The Challenge of (not) translating Russian-English Code-Switching in David Bezmozgis's *Natasha and other Stories* (2004)

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Povzetek

David Bezmozgis predstavlja nazoren primer sodobnega kanadskega večkulturnega mozaika novega tisočletja, saj se v njegovi ustvarjalnosti prepletajo tri različne kulture: sovjetska kultura pisateljevega otroštva, kultura njegove nove prevzete domovine Kanade in pisateljeva zgodovinska judovska dediščina. V prvi zbirki kratkih zgodb *Natasha and Other Stories*, ki je izšla leta 2004, je Bezmozgis uporabljal tako imenovan angleško-ruski "code-switching" ali preklapljanje med tema jezikoma, saj se v besedilu pojavljajo številne ruske besede, ki so prečrkovane in zapisane v poševnem tisku, niso pa prevedene ali razložene. Z uvajanjem postopka preklapljanja med jezikoma je Bezmozgis nazorno upodobil edinstveno dvojezično situacijo v priseljenskih skupnostih, katerih člani pogosto uporabljajo oba jezika istočasno, s tem pa ustvarjajo posebno hibridno jezikovno raznolikost, ki je pogosto tisti, ki ne pripadajo skupnosti, ne razumejo. Ob tem se zagotovo poraja vprašanje, kako in ali sploh lahko prevedemo tovrstno preklapljanje med jezikoma. Analiza ponuja nekaj prevajalskih rešitev obravnavanja tega postopka v slovenskem prevodu Bezmozgisovih pripovedi. Namen analize je ponazoriti možnosti uporabe podomačitvenih ali tujitvenih strategij ob upoštevanju dejstva, da ciljna skupina slovensko govorečih bralcev najverjetneje ne pozna večine ruskih izrazov, ki so uporabljeni v izvirniku.

Ključne besede: preklapljanje med jeziki, podomačitev, tujitev, Bezmozgis, prevajanje

0 INTRODUCTION

David Bezmozgis was born in Riga (Latvia) and immigrated to Canada with his parents as a child. Before graduating from McGill University, Bezmozgis attended Hebrew school and later depicted his experience in "Animal to the Memory", a short story included in his first book. In 2003, three of Bezmozgis's short stories appeared in *The New Yorker, Zoetrope* and *Harper's* and, a year later, his first collection of short stories, *Natasha and Other Stories*, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The book eventually won the Toronto Book Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book, became a *New York Times* notable book and the *Chicago Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle* best book of 2004.

Natasha and Other Stories is dedicated to Bezmozgis's parents and chronicles the life of a Russian Jewish family that immigrated to Canada in the 1970s. Bezmozgis presents a realistic portrayal of the immigrant experience that includes an awareness of the hostile impact of the dominant culture and exposes cultural anxieties in the immigrant communities caused by the inevitable conflict between their former and new lives. As is evident from even a brief outline of the narrative structure of Bezmozgis's collection, the book features familiar topics favoured by immigrant authors, such as: the experience of dislocation, identity formation, nostalgia, bilingualism, alienation, material difficulties, depression and loneliness. In each of his well-written stories, Bezmozgis graphically captures the pain, joy, travails and challenges of immigrants from the vantage point of one family. The closely linked stories are narrated by Mark Berman, a little boy in the first four tales, and a teenager in the final three. All the stories take place in Canada, and can be seen as a cycle to the extent that they share the same protagonists: Mark, his family and their friends. Each story forms an independent whole and is articulated around a single event.

Bezmozgis uses English-Russian code-switching to present the complexity of the bilingual situation in the ethnic community, which should be rendered adequately in a translation, even if it requires more cognitive and "deciphering" effort on the part of readers who do not speak Russian.

