, Greece, Portugal, Israel, the United Kingdom, the U.S., and numerous others. Voiceover translation is relatively cheap (dubbing a movie is prohibitively expensive), technologically uncomplicated, and, in some respects, psychologically and perceptually more authentic and viewer-friendly than subtitling. Voiceovers are done in the same – audio – perception medium as the originals while the background soundtrack preserves the original actors’ voice quality and prosody. This allows a more immediate appreciation of the quality of acting, although for some people it may well be a hindrance. The central psycho-physiological convenience and advantage

¹ A draft of this paper was presented at the Southern Conference on Slavic Studies (SCSS) in Gainesville, FL, on March 26, 2010. I am grateful to my co-panelists and Galina Rylkova for their comments.

² The term “translation variance studies” emerged in the course of discussions that Timothy Sergay and I had during the SCSS annual meeting in March 2010.

of a voiceover is that the viewer hears and watches the movie as it unfolds in a “seamless” sort of way; that is, without being forced to constantly switch between two media of perception – audio and visual. Voiceovers have another advantage over subtitling: the viewer can hear a fuller text of the translation. With subtitling, it is necessary to squeeze the “translation” into one line of, on average, 35 characters – or two lines of about 70 characters at the most – the viewer to have the time to absorb the meaning of the text onscreen. This is dictated by the fact that the speed of oral delivery of a text is generally about one-third higher than the speed of visual perception of a text (1: 247). With voiceovers, no such constraint exists. As for dubbed films, it can be argued that their authenticity is restricted because they are more independent, somewhat more removed-from-the-original, self-sufficient cultural products. The reason for this is because the originals’ entire soundtracks have been replaced with new ones. That said, it is precisely owing to this nature of dubs that they may provide a more enjoyable overall aesthetic experience for the viewer.

Curiously enough, despite its proliferation, voiceover translation is an under-researched area of translation studies. Of course, there are comments on this translation technique and how to assess its quality scattered in various parts of the Internet, but no substantive research has been done on the subject either in Russia or the U.S. Among relatively recent important contributions to the discussion of film translation are the articles by Andrei Gromov, Nikita Bondarev, and Konstantin Egorushkin in the online “Russkii mir” journal (12, 2, 8); interesting insights into the workings of voiceover translating are intermittently provided by the leading Russian voiceover translator today – Dmitrii Puchkov in his online and radio interviews (25, 26, 31); and the leading Russian translation practitioners and theorists, clustered around the “Mosty” translators’ journal – I call them the “Mosty Group” – have also begun to take a serious look at this type of translations (17, 23).

Recent Past

The pirate (unlicensed) voiceover translations began to sweep the then-Soviet Union – and, later, newly designated Russia – in the late 1980s and the beginning of the ’90s. The pirate translators were hired privately by the Russian *nouveau riches* (“novye russkie”) anxious to watch predominantly the latest American movies. The translators worked out of their homes, or “kitchen studios” equipped very basically with two

VCRs and a microphone. The translator recorded his (they were all male) voiceover translations simultaneously while listening to the original soundtrack. Here is how Leonid Volodarskii, one of the veterans of the field, describes the technological side of early voiceovers:³

Everything was done using two VCRs, sitting on your knees, basically. One of them had to be stereo. You stuck the original [VHS cassette] into one VCR, a blank VHS cassette into the other VCR, and a mike into this other VCR, too. I translated simultaneously, and my voice was recorded by the second VCR. Then some techie – I’m strictly not technically-minded – made a master tape of my voiceover. From that point on, it was ‘Full speed ahead!’ – multiple copies were made, and the voiceover hit the popular masses (33).

Urban legend has it that the first Soviet voiceover translators used clothespins to clip their noses so that the resulting nasal quality of voice would disguise their true voices and prevent discovery and punishment for illicit work. Ironically, it was only Leonid Volodarskii’s nasal, somewhat stuttering delivery that was immediately recognizable across the Soviet Union and then Russia, but it was the result of a nose injury in earlier life – no clothespin was involved. The first wave of underground translators churned out translations at incredible speed. The names of these first voiceover “shock workers” – Volodarskii, Mikhalev, Gavrillov, Zhivov, and Gorchakov – are still well known in Russia. These “first-wave” voiceover translations are still available and revered by dedicated fans who consider them to have special cultural value. It is not infrequent that licensed new translations of old movies come out today with bonus additional materials consisting of the previous, unlicensed translations by these “dinosaurs” of voiceovers.

The distinguishing feature of most of these first voiceover translations was that they were done “straight off,” generally without watching the movie first, thinking over the difficult parts in it, and making preparatory notes beforehand. As a result such translations contained a lot of “otsebiatina” (something invented and added to the translation by the translator), which camouflaged the obscure stretches of language or idioms and slang unknown to the translator. In a curious way, the remarkable inventiveness and resourcefulness of the translators

³ All translations into English in this article are mine.

paid off. They produced highly entertaining texts. Their translations were enjoyed by millions across Russia. When the late 1990s saw the release of the same movies as officially licensed and newly translated products, they were often rejected by buyers as not quite the same thing (“ne to”). People wanted the authentic, pirate versions back.

Present

So what are the latest developments on the Russian voiceover translation scene? These were described, in a nutshell, by the translator and cultural commentator Nikita Bondarev two years ago, but the description is absolutely applicable today:

In general, translation, by its nature, does not lend itself to any totalitarian control that prescribes one single way of translating to the exclusion of all others. The translation habitat is the wild where various versions of translations of literary works or films should in theory flourish. From this perspective, it can be said that translations of western films are enjoying complete pluralism in Russia today. The latest Hollywood releases first appear in Russia as imperfect pirated copies, supplied with amateurish translations that oftentimes have little to do with what goes on in the movie. However, they allow desperate devotees of non-Russian cinema to partake of the pop-culture products long before their licensed releases. Then the “official,” licensed copy of the movie is released. It is of high visual and sound quality and it is supplied with a translation that lays claim to being an accurate reproduction of the original. The problem is that this “ofitsioz” [officially approved version] quite often turns out to be – to use a phrase from the famous Zakharov/Gorin movie about Baron Munchausen – “too neatly combed, too thickly made-up, and [regrettably] castrated.” Eventually, the video retail points are overrun by a translation of the same movie by Dmitrii Puchkov, better known as “Goblin.” This man, without a doubt, deserves a separate publication” (2).

