RUSSKIJ JAZYK IN NATIVE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION: TOWARDS THE POETICS OF RUSSISMS IN NON-RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Introduction. Against the torrential flow of Anglicisms into Russian, as well as many other languages, the present paper aims at considering the possible reasons behind introducing loans from Russian into English-language literature.

Materials and methods. The research encompasses authentic English-language literary works in the historical, dystopia and fantasy genres, featuring Russisms. The analysis algorithm includes (1) identification of the Russisms, which can be introduced via a scope of techniques varying in transparency, and (2) identifying their stylistic function in the literary text.

Results. All three of the genres under study feature Russian loans, yet, there are considerable differences as to the effects pursued. (1) In historical novels Russisms are employed to help construct a veritable culturally specific environment, yet absolute accuracy of description is not required. (2) In dystopias elements of the Russian language are used in a particular ideological function, resulting in the effect of negativisation. (3) In fantasy the primary function of Russisms is that of exotisation.

Discussion. The undertaken study allows to raise and answer two kinds of questions: (1) Why-question, or why would a writer risk the text intelligibility opting for the language heterogeneity; (2) How-question, or how accurately do the writers reproduce elements of the Russian linguaculture.

Conclusion. The research allows to show the unique relations established between the Russian and English linguocultures, which are reflected in literature. The genre shift also indicates a change in the overall perception of Russian which seems to be losing its ideological charge.

Key words: russism, historical novel, fantasy, dystopia.


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Introduction. Languages exist in contact and interaction, which are the major factors in their development. English is no exception. It is by no means uncommon for English to make use of elements of other languages – rather, its whole history can be defined in terms of dominant donor languages. Russian has never been among those; yet starting with the XVI century there has been a constant, though uneven flow of Russisms into English (for detailed account see [1, p. 43–45]).

Yet, our focus here is not on the Russisms becoming part of the English lexicon – code interlingualism, but on the interaction of the two languages within a work of fiction – textual interlingualism. Quite unexpectedly, the Russian language appears prominent in the domain of English-language literature and performs a variety of unique functions.

Materials and methods. The phenomenon of language heterogeneity of literary texts has attracted ample scholarly attention and was described by different researchers as code-mixing [2], code-switching [3], multilingualism [4], code intertextuality [5], foreign-language inclusions [6]. The scope of languages covered is also most diverse and includes Spanish, Irish, Chinese, Urdu, etc.

Yet, despite this diversity, all these languages function in fiction in a similar way: their aim can be broadly classified as culturological, since they help to create a culturally authentic textual world and characters. This kind of code heterogeneity is to be found basically in two kinds of fiction: (a) native English fiction depicting ethnically diverse society (e. g. G. Jen’s Typical American) and (b) non-native English fiction depicting the authors’ native societies by means of the English language (e. g. A. Amadi’s The Concubine).

In contrast, Russian linguocultural substrate appears to offer a much richer stylistic potential and is therefore to be found in a greater variety of literary genres. In the present paper we will consider the functions performed by Russisms in historicals, dystopias and fantasy. The corpus of
works is diverse in terms of genres, authors and time of writing; yet all of them are authentic English-language works written by native English speakers, and all of them feature certain elements of the Russian linguocultural substrate, although aiming at different effects.

**Results.**

**Poetics of Russisms in historical literature.** English-language literature favors historical novels; and, striving for diversity and novelty, it has developed a sub-genre of historical novels set in Russia: *Rasputin’s Daughter* by R. Alexander, *The Bronze Horseman* trilogy by P. Simons, *Winter Garden* by K. Hannah, *Russian Winter* by D. Kalotay, to name just a few. At that, according to S. Johnson, book review editor for the *Historical Novels Review*, “it used to be that Russian settings for historicals were few and far between… In recent months, though, historicals set in Russia have been appearing in force”, offering “a wide variety of eras, personalities, and reading levels” [7].

Clearly, the most prominent feature of historical fiction, distinguishing it from other genres, is an authentic cultural-historical background. Yet, there is a difference between history and historical fiction. As L. O. Mink put it, “history claims to be a true representation of the past, while fiction does not, even when it purports to describe actions and events locatable in particular times and places” [8, p. 14]. Therefore we can conclude, the role of Russisms should be to help construct a veritable culturally specific environment, yet absolute accuracy of description is not required. And this is exactly what we witness in literature.

Let us consider *The Bronze Horseman* by P. Simons as an example. The author makes quite an effort to create the genuine cultural-historical setting. To start with, the novel is introduced by two maps: (1) North-Western Russia and adjacent countries and (2) the map of the city of Leningrad, which are meant to help the readers identify the locale of the events narrated. Indeed, the maps are essential, since P. Simons pays much attention to specific routes followed by the characters:

E. g. When the tram didn’t come for twenty minutes, Tatiana agreed to walk a few kilometers to tram Number 16. Govorova turned into Ulitsa Skapina and then meandered diagonally northward until it ended in the embankment of the Obvodnoy Canal – the Circular Canal.