The current analysis focuses on possibilities of using foreignising and domesticating strategies when rendering English-Russian code-switching that may be applied by future translators of Bezmozgis's narrative into Slovene. The empirical part was carried out with the methodological help of Davies' categorisation of domesticating/foreignising strategies, along with Venuti's, Bello's, Andrews's and Maksimova's methodologies. The functions of code-switching were identified and classified based on a framework adapted from Appel and Muysken (2006), Malik (1994) and Poplack (1980, 1995). Each translation choice will

be evaluated on the basis of rendering a denotative and connotative meaning, in consideration of the target audience of English-speaking readers, who may be completely unfamiliar with the terms. As it is impossible to analyse all examples of code-switching in Bezmozgis's narrative within one study, the main part focuses on a few illustrative examples, thus offering a basis for further research. The results of the study may have wider applicability in terms of analysing the use of foreignising/domesticating strategies when translating literary works in which English-Russian code-switching is also used.

1 CODE-SWITCHING IN BEZMOZGIS'S NARRATIVE

Code-switching is generally defined as a linguistic phenomenon whereby two or more language varieties are used alternately by bilinguals in a conversation. For this study, I applied Winford's (2003) more detailed definition of code-switching, which defines it as the alternating use of relatively complete utterances from two different languages, alternation between sentential and/or clausal structures from the two languages, and the insertion of (usually lexical) elements from one language into the other.[1] Thus, code-switching may be defined as the alternate use of two or more languages by bilinguals in a conversation. Unlike other sociolinguistic phenomena, such as pidgins and creoles, whereby speakers in contact only need to have knowledge of the common language that is used to communicate with speakers of other languages, code-switching requires its speakers to know at least two or more varieties, making it an activity exclusive to bilinguals.

It should be noted that Bezmozgis introduces code-switching primarily by inserting single words from Russian into English. Such use can elaborate on meanings that the second language does not have or capture humour to which the listener may respond. Poplack and Meechan (1995, p. 208) refer to this type as "established borrowing", though the heated debate about differentiating code-switching from borrowing is not a part of this analysis[2], and this term is used only to refer to a particular type of code-switching used in Bezmozgis's narrative. I found only one example of intersentential code-switching (Poplack, 1980, 34), i.e.—interjecting an entire sentence or phrase from Russian into English.

As Bezmozgis uses English-Russian[3] code-switching in his narrative to enhance his writing, to establish a real sense of place and create the atmosphere of an

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1   Depending on the purpose of code-switching studies, scholars may further separate code mixing from code-switching.

2   Thus, Myers-Scotton (1977) asserted that borrowed words arise in conversation with some level of predictability, while the same cannot be applied to code-switching words. This means that borrowed words tend to be used in other conversation as well, but code-switching words may occur only once and not in other discourses.

3   There are also examples of German-English and Hebrew-English code-switching in the narrative.

immigrant community, the question naturally arises of how and if it can be translated at all. Should it be preserved by means of foreignising strategies, or domesticated to make the reading process as transparent and fluent as possible?

Davies distinguishes two types of preservation: (a) transliteration, or the preservation of form, which occurs when "a translator may simply decide to maintain the source text term in the translation; (b) preservation of content, which occurs when 'the actual […] words are not preserved, but where a cultural reference receives a literal translation, with no further explanation' (calquing and literal translation). Both types correspond to foreignising strategies, as they follow the source text closely. Davies also subdivides another foreignising strategy, addition, into two types: (a) addition inside the text, or an intra-textual gloss, occurs when the explanation is inserted directly in the text, and (b) addition outside the text, or an extra-textual gloss, occurs when the explanation is provided, for example, in footnotes, or a glossary (2003: 77). Domesticating strategies suggested by Davies are: localisation (when a translator 'instead of aiming for 'culturally neutral' descriptions, […] may try to anchor a reference firmly in the culture of the target audience') (Ibid., 83-84); globalisation (a translation in which a generalised word is used); transformation (which changes the content of the cultural-specific expression used in the source language and may be defined as 'an alternation or distortion of the original') (Ibid., 86), and creation (which appears when 'translators have actually created a culturally-specific element not present in the original text'). (Ibid., 88) Omission is also suggested as a possible strategy.