To some extent this article fills in this gap.

Goblin

The word “goblin” entered mainstream Russian in the early nineteen nineties after the Russian translator of the American cartoon series

Gummi Bears (“Mishki Gummi”) translated the word “ogres” – the big, bad guys in the cartoon – as “gobliny” (goblins). The common meanings of the word “goblin” in spoken Russian today are “a despicable, unpleasant person, or someone with a lot of brawn but a lack of brains” (27). Recently the word has acquired an additional meaning – “the translator Dmitrii Iur’evich Puchkov” (27).

Dmitrii Iur’evich Puchkov (a.k.a. Goblin) is definitely Russia’s most famous film translator today. He is widely known for not toning down the “bad language” in the numerous English-language films that he has translated. These include Guy Ritchie’s “Snatch,” David Chase’s *The Sopranos*, Jody Hill’s *Observe and Report*, Quentin Tarantino’s *The Inglourious Basterds*, the Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*, and very many others. In his interviews (25, 26, 31), Puchkov explains the origin of his nickname. In the late 1980s a newspaper article entitled “Goblins in Gray Overcoats” (“Gobliny v serykh shineliakh” in Russian) denounced graft and abuse of authority in the Russian law enforcement agencies. Following the publication of the article, Puchkov – who at the time was working as a chief criminal investigator in St. Petersburg – began to call himself and his coworkers “goblins.” The ironic, self-deprecating sobriquet stuck.

Ozhivliazh

One of the central issues that I discuss in this article is what I call “ozhivliazh” – the current trend to liven up (I should really say, “sex up”) original English dialogue in Russian film translations, which I will illustrate with an excerpt from Puchkov-Goblin’s voiceover of *The Sopranos*. As a backdrop, I will use a translation of the same excerpt executed in the more traditional and familiar “one-size-fits-all” style.

The word “ozhivliazh” (from the Russian “ozhivliat” – to bring back to life; to liven up) is a professional slang term often used in theater, filmmaking, and fashion modeling. It means “livening up the acting, stage scenery, the actors’ lines, the model’s body language, the clothes design, etc.” I apply it in the sense defined by the Russian poet and translator Olga Sedakova as the practice of “introducing [into the translation] words that are coarser and metaphors that are more jarring, [...] [thereby] adding to the author’s orchestra more percussion and exotic instruments” (15: 437). Speaking less metaphorically, “ozhivliazh” is a conscious, semi-conscious or unconscious enhancement of any aspects of a translated text as compared to the more neutral language

used in the original. One hopes that this happens in the course of the perennial search for authenticity, but it may equally well happen for reasons of self-promotion, an inflated sense of exceptional professionalism, or misguided idealism.

The “ozhivliazh” trend in film translation may be described as a marginalizing or – to use Venuti’s term – “minoritizing” type of translation (32: 10-13). By way of contrast, translations that tone down (or neutralize) culturally controversial language of the original film may be designated as a “majoritizing” type of translations. However, the “ozhivlyazh-minoritizing” approach has been gaining ground so sweepingly in recent years, with Goblin being its chief proponent and practitioner, that what might be deemed as catering to cultural minorities is currently becoming a “majoritizing” mode of translating. Puchkov-Goblin claims that his translations are uniquely “correct” because they preserve the original content of films in full measure, reproducing the original language “like it really is” (25, 26, 31). Puchkov-Goblin’s online translation company is suggestively advertised on the “Tupichok Goblina” site as “Studiia Polnyi Pe” (www.oper.ru), which is a euphemistic rendition of the Russian “Studiia polnyi p***ets” and which – with a certain degree of Goblin-style “ozhivliazh” – could be translated as “F**k Me Studio.” In his online blurb, Goblin defines and assesses the distinctiveness of his “correct translations” as follows:

The translations are distinct in that they reproduce in a maximal possible way the original text of a film. If the original text contains indecent, unprintable swearing, then it is translated as indecent unprintable swearing. If there is no swearing in the original (as in cartoons for kids or old movies), then the translation does not contain any swearing. The translations are single-person (Goblin’s) voiceover translations (31).

In my analysis of the “ozhivliazh” trend, I am seeking to answer four related questions:

- “What are Goblin’s – and anybody else’s – exact criteria for assessing cross-cultural correspondences (“maximal adequacy,” in Goblin’s words) between what is somewhat differently perceived by the elusive, so-called general public as indecent, unprintable or marginally acceptable kinds of language in two different cultures – American and Russian?”

- “How close to the original American culture does Goblin get in his translations from the perspective of the principles of translation pragmatics as defined and accepted by professional translators and translation theorists?”
- “What kind of and how many different translations of the same film does it seem reasonable to expect film audiences to need?” In other words, should there be just one, all-embracing, officially sanctioned (whoever the officials may be) variant or version of a film translation or several translations catering to the tastes of different “cultural constituencies” – to use Venuti’s term (32: 8-30; 67-87)?
- “How are we – both translation experts and laypersons – to sort out and assess the concurrent multiple translations of the same cultural product, films included?”