Another important block of cultural setting is provided by the characters’ names and the various ways they are referred to.

Russian names have a number of peculiarities in respect to their stock, structure, their tendency towards variation depending on the communication register and communicators’ attitude, etc. All these make them a marker of the Russian identity, a highly culturally specific lexical class, often seen as a problem in intercultural communication and therefore subject to neutralization in all texts other than literary, where they are needed exactly for their cultural uniqueness, so readily emphasized by P. Simons in particular.

The author is careful in her choice of names, which are mostly specifically Russian (*Tatiana, Dasha, Pasha*), or international, but typical for Russia (*Alexander* – the bearer of the name turns out to be non-Russian, but this must come as surprise for the reader).

Secondly, the author is unafraid of confusing the reader by providing multiple variants of the characters’ names, reflecting the Russian practice of modifying names to render various kinds of attitude:

E. g. “Daria, Dasha, Dashenka, Dashka. She represented everything that was dear to Tatiana”.

Here the name variants are given in a list. The absence of “and” to signal the closing element rather signals that the list is incomplete, that it is potentially endless. These variants stand for various aspects of the personality, various social statuses of the character, all of which are equally dear for the speaker – Daria’s sister. It is noteworthy that the list is given on the very first page of the novel, for it vividly illustrates the notion of the name variability and allows to avoid the reader’s
confusion when coming across different references to one and the same character. Thus Tatiana is found in the novel under the names of Tatiana (full first name), Tania (contracted family name), Tatiana Georgievna (full name with patronymic, used when addressed by her mother in irritation), Tanechka (when addressed by her grandfather, in a gentle and kindly manner – an attitude most typical of Russian grandparents).

Apart from proper names, the characters can be referred to by other means of address – borrowed Russisms: Babushka (“grandmother”), Deda (contracted for “grandfather”, typical for child discourse), Papochka (endearment form for “father”) – all serving to render a specific Russian linguistic culture.

Thirdly, the author allows her reader to appreciate the Russian discursive practices, notoriously short of courtesy:

E. g. “Tania, be quiet and sit down”, “Papa ordered his daughter”. “It’s about to begin. Irina, you, too. Sit.”

All these efforts on the part of the writer do not go amiss, but succeed in creating a genuine cultural setting for the novel, not undermined by some elements of inconsistency in rendering cultural realia and even by factual and linguistic mistakes. We are talking here about cases such as the use of the name “Tsarskoye Selo”, which is an anachronism, since this had been the name of the place before 1918, while from 1937 onward it has been named Pushkin. It is not our goal to give a detailed analysis of culturally-related mistakes in the text, since we believe these to be of little consequence here. Yet, in one instance the author’s imprecision had an unwelcome side effect.

In the very first chapter of the novel the reader learns about the beginning of the Soviet-Fascist war (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War) in the same way the characters do – by being exposed to the official state announcement. This announcement in the novel is an exact translation of the opening and closing parts of the historical announcement, made by the Minister for international affairs V. M. Molotov on 12-00, 22nd June 1941. It is exact but for the rendering of the name of the city Zhitomir, which for some reason is transliterated as Shitomir, featuring an irrelevant vulgarism, so out of place in the described context.

In general though, it can be concluded that the means invoked by P. Simons to construct the veritable Russian cultural background were adequate to the task, i. e. the culturological function. In this genre the use of Russisms is crucial, but limited – they are to be sufficient to add a strange flavor to the text, but without overcomplicating it.

Poetics of Russisms in dystopian literature.

Another genre, where Russian language plays a prominent role, is dystopia. This is quite understandable in the light of the ideological differences between the Western European world and the Soviet Union for most of the XXth century: the Soviet model appeared to be the very quintessence of evil, Russian language being strongly associated with it and tainted by the association. Therefore Russian became an almost genre-constituting feature for the English-language dystopian literature.

Let us start our review with G. Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four, it being one of the early and by far the most influential dystopias, though somewhat marginal from our perspective, since it does not feature Russisms proper: there is nothing much Russian about the language of fictional Oceania, at least on the surface.

Yet, the Soviet discourse is directly associated with Orwellian Newspeak, as can be concluded from the U.S. reaction to the Danchev case, described by N. Chomsky [9]. M. McCauley also readily equates the “Stalinist discourse” and Newspeak [10, p. 298].

The reason is that G. Orwell’s Newspeak is not a language, but a discourse – in the novel it is applied to the English language, but it was the Soviet discourse that served as the source of
inspiration for the writer. So Newspeak is a combination of the English language with the socialist, i.e. Soviet, discursive strategies. This is implied by the direct parallel between the two in G. Orwell’s Appendix to the novel.