In the empirical part of the present analysis, examples of code-switching in Bezmozgis's narrative will be identified and translated into Slovene[4] by employing foreignising or domesticating strategies. Each choice will be evaluated on the basis of rendering a denotative and connotative meaning, in consideration of the target audience of English-speaking readers who are completely unfamiliar with most terms.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: FOREIGNISING AND DOMESTICATING

One debate that continues to reverberate throughout translation studies is whether to use a strategy of domestication or of foreignisation. The translator whose name is most associated with this debate nowadays, Lawrence Venuti, sees the dominance of fluency in British and American translational tradition as proof that domestication is a vital method for successful translation practices

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4   The official translation could not be used, as to date the collection has not been translated into Slovene.

in the contemporary English-speaking world. In the first chapter of his book *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti (1995: 5) criticises "fluent translation," as being "immediately recognizable and intelligible, 'familiarised,' domesticated, not 'disconcerting[ly]' foreign, capable of giving the reader unobstructed 'access to great thoughts,' to what is 'present in the original'". Coming down clearly on the side of the foreignising method, Venuti (2006: 547) regards the use of a domesticating strategy as "ethnocentric violence", which is very often put in the service of an "imperialist appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas: cultural, economic, political".

Following Venuti's ideas, advocates of the method (e.g. Berman 2000; Oittinen 2006) believe that any text should be foreignised, and name different forms and strategies aimed at "helping" a translation to keep the spirit of the foreign original and, consequently, to enable the reader to experience the foreign culture.

Though these ideas serve as a useful reminder to translators to be more self-consciousness, open to new tendencies, and independent, it is problematic to state that a translation's quality depends entirely on providing an 'alien' reading experience. Thus, Lederer draws upon a principle feature of any translation as a communicative act, and concludes that,

> For a translation to be understood by the person who depends on it, translators must constantly remind themselves that translation is simply a particular type of communication. What happens when we have something to say? We express it intelligibly in forms accepted by all. Sense is individual but forms are social. (2003: 58)

Lederer's interpretive model of translation theory exposes more the meaning of the message than the form, as "the transfer is supposedly through sense and not words" (2003: 13). Hence, the information is the most vital part of the translation and should be transferred by all means, regardless of which principle a translator decides to embrace.

The appropriate decisions with regard to foreignisation or domestication are usually culturally variable, historically contingent and dependent on various other factors, such as the language. Thus, pondering the question of "foreign-soundingness" in translation, Bellos states that "selective or decorative foreignism is available only in translation between languages with an established relationship" (2011: 45), such as English and French. The established relationship between French and English gives the translator an opportunity to foreignise the target text without disturbing the fluency of reading, as "the project of writing translations that preserve in the way they sound some trace of the work's 'authentic foreignness' is really applicable only when the original is not very foreign at all" (Bellos 2011: 47).

Similarly, Eco gives examples of good choices for domestication and foreignisation by examining situations when one of the two strategies being used decreased the readability of the translation by either introducing an incomprehensible cultural reference, or destroying the historical consistency of the text (2001: 22-24).

Andrews and Maksimova also avoid strict criticism of either method. They distinguish between ST preference – which means that "if the translator's ultimate goal is to preserve as much as possible from the ST, then the resulting TT is generally referred to as literal" – and TT preference – if the "translator's ultimate goal is to produce a TT that reads as if it were written originally in the TL for the culture and speakers of the TL, then we have to do with what is often referred to as *free translation*" (2010: 10-11). Neither of the methods is universal, as the authors conclude that "even at the lexical and discourse levels, the degrees of freedom are greatly restricted and vary from utterance to utterance" (Andrews and Maksimova 2010: 11). Thus, any TT produced from an ST would be restricted in a similar fashion, with "greater restrictions at the phonemic and grammatical levels, and lesser restrictions at the lexical and discourse levels" (Andrews and Maksimova 2002: 11).

Hervey and Higgins (2002: 18-25) also articulate the philosophy of *minimising difference* as a central goal of translation, regardless of the foreignising/domesticating strategies applied. As every translation involves a certain degree of loss in meaning, the translator's task is not to seek the perfect or ideal translation but to reduce the translation loss. To achieve this aim, the translator will have to decide "which of the relevant features in the ST are most important to preserve, and which can most legitimately be sacrificed in preserving them" (Hervey and Higgins 1992: 25).

