

Time, Sleep and Death in Pelevin's "Sleep" and Its English Translation: Ways of Interpreting Realia, Allusions and Time Movement

Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются проблемы интерпретации ключевых понятий рассказа В. Пелевина «СПИ» (таких как «время», «сон» и «смерть») в переводе на английский язык, выполненном Э. Бромфилдом. В фокусе исследования – способы передачи оригинальных аллюзий и трудных для перевода реалий. Специфика движения времени в рассказе «СПИ» обусловлена наличием двух противоречащих друг другу временных контекстов: история Никиты Сонечкина охватывает несколько месяцев, однако целый ряд исторических аллюзий и социальных реалий указывает на то, что Никита взрослеет, стареет и умирает незадолго до конца рассказа. Некоторые реалии (например, «лекция по эм-эл философии») удачно интерпретированы переводчиком («lectures on Marxism-Leninism»), но ряд предложенных им решений уводит иностранного читателя в сторону от авторского приема. Так, во фразе «Мы учили духов, духи учили нас» слово «духи», которым советские солдаты называли «душманов» (афганских боевиков), интерпретировано при помощи номинации «spirits» («призраки», а также «алкогольные напитки»). Таким образом, темпоральная локализация события в переводе исчезает, высказывание приобретает иное содержание. Оригинальные реалии и аллюзии, указывающие на изменение исторической эпохи, а также возраста и социального статуса героя, описываются в статье с точки зрения их текстовой функции и способов перевода. Опираясь на данные опроса, проведенного среди американских студентов, прочитавших «СПИ» в переводе, авторы статьи выявляют проблемные фрагменты текста и рассматривают возможные способы их интерпретации для англоязычных читателей.

Ключевые слова: перевод, время, хронотоп, реалия, коннотация, интерпретация, Пелевин, РКИ

Abstract: The article concerns ways of interpreting key concepts of V. Pelevin's "Sleep" (such as "time", "sleep" and "death") in the English translation made by A. Bromfield. The ways of rendering original allusions and realia that are difficult to translate are in the focus of the study.

Peculiar time movement is presented in the original in two contradictory ways: the explicit story of Nikita Dozakin covers several months of his youth, though many hints

supported by certain historic allusions and social realia convince the attentive reader that the plot covers several decades and Nikita gets old and dies some time before the end of the story. Some of these realia (for example, “em-el philosophy” = “lectures on Marxism-Leninism”) have been skillfully explicated and rendered by A. Bromfield, but some interpretations lead the reader astray, as the word “spirits” instead of the Soviet soldiers’ slang “dukhi”, used for “dushmany” (Afghan militants) during the war in 1979-1989: “We’ve taught the spirits, and the spirits have taught us”. The whole scene lost its temporal location and besides mystic connotation got some connection to alcohol. Realia and allusions to Soviet and Yeltsin’s times, pointing to changing age and social status of the hero, are described in the article according to their function in the text and potential translatability. Using the data of the survey carried out among American students who had read ‘Sleep’ in translation, the most sophisticated passages in the text are revealed, and the ways of their interpretation for English-speaking readers are offered.

Key words: translation, time, realia, Pelevin, Russian for foreigners, interpretation, cultural reference, connotation

INTRODUCTION.

THE NEED FOR STUDYING REALIA IN PELEVIN’S TEXTS

The article presents some results of the current research studying cultural references in Pelevin’s prose and its English translations [Urzha 2009, Skvortsova 2012]. One of the main goals of the research is collecting the data and elaborating methodological grounds for composing a commented reader’s book on Pelevin’s prose for foreigners who learn Russian.

Victor Pelevin is one of the most popular Russian writers nowadays; in 2011 he was nominated for the Nobel prize in Literature. “Generation P” and “The Buddha’s Little Finger” are included in the courses on contemporary post-modern literature in many universities. Growing interest to Pelevin’s stories and novels among foreign readers creates the demand for translations, and on the ground of these translations the content and the style of Pelevin’s texts are perceived, as well as the key ideas of the narratives, and the image of the author. However, producing interpretations of these narratives is a really challenging task. The stories and novels by Victor Pelevin, describing Soviet epoch and the period of Perestrojka, are filled with the realia which have already gone away, sometimes not even being fixed and described in the dictionaries or encyclopedias. Not only foreigners, but also young Russian people would not thoroughly understand some passages of his books without a detailed commentary.