Multiple Translations

One of the advocates of multiple translations of the same text was the literary scholar Mikhail Gasparov. He liked to quote a simile used by the famous linguist, translator and cultural theorist Sergei Averintsev, when the latter talked about getting to know a different culture: “We get to know somebody else’s culture the way we get to know a stranger. When we first meet, we look for something that we have in common in order for the acquaintance to take place; but after that we look for something that makes us different in order for the acquaintance to become interesting” (10: 108). Talking about the translations of *Hamlet*, Gasparov said that “there should be *Hamlet* translations not only for reading, but also for every stage production of the play. [The director] Kózintsev didn’t film just *Hamlet* – he filmed a movie based on Pasternak’s translation. Fitting Lozinskiy’s text [translation] to the frames of this movie would not work” (10: 48). Gasparov believed that there should be at least two translation versions of each complex work of verbal art – a simplified (domesticated) one for a “beginning reader” and a special translation for a “prepared [sophisticated] reader,” although he never defined in any specific terms what the difference between the two should be (10: 321).

In a somewhat contradictory vein, Gasparov also liked to quote the famous German classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-

Moellendorff, who said, “There is no such thing as a translation from a language into a language – there can only be a translation from a style into a style” (10: 319). Today, most translation theorists and critics go further than that and say that a good professional translation is carried out from culture into culture. For me as a translation theorist, critic, teacher, and practicing translator/interpreter, the central tension that the translator has to resolve is that between the pressure of intralingual (monocultural) pragmatics and the exigencies of interlingual (cross-cultural) pragmatics. Intralingual pragmatics involves communication that takes place in a shared native language inside a shared native culture. Interlingual pragmatics involves communication that takes place via a process of translation across cultures. Since, in my view, the end result of a film translation is determined, in large part, by the kind of communicative pragmatics the translator pursues, a brief overview of the three best-known pragmatics theories is in order.

Theories of Pragmatics: Overview

Paul Grice has developed the concept of pragmatic implicature, which he formulated as a set of rules or “maxims” guiding most “cooperative” conversations. These maxims are “quantity” (do not give too much or too little information); “quality” (say only what you believe to be true); “relevance” (the information that you convey should be directly relevant to the act of communication at hand), and “manner” (the way you convey information should be appropriate to the message you are getting across and conform – as far as possible – with the expectations of the receiver of the information. (For a gist of the Gricean pragmatics, see, for example, Munday 97-99 and Malmkjær 25-40.)

Geoffrey Leech has enlarged Grice’s pragmatics (or the “Cooperative Principle,” as it has come to be known) to include the concepts of politeness, irony, and phatic communion (banter) (20: 19).

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson have developed a relevance theory of communication, according to which the success of any act of communication depends on the pursuit of optimal relevance of the information involved on the part of both the communicator and the addressee (28). One of the central concepts in Sperber and Wilson’s mutual-knowledge perspective is that of context, which they define as follows:

A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world. It is these assumptions, of course,

rather than the actual state of the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance. A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediate preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation (28: 15-16).

Substitute “translator” or “interpreter” for the word “hearer” and the whole concept of context – as defined above – could arguably work as a general definition of pragmatics.

The generally accepted, “classic” requirement of pragmatics in translation is for the translator to evoke or achieve the same effect in the mind/s of the receiver/s of the translation (the target audience) as that in the mind/s of the receiver/s of the original text (the source audience). Based on the above theories of communicative pragmatics, I have developed a short, working definition of pragmatics or pragmatic effect: pragmatics is the process and result of using specific linguostylistic means to adjust the language of the translation to the cultural and informational background and expectations of the receivers of the translation as perceived or presumed by the translator. Greater adherence to the perceived expectations of the “internal” cultural audiences (constituencies) involves intralingual pragmatics (greater domestication of the text). Greater adherence to the original text of the film results in “foreign-sounding” stretches of language in the translation (“foreignization” of the text).

The translator’s use of combinations of different translation strategies will determine and change the pragmatic effect of the translation, that is to say, it will shape the cultural identity of the cross-cultural “other” in the minds of the target audience in discernibly different ways. Measuring the perceived pragmatic effect is highly problematic, but it is generally agreed that assessments made by the direct participants in the communicative situation, native speakers of both languages, professional translators, and translation experts are good enough indicators of the accuracy of a translation, including its pragmatic impact. Enter the wide masses on the receiving end of a translation of a film. Just what do *they* have to say about the translation in question? And do they have any say at all?

*Nizy ne Khotiat Zhit' Po-staromu – A Revolutionary Situation?*⁴

As has already been pointed out, the multi-million audience of a mass-culture product would normally consist of multiple sociocultural “constituencies” with widely varying sociocultural experiences and expectations. Aiming for a single translation meant for the whole of the audience would *a priori* reduce the translator’s choices to satisfying some kind of a hypothetical median or average consciousness.

In Soviet and much of the post-Soviet times, what the general public normally got as a result of such a reductive, “homogenizing” effort was a one-size-fits-all, “blandspeak” version of a translation of a film – to use Chukovskii’s term “gladkopolis” in Russian (6: 253). The films were practically always dubbed. In such versions the rough edges of vulgar slang and any perceived political (ideological) incorrectness would have been smoothed over or neutralized, and the translation would thus have been rendered inoffensive to one and all. This inevitably left some people, constituting different sociocultural groups, feeling vaguely dissatisfied and bemused. To them, the way some characters spoke (through the translation) sounded suspect. However, life – as is often the case – is introducing its correctives: regardless of the views of professional and semi-professional translators, translation scholars, critics or theorists, different versions of translations are hitting the movie theater and video screens, sometimes nearly simultaneously.