Newspeak in the novel is the writer’s experiment to show the relationship between thought and language, earlier approached by Orwell theoretically in “Politics and the English Language”, where he reasons that “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” [11]. In the essay we also find numerous references to the deplorable trends in the Russian language “as a result of dictatorship” [11]; in the novel these trends are merely radicalized.

At about the same time V. Nabokov published his first American novel *Bend Sinister*, which is also a dystopia featuring an aggressively asserting oneself totalitarian state. To complete the repulsive characterization of the state the writer gives it a language, which is a combination of Russian and German, perceived in the years directly following the 2nd World War not as languages of literature and philosophy, but as the languages of dictatorship.

Nabokov blends the languages, plays with them, but leaves them quite recognizable:

E. g. Ubit’ il’ ne ubit’? Vot est’ oprosen. // Vto bude edler: v rasume tzerpieren // Ogneprashchi i strely zlovoro ka.

The fragment is a translation of the Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” monologue into the fictional Kuranian tongue. It mostly reads as distorted Russian, but also features German words and forms. The most interesting are Russian roots in German guise – oprosen, tzerpieren.

Finally we cannot but mention A. Burgess’ creation – the world of *A Clockwork Orange*, where he focuses on a youth gang speaking their own slang Nadsat. This one is different from other dystopias, where the protagonist rebels against the evil state; it is the protagonist that is the evil here, and, as in all the above described texts, this quality is marked for the reader by the Russian language. Burgess, too, is not content with a mechanical transliteration, instead he plays with linguistic forms and meanings. This can be illustrated by the writer’s coinage horrorshow, which via association with the Russian ‘khorosho’ comes to mean ‘good’. But clearly, it is good only for the “droogs”, while for the others it remains a horrorshow.

The three novels mentioned here are different in many respects, as we tried to highlight below (see Table 1). But there is one distinct feature that holds them together, and that is the use of the Russian language in a particular ideological function.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the fictional language</th>
<th>Newspeak</th>
<th>Nadsat</th>
<th>Kuranian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic status in the artificial world of the novel</strong></td>
<td>Conlang based on the official national language</td>
<td>Slang</td>
<td>Official national language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic features</strong></td>
<td>Combination of the English language with the Soviet discursive strategies</td>
<td>Partially assimilated and distorted Russisms</td>
<td>Combination of partially assimilated, distorted words of Slavic and German origin (predominantly Russian and German)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function in society</strong></td>
<td>Thought control</td>
<td>Identification of the group, conspiration</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Function in novel</strong></td>
<td>Negativisation of the image by association with Russian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional functions in the novel</strong></td>
<td>Criticism of manipulative discourse in a totalitarian state</td>
<td>Estrangement</td>
<td>Estrangement</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Poetics of Russisms in fantasy literature. Finally, we can compare the place of Russisms in the older literary trends with a newer development, i.e. a particular sub-genre of fantasy, which we, following L. Bardugo, will refer to as tsarpunk [12].

Interestingly, texts of this genre comprise over three fourths of the COCA results for query “boyar” – 110 out of 144 [13]. This is a drastic contrast to BNC, giving mere 6 valid results, all in texts on political history [14]. Yet, this is understandable, taking into account the fact that the BNC ceased to update its textual basis since 1994, while COCA continues its development and reflects the newest trends in the English linguoculture, among which we count the emergence of tsarpunk – fantasy that “uses Russia as its cultural touchstone” [12]. So Russisms are crucial for the genre.

If we consider some isolated examples, we would find certain trends very similar to other genres considered above. Just for the sake of illustration, let us compare two fragments from different genres (see Table 2), featuring one and the same Russism introduced by means of transliteration (kolbasa), but in a highly explanatory context of hyperonyms and closest equivalents (meet, sausage). This is a model strategy that takes care of both the form and the meaning of the loan, and we can see no genre-specific difference here.

Yet the general genre portraits in terms of treating Russian linguocultural substrate are rather dissimilar. And there are two major distinctive features: (1) in fantasy Russian inclusions are much more frequent and lengthy; and (2) the authors enjoy greater freedom in respect to the foreign culture they build their literary world upon, indulging in all kinds of distortions and violations, which we shall attempt to systematize.