Of course, this could be said about any writer showing the certain period of history in detail, but Pelevin’s texts provide an extraordinary case here. This author never uses cultural references just to describe anything typical, the words denoting realia reveal their connotations, form unexpected metaphors, explicating the philosophical message of the author, involving the reader into the intertextual play upon quotes, clichés and popular images. Critics and linguists, writing about Pelevin’s language, often use the word “blend” referring to the author’s mixing English and Russian words, or slang and literary language [Antonov 1995, Genis 1999, Lipovetskij 1999, Repina 2004, Markova 2005, Paulsen 2006]. For example, Mark Lipovetskii uses this concept to characterize Pelevin’s style concerning his, so to say, “untranslatability”: “Notwithstanding the success of all of Pelevin’s earlier novels in English translation, the translation of Generation P will hardly be adequate – after all this novel is written in a fantastic blend

of Russian and English, where one and the same text or even simply a single word acquires a double meaning by virtue of its double status, i.e. it becomes a metaphor in the process” [Lipovetskij 1999].

Although the literary critics and philologists refer to Pelevin’s prose rather often, the linguistic study of these texts have not gone far yet [Babenko 2004, Markova 2005, Palchik 2003, Paulsen 2006, Zarubina 2007]. What gets left aside is a creative “blend” of cultural references that Victor Pelevin uses to transfer his ideas to the attentive reader. This fantastic, sophisticated blend is one of the unique features of Pelevin’s style that lets each reader have a different text interpreting the same story. On the other hand, this very feature gets the task of translating Pelevin’s prose into any other language really challenging.

REALIA AND ALLUSIONS EMPLOYED IN CONTRADICTIONARY TIME MOVEMENT IN “SLEEP”

The story “SPI” (or “Sleep”, in the English translation by Andrew Bromfield), which we will focus on in this article¹, provides convincing illustrations for the idea stated above. The main plot about Soviet student Nikita Sonechkin (Dozakin in the translation), who discovers that all people around him spend their lives sleeping and finally falls into the eternal sleep himself, turns out to be just a small part of the story. This plot blurs weirdly, and the attentive reader can notice that it covers not only several months of Nikita’s life, but also several decades of the Soviet and Post-Soviet period. A drastic twist of the time-flow is realized in the text only with the help of the realia, because no dates are mentioned, so the contradiction between two different time-frames of the story appears only to some of the readers, who can notice and interpret the cultural references.

Here are some examples. The story begins when Nikita attends the lecture in “em-el philosophy”, and the reader has to guess that “em-el” means “Marxism-Leninism” – the theory studied in all Soviet schools and universities in 70-80-s, but not later. Nikita and his parents watch a TV program where they can see a major standing in a hot mountain ravine, and this military man says: “We’ve taught the *dukhi*, and the *dukhi* have taught us”. The Russian word “*dukhi*” is a slang used by Soviet soldiers for “dushmany” (Afghan militants) during the war in 1979–1989, where the USSR rendered military help to the pro-Soviet Afghan government. In the university one of Nikita’s friends tells him an anecdote about “*three Georgians in the space*”. This anecdote is only mentioned, but not narrated in the story. The research shows that this text turns to be a mixture of two different anecdotes, and the first one (“*the Georgians in the space*”) concerns tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh at the end of the 80-s. The second anecdote is about “*three Georgians in the bath*”, and the hero of Pelevin’s story really finds himself in the Russian bath, where he sees “*women, <...> dressed in short ballet dresses made of feathers*”. This allusion to the “Swan Lake” and its famous translation on TV during the attempt of the coup removing Mikhail Gorbachev in the August 1991 is easily discovered by middle-aged Russian readers, but gets missed by young people. In the final evening, mentioned in the story, Nikita goes for a walk to talk to “sleeping” people and find out the truth – to know what they are dreaming about. He meets two men in white coats (the author leaves a hint here: these coats “*made them look like angels*”), and the names of the men are not at all deliberate.

¹ The research project also includes other Pelevin’s texts, such as “Deviatyj son Very Pavlovny” and “Prince of Gosplan”, compared to their English translations.

They are Mikhail and Gavriila – the names of two main archangels – messengers from God. They offer Nikita to have a drink with them – and vodka with the inscription “SPI” (which is an abbreviation of the exporter) makes a secret influence on the main hero. The signs of his social status start to change quickly. They are represented by such realia as *a half day-off* (“*otgul*”), and a working food bonus called *a grocery order* (“*zakaz*”), which mean that Nikita is already not a student, but a working man. He thinks of his wife and daughter. His looks (*a bald head*, then *wrinkled face*) change, he becomes older with every minute. Nikita does not want *to walk to the subway with the captain and talk about Yeltsin*, which means that the plot goes on in the 90-s. Finally the reflection of Nikita’s face in the train window disappears, and we can read two letters “DA” written *from the outside* of the window glass, which means that they should be read as “AD”, that is “*hell*”. The whole life of the hero flows and ends in one evening, and the philosophical themes of “life as a sleep”, “sleep as death” are intermingled here with the idea of life in the Soviet Russia as a passive, sleep-like state.