The translation versions are predominantly voiceovers that rely on different mixes of intra- and interlingual pragmatics and meet different kinds of sociocultural expectations and levels of ignorance and expertise. On the one hand, a very significant portion of the general public – unaware of the technical intricacies of translation or the fact that it is a high art to most of its theorists and many of its practitioners – prefers the more “populist” kinds of translations. Not to put too fine a point on it, such translations pander to the sensibilities of less linguistically and culturally sophisticated audiences. On the other hand, arguably, a no less populous part of the general public prefers the more nuanced, “scholarly” – more professionally rigorous – translations that attempt to inventively combine both kinds of pragmatics in order to create a distinctive kind of narrative that would be associated with the

⁴ This is a reference to Lenin’s famous definition of a revolutionary situation in society as a state of affairs when the ruling elite (*verkhi*) are no longer capable of ruling in the old way and the subjugated masses (*nizy*) no longer want to live in the old way.

cross-cultural “other” on a higher level of cultural authenticity. It would seem that – to paraphrase Gasparov’s words – in the first case, translators emphasize something that the audience and the film characters have in common in order for the audience’s acquaintance with the cultural “other” to take place, while in the second case, translators look for something that makes the audience and the film characters different in order for the acquaintance with the other culture to become interesting (10: 108).

Two Translations of the Same Episode

The table below contains two transcripts of two different voiceover translations of a short episode from *The Sopranos* TV series that I have chosen for comparative analysis. The translation in the middle column was done for the NTV channel by a translator whose name is unknown. It was shown by NTV shortly before Puchkov-Goblin’s translation. No parts of this translation were bleeped out. The translation in the right-hand column was done by Puchkov-Goblin. The words that were “pinged out” in its TV-3 showings are highlighted by italics. The uncensored version of Goblin’s translation (with the original language preserved “like it is”) is widely available in Russia unofficially.

Transcripts of a Scene at Tony Soprano’s Racehorse Stable		
<i>The Sopranos</i> . Season 4, episode 8, disk 3 – “Mergers and Acquisitions.” First broadcast on HBO in 2003. Brad Grey Television Production, DVD, 2002.	DVD. <i>The Sopranos</i> . Клан Сопрано. Сезон 3, 4. Москва: ООО «Мега Видео», 2008 (NTV version).	DVD. Переводы Гоблина. Правильный перевод. Клан Сопрано. 3-4 сезон. Коллекционная серия. Москва: ООО “ICE Records,” 2009 (Goblin’s version for TV-3). The uncensored Goblin translation of this episode can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0wRiNdRB7U .
Tony: You don’t feel good, baby girl? You bad girl.	Ты не слишком хорошо чувствуешь себя, малышка? Плохая девочка.	Нехорошо себя чувствуешь, а, девчонка? Плохая девчонка.

Ralph: Fuck this horse-whispering shit.	Эй! Хватит шептать нежности кобыле на ушко.	Ну-ка <i>на хуй</i> шептаться с лошадьё.
Tony: What’s this costing us?	Эгх, во что нам это обошлось?	Во сколько нам это встало?
Ralph: Oh, Tony, Valentina. Valentina, Tony Soprano. She works in an art gallery. Helping me to enlarge my collection. And this, my Chiquita banana, is Pie-O-My.	О, Тони. Это Валентина. Тони Сопрано. Валентина работает в художественной галерее, помогает приумножить мне художественную коллекцию. А это моя маленькая ягодка, мой сладкий пирожок.	О, Тони, это Валентина. Валентина, это Тони Сопрано. Валентина работает в художественной галерее. Помогает расширить мою коллекцию. А это, моя чикита-банана, мой Пирожочек.
Valentina: She’s beautiful.	Она просто красотка.	Красивая какая.
Ralph: There’s no stopping this horse. She’s gonna go all the way to the Breeders.	Ничто не может остановить эту лошадку. От нее будет роскошное потомство.	Эту лошадь ничто не может остановить. У нее будет роскошное потомство.
Valentina: We’ll do the two geldings next. Hon, can you come here a sec? I think I have something in my eye.	Не слишком ты возбуждайся, я ревную. Дорогой, можешь ты подойти на секунду? Мне что-то попало в глаз.	Следующими двух меринов давай. Дорогой, можешь подойти на секунду? Мне что-то в глаз попало.
Ralph: Let Dr. Ralphie have a look. I don’t see anything.	Дай-ка доктору Ральфу посмотреть. Я ничего не вижу.	Давай-ка доктор Ральфи посмотрит. Ничего не вижу.
Valentina: Maybe you need more light.	Наверное, тебе нужно больше света.	Может, надо к свету повернуться?
Ralph: What the fuck? I can’t believe you did this to me.	А, дерьмо! Я не могу поверить, что ты так со мной поступила.	Ну что за <i>хуйня</i> ?! Ты чё творишь-то, а?
Valentina: It was a joke, hon.	Это была просто шутка, дорогой.	Это была просто шутка, дорогой.
Ralph: There’s nothing funny about it.	Здесь нет ничего смешного.	Ничего смешного не вижу.

Tony: There is from where I'm standing.	А, по-моему, есть.	А я отсюда очень даже вижу.
Valentina: Besides, it's good luck.	Кроме того, это приносит удачу.	Кроме того, это хорошая примета.
Ralph: What?	Что?	Что?
Valentina: It's good luck to step in horseshit. Ask any horseperson.	Наступить в лошадиное дерьмо – это хорошая примета. Спроси кого угодно на конюшне.	Наступить в лошадиное говно – хорошая примета. Спроси кого угодно на конюшне.
Stable attendant: It's true.	Это правда.	Это правда.
Ralph: Then why aren't you, people, walking around all day looking for piles of horseshit to stomp around in?	Тогда почему я не вижу толпы туристов, гуляющих по округе в надежде вляпаться в свежий навоз?!	Ну так чё ж вы тогда целыми днями по говну не топчетесь?
Stable attendant: It only works if it's an accident.	Примета действует, только если это произошло случайно.	Примета действует только если случайно.
Ralph: Fucking sick, all of you. Fucko, where's a hose?	Да пошли вы все! Где здесь кран?	Да вы тут все <i>йибанутые</i> . Слышь, <i>йибанько</i> , где здесь шланг?