Firstly, the most frequent are banal misspellings (mistransliterations, confusion of similarly looking graphemes) and grammatical mistakes caused by poor knowledge of the source language. Thus we can consider the following passage presenting a dialogue of characters speaking different languages, which accounts for constant code shifting:

Table 2. Russisms in historical and fantasy fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical fiction</th>
<th>Fantasy fiction</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. Maybe some sausage. Some nice smoked kolbasa. (Simons P. <em>The Bronze Horseman</em>)</td>
<td>Is there meet? – Kolbasa. She doled out a length of smoked sausage. (Garcia y Robertson R. <em>Firebird</em>)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

E. g. The rider stood in his stirrups and scanned the encampment. Then he called to Andrew: “K kakomu boyaru vy podchinyaetes?” (What boyar do you serve?) Confused, Andrew could only shake his head. “Nemedlenno mne otvechayte! Boyary Ivor-i-Boros trebuyut bashey nemedlennoy sdachi.” (Answer me at once! Boyars Ivor and Boros demand your immediate surrender!) Andrew extended his right hand outward. “I am Colonel Keane of the 35th Maine Volunteers, of the United States Army.” The rider reined his horse back several paces. “Vy yazychnik, vy ne govorite po hashemvy yazyku. Zavaytes!” (Forstchen W. R. *Rally Cry*).

Not a single of the series of “Russian” inclusions is free from mistakes (underlined by us for the sake of convenience). Evidently they were not intended to be read – that would have been a challenge even for a person with Russian background. They were apparently meant to represent stretches of some barbarous tongue.

In another work – *The Grisha Trilogy* by L. Bardugo – we face a confusing inconsistency in rendering personal names, which mostly fail to agree in gender with the surnames accompanying them: *Ilia* (m.) *Morozova* (f.) – male character; *Alina* (f.) *Starkov* (m.) – female character.
Secondly, there occur functional shifts changing the way a word functions. Thus “Morevna” is part of the personal name of a Russian folk tale character “Marya Morevna”. Morphologically, it is reminiscent of patronymic, but C. Valente turns it into the character’s surname:

E. g. Major-General Marya Morevna sat impassively and watched the child weep. <…> “Go,” Morevna whispered (Valente C. M. *Deathless*).

In L. Bardugo’s trilogy the verb “otkazat’sya” functions as a noun; “Razrushaya” (literally “Ruining”, an active participle) is rendered as “the Ruined”.

Thirdly, there happen semantic shifts, changing the meaning of the Russian loans. Thus the analysis of contexts for Russism “kvas” in L. Bardugo’s *The Grisha Trilogy* indicates that it is an alcoholic beverage: one can get drunk on kvas, it can be compared to champagne, it is not to be drunk in the morning.

Fourthly, the strategy of introducing a Russism is sometimes far from optimal, or even faulty, in that it does not allow the reader to establish a connection between the transliterated and calqued versions of one and the same Russism, as is the case with “Byeli Zamak” and “the White Castle” in *Firebird* by R. Garcia y Robertson and with the birds’ names of the husbands and the birds they transfer from in C. Valente’s *Deathless*:

E. g. She laughed to see the rooks … One of them <…> fell hard onto the streetside. But the little bird bounced up, and when he righted himself, he was a handsome young man … “I am Lieutenant Gratch …”.

Fifthly, the selection of the elements of Russian cultural substrate is noteworthy. Thus, the world of R. Garcia y Robertson’s *Firebird* is inhabited by Infant King Ivan; Prince Sergey Mikhailovich, Grand Duke of Ikstra; Sonya D’Medved; Bishop Peter Petrovich of Markov; Tartars; Kazakh bowmen; Boyars. These aren’t really Russisms, but exotisms, i. e. elements of some undefined exotic culture; they have little meaning behind them but this exotic flavor.

Therefore, we can conclude that the primary function of Russisms in the fantasy genre fiction is that of exotisation. And, paradoxically, the choice of the Russian culture as substrate for fiction is due not to its being familiar, but on the contrary. For most readers (and, apparently, writers too) the knowledge is limited to a set of myths and stereotypes, which serve as an easy way of constructing a recognizable, yet distant and exotic alternative world.

**Discussion.** Having considered thus the functioning of Russian language in native English-language literature, we can conclude that it indeed holds quite a unique position for a foreign language neither culturally very close, nor especially influential for the target English linguoculture. In our review we tried to answer the why-question; and the answers differ for different genres, since the introduction of Russisms pursues different goals in them. In historical and, more broadly, realistic fiction their function is that of constructing an authentic cultural setting; in dystopias they serve to create a negatively charged fictional world; in fantasy Russian appears to a synonym to exotic, so its function is that of exotization, i. e. the utmost estrangement.

As to the how-question, there can be a more general answer, since in all three genres we noted lack of absolute exactness and trustworthiness in rendering elements of the Russian linguocultural substrate. There has been much debate among readers on forums as to the acceptability of this kind of freedom on the part of writers towards a real natural language, not some conlang of their own invention. Yet, even the highly unscrupulous use of Russian in modern fantasy can be seen as a kind of progress if compared to the perverse image of it in the Cold War literature.
Conclusion. Overall, this unique place held by the Russian language in the English linguoculture indicates that irrespective of the attitude, positive or negative, it has been and keeps attracting much interested attention. And literature is always an invitation for the reader to go further, beyond myths and stereotypes.

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