“BLENDING REALIA” AS A SPECIAL DEVICE

We can see that the device of “blending” is used in the story not only concerning some separate images or events, but in the very structure of the narrative, its time-flow and philosophical content. And in the sphere of the realia, the bizarre mixtures appear here and there in the text turning the process of reading into the intriguing play. For example, Nikita dreams of “*a business visit to Moscow by the Mongol Khan*”, where Soviet expression “*rabochij visit*” (a business visit) is united with the ancient image of Mongol Khan. Nikita’s friend speaks about the match between “*Spartak*” and “*Salavat Yulajev*” (Russian readers know that these are the names of hockey teams), and the hero understands that his friend is dreaming of something “*Romano-Pugachevian*”, mixing two historical epochs when Roman gladiator Spartak and Bashkir rebel Salavat Yulajev lived. Other mixture in the reference to an anecdote (about Dzerzhinsky’s revolver (“*mauser*”) and Dnepropetrovsk geysers (“*mazut*”) is based on the misuse of proper names and paronyms: “(on) stal govorit’ o mazute Dnepropetrovska vmesto mauzera Dzerzhinskogo”¹. One of the key images of the story is *seaweed* – one of the cheapest products available in Soviet shops. Nikita spends his time standing in the line for the seaweed, his parents have a special cupboard where they store the seaweed etc. – this grotesque shows the food shortage in the USSR.

THE GOALS OF COMMENTING ON THE REALIA

Comments on the explored realia and their functions in Pelevin’s text could be applied in different ways. First of all, providing the sources of the author’s allusions could help both foreigners who read Pelevin in the original and young Russian readers who wish to understand his post-modern strategies. Secondly, such comments could be

¹ The full text of the anecdote can be found in different versions, here is the variant from the book by A.K. Zholkovsky [Zholkovsky 2015], we present it in the English translation:

Two Soviet violinists went to an international contest. One of them got the second prize, and the other was only the 37th. The former was really upset, and the latter asked him:

– Why are you so sad? The second prize is nearly the same thing as the first prize!

– No, you don’t understand! If I had got the first prize, I would have had the chance to play the violin made by Stradivari!

– And what’s the buzz about it?

– Well, how can I explain? It is just like having the chance to shoot from Dzerzhinsky’s mauser!

used at the “pre-translation” stage in order to find most appropriate ways of interpreting realia in Pelevin’s texts. (A commentary to “Eugene Onegin” by Y.M. Lotman paradoxically comes to mind here, and this comparison would not seem odd: Andrey Bitov, a modern Russian writer, said at the meeting with Moscow students that he was not surprised when his American colleagues once called Alexander Pushkin “the first Russian post-modern writer”. As we know, Lotman’s commentary, referring to different kinds of realia in Pushkin’s novel, is used not only by contemporary Russian and foreign readers who wish to get thoroughly acquainted with the text of “Eugene Onegin”, but also by translators and scholars in Translation Studies).

Of course, the commentaries can be different, taking into the account the language skills and the acquaintance of the target readers with Russian history and Soviet culture. At present, there are several commented reader’s books on contemporary Russian prose that include Pelevin’s stories (“Nika” and “Zigmund in a café”), they provide the reader with comments on text composition, style, some grammar peculiarities, and realia, among others, though they do not use any classification of the realia, where each group, or class, would be given a special comment [Yatsenko 2006; Pelevin 2007 (Yudina, Kirichenko comp.)]. And up to now, there have been no supporting manuals for translators who would wish to interpret Pelevin’s texts into other languages. In order to prepare any of these two types of information materials (the reader’s book for foreigners or the manual for translators) the elaborating a taxonomy of the realia in Pelevin’s texts, based on classifications, offered by Russian and foreign scholars, is necessary.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE REALIA IN “SLEEP”