Assessment

If pragmatics means meeting perceived expectations of the target audience, then Goblin's version most likely meets the expectations of a sizeable part of Russian viewers who speak the same kind of language that Goblin uses to translate lower-register lexical items: as the saying goes, some people do not just use "mat" (obscene or profane language) – they routinely speak it. And one does have to admit that "mat" has become a pan-national discretionary sociolect that even refined intellectuals and linguistic aesthetes occasionally resort to.

The absence of censorship (or a very mild censorship of printed and visual matter), the free-wheeling Internet, and the democratization of Russian life in general have led to a very noticeable relaxation of linguistic taboos and time-honored norms. "Mat" has become more visible and audible than before. It is noteworthy that there have appeared

some monolingual dictionaries of Russian “mat” (see, for example, <http://awd.ru/dic.htm>) that delineate vocabulary belonging to the realm of “mat,” with what is missing from the dictionary, by default, belonging to the realm of “non-mat.” To be sure, a sizeable part of the viewers (including those who occasionally use “mat” themselves) would be jarred by Goblin’s translation, which flouts the traditionally expected standards of decency in the mass media. Until recently, the media were only allowed or preferred to use language that, say, members of the whole family could feel comfortable with in one another’s presence.

To get a more specific and immediate sense of the intracultural effect of the episode on representatives of the present-day American culture, I showed the episode to a kind of focus group consisting of 39 of my students aged 18-22. I do not position the results of this mini-survey as sociologically valid – still, this is the reaction of 39 flesh-and-blood respondents at the University of Florida, whose native language is American English and who are steeped in American culture. Judging from their reactions, the characters’ language in this episode produces a less disturbing effect on American viewers than Goblin’s arguably harsher linguistic choices in his version of the translation produce on Russian viewers (myself and many of my Russian friends included). Though anecdotal, this evidence confirms my longtime impression that American audiences are generally more tolerant of strong language in movies than their Russian counterparts, no matter what the MPAA ratings may be.

As was already mentioned, what makes Puchkov-Goblin’s translations “Goblin translations” is his unabashed choice of vocabulary. Another feature of his translating style is his unique way of reading his carefully prepared-in-advance voiceover texts. “Mat” aside, the enlivening of the original American soundtrack proceeds along the following lines. At the level of words and non-predicative phrases, “enlivening” involves (1) intensifying the level and sometimes the nature of the emotion expressed by a word sense; (2) enhancing the evaluative force of a word sense; (3) changing the functional register of a word sense – usually by substituting slang or more elevated vocabulary for neutral language; (4) changing the dialectal – that is, regional, temporal or social – reference of a word sense; (5) misrepresenting the relative frequency of occurrence of a word sense in the original, source style; (6) pandering to the perceived expectations of the audience by radicalizing the imagery

and metaphors evoked by a word sense or phrase, and (7) consistently using speech contractions, like “che” for “chto,” etc. (see 3).

At the level of the sentence and paragraph, enlivening is carried out by using more emphatic sentence structures, breaking up sentences, condensing sentences, and using elliptical sentences, thus creating a punchier translation text (see 4). All of these elements coalesce into a pragmatics of translating that is essentially domesticating – using the local highly colloquial and profane idiom packaged into truncated, emphatic syntax without any significant foreignization. However, the level of profanity is so harsh that I would expect some viewers to feel alienated, i.e., “defamiliarized” by it. Metaphorically speaking, like an animal beginning to talk out of the blue in a fairy tale, Goblin translations have – especially initially – a defamiliarizing effect.

Goblin’s distinct way of reading his translations is that, instead of speaking in an emotionally even-handed monotone, traditionally expected from voiceover translators, Goblin differentiates between male and female characters – and sometimes among different characters in general – by changing the prosody of his delivery: 1) the pitch of voice, 2) the movement of the tone of voice (dynamics of pitch), 3) word and sentence stress, 4) loudness, 5) tempo (speed of speech), 6) pauses (their distribution and length), 7) rhythm, 8) timbre, and 9) the general intensity of speech calibrated by varying degrees of muscular effort and resulting in varying degrees of articulatory clarity. (For one of the most recent and comprehensive conceptions of prosody, see 15.)

In general, Goblin’s intensity of speech – its loudness, clarity, and forcefulness of stress – is often more pronounced than that of other translators, and his pleasant and confident speaking voice is widely recognizable. Goblin’s lowered style of speech, composed of predominantly highly colloquial syntax and risqué vocabulary, would generally have been considered vulgar and “unprintable” as recently as the late 1980s. To give just one example from the minute illustrative fraction of the whole mammoth *Sopranos* series, it is indicative of the greater permissiveness of social norms in the last five to ten years that the word “govno” [shit] is not bleeped in Goblin’s version at two points in the dialogue; thus the word is, arguably, being positioned as an acceptable term to the general public. The word is conspicuously absent from the dictionary of “mat” referred to earlier (<http://awd.ru/dic.htm>). Significantly, the NTV translation avoids any strong language altogether,

substituting the words “der’mo” (a mild version of “govno”) and “navoz” [manure] for Goblin’s jarring “govno.”

Judging from Puchkov-Goblin’s interviews about his own work, his video reviews of the latest movies on his website, and the aplomb with which he does his voiceover translations, Puchkov-Goblin is very proud of his translations – and rightfully so – given the amount of time and research he puts into the preparation of each of them. Unlike most of the first-wave voiceover translators and present-day underqualified practitioners of the craft, Puchkov first carefully studies the whole movie and writes down his translation of the whole text heard and seen in the movie. Only after that does he get down to recording his voiceover.