Though providing a detailed assessment of each strategy's advantages and disadvantages is beyond the limits of the current analysis, we can sum up the foreignising method as being one that helps the translator to faithfully convey the message of the original writer, while offering the target readership a chance to enjoy a different cultural atmosphere, as well as new vocabulary and terms within the target language. The process of borrowing among languages enables this.

In contrast, advocates of domestication argue that domesticating foreign literature offers a more pleasant and undisturbed reading experience, preserves the source language's norms, and keeps them intact from any alien interference or exotic additions.

Domestication grants the translator more freedom to manipulate the source text and, finally, according to Yang (2010:77), "alien cultural images and linguistic features may cause information overload to the reader". Advocates of domestication also claim that foreignisation does not attract readers from all levels, as

foreign knowledge that appeals to the elite and educated strata might not appeal to "grassroots" readers, as "domesticating translation is easier for readers to understand and accept" (Yang 2010:79).

3 TRANSLATING ENGLISH-RUSSIAN CODE-SWITCHING

Code-switching is primarily used when Bezmozgis refers to political terms, or so called *Sovietisms*, and other culturally-specific elements.

There are two interesting examples of introducing Russian, or more precisely Soviet, political terms in the narrative. My assumption is that Bezmozgis introduces both terms due to lack of vocabulary between the languages. Appel and Muysken (2006) refers to this type of function of code-switching as a "referential function", i.e. "Code-switching involves lack of knowledge or facility in a language. Hence, bilingual speakers switch code when they do not know the word or when a certain concept is not available in that language. Language is also chosen because it is more appropriate or suitable to be used for a particular topic." Malik calls it "lack of facility" (1994), explaining that code-switching is triggered when bilinguals are unable to search for an appropriate expression in a language or when certain concepts are only available in one language and do not have words that convey equivalent meanings in the other.

The first term is "otkaznik": "At least my parents were not *"Otkazniks."* (Bezmozgis 2014: 33), which refers to individuals, typically, but not exclusively, Soviet Jews, who were denied permission to emigrate by the authorities of the former Soviet Union and other countries of the Eastern bloc. A more common English term is "Refusnic," which originates from the English verb "to refuse". It is always difficult to speculate about the target readers' preliminary knowledge about a different country, yet in this case the term may be problematic as it belongs to the category of *Sovietisms* – that is, culturally-, historically- and socially-specific terms from Soviet speech of the 1930s brought into the Russian language through the discourse of the communist regime to describe various aspects of Soviet life (e.g. professions, institutions, propagandistic slogans, etc.). As different terminology is used when defining the term, I will use the seminal works (in Russian) by Vlakhov and Florin (1980) on translating *realia*, specifically as presented in the chapter entirely devoted to *Sovietisms* and the ways of translating them. In Vlakhov and Florin's methodological research *Sovietisms* are rendered as a sub-category of "*realia*", "words or word-formations that name subjects, facts and objects characteristic of life, a mode of life, culture, social development of one nation and unclear or completely unknown to another, which express a national and/or a

historical *kolorit*"[2] (Vlakhov and Florin 1980: 47; all translations are made by the author).

As in the case of other culturally specific elements, Sovietisms present a rich and diverse cultural identity, carry important, though implicit information and awaken in Anglophone readers an interest and respect for the foreign culture. Hence, extensive domestication of these national, cultural and social components would significantly change the interpretive coordinates. On the other hand, Sovietisms are distinctive linguistic marks of the discourse that no longer exist and may cause difficulties in comprehension.