The problems of translating realia have been among the most acute in the Translation Studies, different opinions on the subject being discussed in the works by K.I. Chukovsky, E. Nida, G. Mounin, Y. Levyi, A.V. Fedorov, S. Vlachov, S. Florin and many more up to present times (V.S. Vinogradov, L.S. Barkhudarov, G. Toury, M. Baker, B. Hatim, J. Mason, B. Osimo, N.K. Garbovsky etc). The term “realia” denotes objects of culture that are relevant for a certain nation in the certain historic period, for example, clothes, dishes, measures, money, titles and ranks, national celebrities, famous artifacts and many more (see [Vlachov, Florin 1980]). Quite often this term is applied also to the words and expressions denoting realia, although the vast number of other terms have been offered the scholars (for example, exotisms [Suprun 1958], etnolexemes [Sheiman 1978], cultural lacunae, or gaps [Revzin, Rozentsveig 1964; Titkova 2007; Ruzhitskij 2015]). As far as the semantics of these elements is concerned, scholars consider them having “cultural references”, and this term is widely applicable, because it can be referred to the words that include a cultural component either as a seme or as a connotation. In the latter case this semantic component is “connected to the object in the native speakers’ mentality, though it is not obligatory for the use of the word denoting this object” [Apresyan 1995: 156].

One of the first classifications of the words and expressions with cultural references was offered in the work by E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov “Language and Culture”, published in 1973, later it was applied to other languages [Tomakhin 1988]. It included the nominations of traditional household (*borsch*), the out-of-date realia (*lap-ti*), the folklore expressions (*dobry molodets*), sovietizms (word denoting Soviet realia, such as *kolkhoz*), the new realia (*zags* – as the abbreviation for the registry office), and the loanwords [Vereshchagin, Kostomarov 1990: 51]. Later this classification was corrected and extended for different purposes, for instance, for the purposes of translation [Vlachov, Florin 1980; Osimo 2004].

It is important to point out that the cultural connotations of the words denoting realia help us to localize the mentioned objects in the certain time and space, and this localization usually works as a supplementary device of creating time-references in a narrative (while the main device here is the use of dates and nominations of periods in time: years, weeks, hours etc). In Pelevin's "Sleep", as we could see, the time frame, constructed with the help of the realia, contradicts the explicitly postulated period of several months in Nikita's life and expands the temporal context of the narrative.

Working out the classification of the realia in "Sleep", we referred to the existing taxonomies and also took into the account the special textual functions of these elements, described above. The thorough study of the historical and cultural context of the realia required the reference to official documents, memoirs, encyclopedias, literary texts, and surveys among Russian adults, who grew up and lived in the Soviet epoch.

The realia in "Sleep" have been divided into several groups:

- Soviet realia (*zakaz, otgul, druzhinnik* etc);
- names of celebrities and historic events (*Lunacharsky, Dzerzhinsky, Yeltsin, Kurskaya bitva* etc);
- frames, or scenarios (for example, standing in the long queue to the grocery store¹, in Pelevin's text: "*medlennaja ochered' za morskoy kapustoj*" (a slow queue for the seaweed);
- metaphors and comparisons based on cultural references ("bananovo-limonovyj Singapur" (banana-lemon Singapore) – an expression referring to the bright and exotic life abroad, as it seemed for the people behind "the iron curtain");
- allusions to popular texts (anecdotes, films, songs etc).

The words and expressions from each group require a special kind of commentary, for example, the frame, as a stereotypical situation in progress [Demjanenko 1981], should be described as a sequence of iterated procedures performed by some agents in special circumstances. The allusions to popular texts (the term "precedentnyj text" is used here in Russian [Sorokin 1985]) need the reference to the source, the explanation of the way the allusion was made and sometimes even a quote from the text.

Each commentary should refer to the function of the realia in Pelevin's narrative. We showed some of these functions above, presenting the concepts, names, texts and events that are used for creating certain time-references in the plot of "Sleep" (a lecture in "*emel philosophy*", Afghan "*dukhi*", anecdotes concerning the Karabakh conflict, "the short ballet dresses made of feathers" ("*the Swan Lake*"), *zakaz, otgul, Yeltsin* etc). These functions also deserve special attention of future translators of Pelevin's prose.

UNDERSTANDING THE REALIA IN TRANSLATION:

THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY AMONG AMERICAN READERS OF "SLEEP"

The English translation of "SPI", or "Sleep", made by Andrew Bromfield offers many excellent inventions, such as "chances of "Spartak" and "Salavat Yulajev" in soccer", or "SLEEP" as the abbreviation of the Special Limited Extra Export Product. Inserting paraphrase nominations, Bromfield explains some details of the Soviet life: «*He could see a sign, "GLORY TO SOVIET MAN"»* ("*stala vidna slava sovetскому cheloveku na kryshe vysokogo doma*"). But such devices as transcription and transliteration (*borscht, Zil, Desinsectal*) did not work well here.