Does Goblin’s “sexing up” of the original text matter to the majority of different cultural contingents that watch Goblin-translated movies? I think it does, although not to the extent that many professional translators and translation scholars and critics would have one believe (17). What would fit Venuti’s definition of “minoritizing” translations – like the ones provided by Goblin – reach out to multiple cultural constituencies, and especially to the “minoritized,” marginalized cultural groups. A neutralized, “smoothed-over” translation makes it hard for such groups to suspend disbelief when they hear, for example, supposedly hardened criminals talk like university professors. Such a “blandspeak” translation may satisfy a large audience, but it loses out on its effect on and fulfillment of expectations of numerous more specific, although intersecting, social groups not particularly averse to using marginalized Russian.

A Goblin translation meets the expectations of such groups by having an emotive effect they can identify with. To them it sounds authentic. At the same time, Goblin’s professedly “correct” translations contribute to creating a false or distorted translation canon for the widespread “four-letter” elements in casual, low-register American speech. In place of the “blandspeak” canon that used to be acceptable to one and all in traditional Russian translations of films, Goblin establishes a kind of “y*b-v*shu-mat’” (f**k me – or is it you?) canon in Russian translations of low-register speech, which is still not the kind of Russian one normally hears onscreen.

It should be noted in passing that, despite the fact that the series *The Sopranos* has been shown by two television channels, it has not become popular in Russia. According to the many retail clerks I talked with, the DVD sales have been disappointing. Among the – no doubt –

multiple reasons for this lack of popularity of an American blockbuster TV drama in Russia, I would single out the following: There is too much vulgar swearing in the Goblin translation that makes people turn away from his version while, simultaneously, people who are unfazed by unabashed swearing are turned off by the interminable bleeps in the officially licensed version; the NTV version is too bland (“intelligentnyi”) to attract the “coarser” social elements; and, in any case, the series is too long and too foreign to make Russian viewers identify with its setting and culture or sustain a prolonged interest in it. Some people bought the DVD because it was advertised as a Goblin translation, and the Goblin fad is very strong these days.

The “Mosty Group” Speaks Out

Goblin’s work has triggered a lively discussion within the translators’ community in Russia. The famous translator and media personality Leonid Volodarsky has a website called “Volodarskii Leonid Veniaminovich,” on which he is often asked questions about his views on translation. On January 26, 2011, a college student who has lived in the U.S. for the past five years asked him the following:

How do you assess the quality of present-day translations of American movies into Russian? I’m writing a college thesis on text adaptation in translating foreign films, and I’ve watched several contemporary American films with Russian translation. To tell the truth, if I hadn’t seen the originals without any translation, I would have had trouble understanding what was going on in the movies. The translations leave a lot to be desired. There are numerous coarse words and expressions in them, and, in general, the Russian used grinds on the ear.

Volodarskii had this to say in response:

At present, literary translation into Russian is going through a difficult time. It’s quite obvious. And it is true that many translators quite often overuse slang and profane language when the [original] text doesn’t really call for it (<http://volodarskiy.ru/section/questions/?sid>).

Volodarskii does not mention Puchkov specifically, but other professional translators and translation theorists do. They assess Puchkov’s creative work in different ways. On the one hand, there are

those who praise his talent, sense of humor, and high level of professionalism. On the other hand, there are those who accuse him of overconfidence, lack of professional training as a translator, and pandering to unsophisticated audiences. Here is a very brief sample of views on the Goblin phenomenon of some prominent translation figures in Russia, all of them belonging to the “Mosty Group” (17).

The translator and frequent contributor to the “Mosty” journal Mikhail Zagot gives a generally positive evaluation of Goblin’s work by saying that “overall, he’s a pretty good translator [...] that does have a feel for his native language.” While admitting that Goblin does well in both genres – “funny” and “correct” translations – Pavel Palazhchenko, Gorbachev’s longtime translator and also a frequent contributor to “Mosty,” has some reservations about Goblin’s penchant for using “mat.” He does not believe that “profanity will entrench itself in Russian culture – in Russian cinema, in particular – the way it has happened in American cinema. First and foremost, because obscenities in American English don’t have the same edge as they do in Russian.” The Chair of the Translation and Interpreting Department at the Moscow Linguistic University, Professor Dmitrii Buzadzhi is moderately critical about Goblin’s M.O.:

[...] Goblin is not a “new word in translation,” he’s not a “trail-blazer,” but nor is he a villain or talentless nonentity. [...] He is superficial. His translations have textual unity but at the same time contain a whole array of a translator’s errors. Swearing in his translations is just a diversion – he shocks the public in order to conceal behind this “slap in the face of public taste” some embarrassing gaps in his translation technique. He proudly declares that he “ain’t been to no academies” [...], which, in fact, is nothing to be proud of – a lack of professional training is very noticeable. I think that those who refuse to discuss Goblin’s translations seriously are making a mistake because, in the absence of serious critique of his work, he has already begun to be referred to as a “famous translator” and an “expert.” People who are incapable of assessing translation quality believe this.

Professor Viktor Lanchikov of the Translation and Interpreting Department at the Moscow Linguistic University dismisses Goblin’s claim to “correct” translations out of hand:

If you throw all the profanities out of Goblin's translations, you will get translations of such quality as to be totally indistinctive. I asked my students, who were curious about Goblin's translations, what they could remember about his translations besides the profanities. They remembered nothing else. The whole 'correctness' of his translations is in the fact that he presents Russian profanity ("mat") as a full-ledged equivalent of "four-letter" words in English and is surprised that nobody else has made that discovery before him. That's the extent of his translator's achievement.

Dmitrii Ermolovich, the famous lexicographer and a professor in the Department of Translation and Interpreting at the Moscow Linguistic University, is very harsh:

I don't think Goblin has any "correct" translations at all. From the perspective of translation technique, Goblin is not really a very good translator. [...] Either consciously or intuitively, Goblin meets a social need that calls for – to put it mildly – an adaptation of a film text to the tastes of a certain part of the viewing public. The range of such adaptations is rather wide – from a funny parody to downright vulgarization. But what can you do if some folks just need that kind of stuff? [...] His opuses filled with obscenities [...] are what I would call "translation pornography."

Michele Berdy, a famous translator, writer, and weekly columnist in *The Moscow Times* newspaper, adds to the sociolinguistic dimension in the discussion of the quality of Goblin translations introduced by Ermolovich:

It has to be admitted that beginning translators don't understand that Russian "mat" and "four-letter words" are different things. In English, these words often indicate class affiliation. The fact that we hear Hugh Grant's character say "fuck" fourteen times at the beginning of the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and that the Queen of England has seen and approved of the film doesn't at all mean that everybody speaks that way in Britain. In the movie, the use of "fuck" signals a social characteristic of the hero: a British intellectual with a left-wing outlook ("left-wing" in the Western sense of the term). Using this kind of language as a marker of a left-wing worldview became noticeable following the 1960s

counter-cultural revolution. Incidentally, if Grant’s hero had used milder language – like “shit” or “damn” – the viewers wouldn’t have been able to identify him as a typical Oxford “lefty.” Substituting – Goblin-style – a Russian “mat” expression for “fuck” here would destroy the implication. Grant’s character would sound like some kind of a desperado [bespredel’shchik].

Berdy leaves the question “So how exactly do you translate ‘fuck’ in the given example?” unanswered. I am afraid, a Goblinessque solution, using the elliptical “Tvoiu mat’!” several times would, in fact, work here, conveying the “liberal” non-aversion to strong language that has become quite widespread in Russian well-educated circles. Having said that, I have to agree with Goblin’s critics that, in most cases, Russian “mat” is more emotionally charged and less publicly acceptable, especially onscreen, than obscenities in American movies or prose fiction. I personally would use it in a voiceover only if it were absolutely crucial to the film’s plot or esthetic conception. But, of course, the esthetic conception, as the current Russian experience shows, is in the eye and ear of the translator. While being illuminating, the “Mosty Group”’s views on Goblin’s work need to be augmented with a more comprehensive and profound examination of its interlinguistic and sociocultural aspects, especially in the context of the work of the other prominent voiceover translators in Russia today (<http://forum.kinozal.tv/showthread.php?t=61079>). It is hoped that this article is a step in that direction.

Interpreting Goblin’s Success Story

How can the Goblin phenomenon be accounted for? I will begin with an anecdote told by the translator and cultural commentator Nikita Bondarev in his article “Zakon mozaiki protiv zakona Moiseia” (2):

An American with a more or less decent knowledge of Russian arrived in Moscow on a short visit, and his Russian friends decided to give him a surprise by showing him the “Goblin” translation [“smeshnoi perevod” – “funny translation”] of *The Lord of the Rings*. The DVD [purportedly in Puchkov’s translation] is duly bought from the nearest street vendor but it turns out that this is not a translation by Puchkov himself. It turns out to be a much less witty imitation of his translation style by somebody else posing as Puchkov. They explain the situation to their American friend: “You know, this isn’t what we wanted to show

you. This is, well, a pirate version of a pirate version of a translation..." All the amazed American can say in response is: "A pirate version of a pirate version?... And you still complain that you have problems with democracy..."

So Goblin has become a cult figure with an unmistakable style and identity. But in order to create a cult following, one first has to do something distinctive and then publicize the distinction widely so it becomes an immediately recognizable cachet. An element of prurience or luridness is very helpful for titillating public sensibilities. The first voiceover translators of the 1980s and '90s acquired their cult status by doing something that had not been done on a large scale before: they produced voiceover translations of previously totally inaccessible movies, and the VHS cassettes with the translations became readily available through a rapidly developing network of private video rental shops. An added titillating attraction for the renters and buyers of the translations was the sense of doing something vaguely illegal: the translators plied their trade semi-legally (their work was illicit employment), and the frequently risqué language of the translations was not approved by the cultural establishment. Everybody felt they were partaking of the proverbial forbidden – and exotic – fruit.

Goblin started learning English in about 1985 in a school for law-enforcement workers. At the same time, he became very interested in computer games that were just appearing on the Russian market. He started to translate and sell computer games, gaining a measure of recognition among the computer-savvy segment of the population. Being an avid enthusiast of the English language, he then began to make public fun of the inept first-wave voiceover translations that were flooding Russia. His serendipitous, accidental-masterpiece kind of creative find was what he called "smeshnye perevody" [funny translations]. These were English-language movies in which Goblin and his team, appropriately and euphemistically called "Studiia polnyi pe," replaced the whole of the original soundtrack with a totally different text that parodied the original material and contained a lot of "unprintable Russian" ("mat"). His funny translations of *The Matrix* and *The Lord of the Rings* became instant hits among large city movie cognoscenti. This was an ingenious way to attract public attention to the importance of voiceover translations for the appreciation of a film. The next step came logically – Goblin-Puchkov began to offer his own – "correct" –

translations of the predominantly American cine-fare deluging Russia. Thus he produced a titillating product while commanding a powerful channel of distribution – the newly arrived DVDs that replaced VHS cassettes and the Internet. Puchkov’s charisma, talent, resourcefulness, and hard work have paid off. Today he enjoys icon-like recognition in Russia, and his site “Tupichok Goblina” is extremely popular. The classical conflict between popular success of a cultural product and its critical expert assessment is very much in place.