¹ This scenario has been thoroughly described in the article about "the discourse of the queue" [Vereshchagin 1996: 15–26].

This was shown by the results of the survey which Valeria Skvortsova made among American students, who had read Bromfield's translation. The survey was carried out among the American students (20–23 years old). 87% of the respondents study Russian, but they have read the story in the English translation, not being acquainted with Soviet realia. 25% of the respondents have been to Russia (already in XXI century).

The respondents said that “the language did not make sense” to them in many cases of transliterations. Here is one of the comments:

*On page 71, Nikita recommends **Desinsectal** to the old man who sees bed bugs. Desinsectal is not something I've ever heard of.*

The method of literal translation was also unsuccessful:

*There are some places where the language did not make sense to me. Nikita passes a “anti-tank gun and tobacco shop” on page 69. I was confused by the phrase “**anti-tank gun.**”*

Some interpreted passages of Pelevin's story led American readers astray. For example, the phrase of a major about “*dukhi*” was translated as “*We've taught the spirits, and the spirits have taught us*”. The whole scene lost its temporal location and besides mystic connotation got some connection to alcohol. The name of the TV show “*Nash sad*” has been interpreted literally as “*Our garden*”, and Nikita's thoughts about “*the inventor of a popular sexual perversity*” (Marquis de Sade) seemed to come out of the blue for English-speaking readers. The Russian word “*DA*” in the final scene has been translated as “*YES*”, which can not be read vice versa and has no connection with the arising infernal theme.

As a result, the American readers' apprehension of the story turned out to be rather different. They focused their attention only on the twisted mind of the main hero “swinging” between the sleep and the reality:

*Some points where he was alternating between the dream and his life stood out as somewhat **confusing**.*

*I really enjoyed the beginning but **had trouble following** the rest once all the dreams got **mixed up** until the very last page.*

*The difficulties I had in understanding stemmed primarily from the **confusing dream sequences**.*

The second reason explaining many strange mixtures and bizarre objects mentioned in the story has been found in the state of intoxication, provoked by “spirits” and “export vodka”:

*So perhaps throughout the story **he's been intoxicated?***

*It could mean **they're drunk** (spirits = alcohol in some contexts) so much so that they no longer fear death.*

The readers noticed Nikita's changing looks in the final, but did not interpret his disappearance as a possible “metaphysical” death. One of the readers noticed that the name of the hero had changed, and interpreted this fact (which is just a translation mistake or misprint) as a social sign:

He surely gets older; he's no longer a student and also his name goes from Nikita to Nikolai.

One of the respondent's answers can be used as a summary of these reading misfortunes:

I really enjoyed reading the story. There were some things that didn't really make sense to me because they were cultural references. The references to “Dnepropetrovsk

geysers instead of Dzerzhinsky's mauser", a Romano-Pugachevian dream, the television show "Traveler's Club," the archimandrite Julian, Alsatians, and the reference to the German Parmenych all went over my head. I was also wondering about all of the seaweed. What is a seaweed sandwich? It sounds really weird in English.

On the other hand, some details, noticed by the respondents, explicated A. Bromfield's skilful interpretations of some realia. For example, the readers pointed out that the constellation Ursa Major, mentioned at the end of the story, is normally called "the Big Dipper" and not "the Great Bear", but noting the fact that the expression "the Great Bear" is also widespread, we can suppose that the translator chose his variant ("the dipper shape of the Great Bear") to save the original allusions, which concern Soviet Russia ("*sovok Bol'shoj Medveditsy*").

Working on the material, we offered several solutions for the issues mentioned above. For example, the name of the TV show "*Our garden*" could be translated in the form of a slogan "*Don't be sad – make the flowerbed*", which could be used to evoke allusions with the "the inventor of a popular sexual perversity". And for the interpretation for the word "*DA*" ("yes") being also read as "*AD*" ("hell") we could offer "*an inscription 'HELLO' with erased letter 'o'*".

CONCLUSIONS

Exploring the realia in Pelevin's prose and commenting on their usage (as it has been shown on the example of "SPI") lets us reveal and show the special 'blending' device used by the author to create the images in the narrative based on many cultural references. Also it becomes possible to describe the crucial role performed by these realia in marking the contradictory time-flow of the text. These findings can help post-Soviet young readers get acknowledged with Pelevin's literary strategies; they can also be used by foreigners who wish to read Pelevin in the original; and finally, they can be concerned by future translators wishing to get closer to the author's exclusive manner.

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