Concluding Remarks

While some of the criticisms leveled at Goblin by some leading translation analysts reproduced in this article may seem a little harsh, they come close to formulating – although they do not formulate clearly – the sociolinguistic problem that Goblin’s translations often face but fail to resolve entirely satisfactorily, if such a resolution is at all possible. The problem is that Goblin treats swear words more like dictionary items than parts of complex communicative intentions realizable in speech acts (11, 29). In his own words, Goblin translates ‘what is swearing as swearing’ (25, 26), but, in actual fact, from the perspective of different implicatures of speech acts, what has the outward form of swearing may express a wide range of implications – from the phatic function in order to maintain friendly contact to familiar endearments to self-identification, ad hoc or otherwise, as a member of a certain sociocultural group or class. Profanities cannot be transferred from one language into another intact, verbatim. They often need pragmatic modification.

In Gricean terms, Goblin tends to recognize encoded content (“natural” meaning), whereas he should also strive to recognize and represent non-encoded content (“non-natural” meaning) – those meanings and different kinds of implicatures that are understood beyond an analysis of the words themselves, i.e., by looking at the context of speaking, status of the speakers, genre of the story, the speakers’ tones of voice, and so on. A “fucker” does not always translate as “eban’ko,” “pizdiuk” or “khui morzhovyi”; it can also be “urod,” “debil,” kozel,” “pidar” or plain “pridurok.” By translating “fucko” – a pretty exotic, Italian-evoking word in English – as “eban’ko,” Goblin domesticates the original swear word by using a totally natural and commonly used vulgar Russian expression, but there is one catch here: “eban’ko” is what might be called a piece of “Ukrainianized” Russian slang, modeled on a typical ending of Ukrainian surnames and triggering associations with

“dumb Ukrainian khloptsi” [guys] common in Russian jokes (anekdoty). The translation is domesticating and defamiliarizing at the same time because the mobster Ralph is not your typical “dumb Ukrainian khlopets’.” It seems that something like “urod,” “debil,” or “pridurok” would have worked well enough without creating a deviant cross-cultural web of associations. In my illustrative sample of the voiceovers, the NTV translator avoids the problem by elision while Goblin “sexes up” his translation, causing it to be bleeped in the TV-3 copy, with the bleeped word being easily “guessable.”

Goblin does not seem to be sensitive to complex interactions of the two types of translation pragmatics, nor does he seem to be fully aware of the possibility of different implicatures of the same vocabulary within either or both types of pragmatics. Goblin’s level of adequacy and accuracy in translating low-register texts from American English into Russian is based on intuitive, vaguely defined criteria – “what is swearing in English is swearing in Russian” (31). A more nuanced approach would have to integrate the two types of pragmatics: intralingual and interlingual. An intralingual (monocultural) pragmatics would cater, within the target culture, either to the whole multiplicity of overlapping cultural identities (that is, variously instituted social groups) or to a specific set of these variously instituted social groups. This intralingual pragmatics would have to be imaginatively, but consciously, intertwined with an interlingual (cross-cultural) pragmatics that would aim to convey a sense of the distinctiveness of the specific foreign cultural identities (“the other”) to the same multiplicity of cultural constituencies or a select set of them.

This is, of course, a tall order, but, given these constraints, “hybridization” is inevitable, so that it seems reasonable to expect at least three different types of film translations to emerge: number one – “minoritizing” ones (like those by Goblin), satisfying the theoretical perspectives of Venuti (32), Bourdieu (5), Lecerle (18, 19) and other authors but projecting somewhat distorted cross-cultural identities; number two – “majoritizing” ones (like those that were routinely released in Soviet and post-Soviet times), glossing over the less “palatable” segments of the original; and number three – some hybrid versions in between (like *The Sopranos* translation commissioned and shown by the Russian NTV channel). The latter ones will tentatively test the general audience’s sensibilities of decency, but will still lean toward generally accepted standards of public decency. Given the complexity of

the translation enterprise, attempts at creating cross-cultural identities of the “other” through the medium of distinctive film translations will continue and result in multiple versions of translations of the same films. And that is exactly what is already happening on the Russian film translation scene.

Ironically, in Russia, what Venuti termed the “minoritizing” type of translations seems to be morphing into its opposite – the “majoritizing” one. The professional elite of the “high-art” school of translators are scrutinizing the process with jealousy, suspicion, and unease, but are having little effect on or control over the process, which is not to say that they have not been vociferous – although in a disjointed and often contradictory fashion – in expressing their criticism. (One may want to follow, for example, the six-year-long debate on the accuracy and adequacy of different translations in the Russian professional translators’ journal *Mosty* or the abundantly quoted here most recent roundtable discussion on the subject by leading translation experts in Russia.) It has to be admitted, though, that there is no getting away from the “violence of language” (19) and that – to paraphrase Tony Curtis’s character Joe in the famous Billy Wilder movie: “Some will still like it hot while some will continue to prefer classical music.”⁵

One of the “cursed” Russian questions is, as usual, “What is to be done?” How will or should the multifarious community of translation practitioners, theorists, and critics deal with such a “multi-translational” state of affairs? I would suggest engaging more actively, rigorously, and coherently in the assessment of retranslations and multiple translations that represent one and the same foreign source – be they films, prose fiction, or poetry – thereby constituting the raw content for what may be called “translation variance studies.”

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⁵ “Some Like it Hot” is a 1959 Billy Wilder comedy in which two unemployed musicians, Joe and Jerry, while on the run from the Mafia, which wants to eliminate them as witnesses, disguise themselves as young women and join an all-female jazz band, playing jazz – the hot music at the time – in the company of hot women making up the band. Hence, the title of the movie. The film was immediately dubbed into Russian under the title “V dzhazze tol’ko devushki” (“Jazz by Women Only”). It has been very popular ever since.

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