When speaking about translation strategies for translating Sovietisms, Vlakhov and Florin agree with Aleksander Shveitser, as follows:

> In the texts written for professionals and readers familiar with Soviet realities, translators usually use a transliteration and a calque (e.g. *агитпункт*-agitpunkt, *дружинники*-druzhinniki, *область*-oblast), while in texts that address a broader audience, we find explanatory translations (e.g. *agitpunkt* - an indoctrination and political propaganda centre in the Soviet Union, *druzhinniki* - volunteer patrols), and transliterations and calques are normally accompanied by comments. (1973: 251)

Though it is possible in most cases to transfer the denotative meaning of Sovietisms fairly closely, Vlakhov and Florin state that nothing guarantees that the connotative meaning will also be fully transferred, and the terms may be substituted with "a word or a formation with a zero connotation" (1980: 89). While in several cases, a connotative meaning is partly transferred, not all connotations attached to Sovietisms can be rendered within the text, and comments are usually required.

I would suggest that the original term be kept intact and explained in a footnote or an endnote. Otherwise it may be unclear why Mark is so relieved that his parents were not "otakazniks" but were granted the permission to leave the Soviet Union.

Another example of code-switching, introduced by a Sovietism, occurs in the story "The Second Strongest Man". The story opens with a weightlifting championship held in Toronto. Roman's former colleague and friend Gregory, who has stayed in the Soviet Union, comes with the Soviet team. Gregory is the trainer of the most famous Soviet weight-lifter, Sergei. Little Mark remembers that "his gratitude to my father for rescuing him from the army and the *kolkhoz* was absolute" (Ibid., 45). In order to understand why Sergei needed to be saved, the term "kolkhoz" needs to be explained. It was a collective farm that peasants often could not leave voluntarily without the required legal documentation.

Many kolkhozniks clearly left illegally, obtaining passports and urban registration by illegal means. According to Pikhurova, this Sovietism belongs to the lexical category: words and expressions that occurred or were coined in the years between the 1920s and the 1970s to describe elements of Soviet reality (бракодел, обезличка, подкулачник) (2005: 8–9). Pikhurova also states that lexical Sovietism are the most difficult to render in a translation.

It was because of Mark's father that Sergei could escape the kolhoz and go to Moscow to train as a weight-lifter. I believe that, in this case, the Sovietism may be transferred intact with an explanation provided in a footnote or endnote. If part calquing with "skupna farma" is used, no extra-textual explanations would be necessary.

Another example of a Sovietism in the same story is the car model Moskvich, which can be found in the part when Mark wonders how strong Sergei is, "Listen, faggot, if one of your boys can lift the *Moskvich,* we'll forget the whole thing." (Ibid., 43) I believe it is clear from the context that Moskvich is a car, though it could be modified as "the car".

There are numerous examples of code-switching introduced with culturally-specific elements. One of them occurs in the first chapter "Tapka," which tells the story of Mark's parents' neighbours Misha and Rita Nahumovsky, who are also Jewish immigrants. Their life in Canada turned out to be entirely different from what they had expected: "Our life was tough, we had it hard – but the Nahumovskys had it harder. They were alone, they were older, they were stupefied by the demands of language" (Ibid., 4). Isolated and helpless, the Nahumovskys find consolation in their precious dog Tapka and some everyday habits they share with their neighbours, such as playing a card game called "Durak": "As my mother reviewed sentence construction, Misha played hand after hand of *Durak* with me." (Ibid., 4) The function of code-switching is again referential, as Durak, which literally means "a fool", is one of the most popular and simplest Russian card games. In my opinion, the term should be modified as "card game", as there is a chance that the reader could get the impression that Misha played Mark as a fool. The term may also be substituted by cultural equivalence, which in the Slovenian language would be Črni Peter, though such an extreme domestication would neutralise the multicultural impact.

Another example occurs when Bezmozgis refers to *"Clonchik",* a red and yellow rag clown, Tapka's favourite toy. I believe the function of code-switching in this case is phatic, which is when code-switching is used to show a change in tone and emphasise parts of a conversation that are of importance. The Nahumovskys' obsession with the dog becomes a key issue in their interaction with the outside world, and Tapka's favourite toy is more important to them than anything else. In

my opinion, the term can be used intact. Additional explanations or expansions within the text seem unnecessary as the word is similar to the English "clown", and the suffixation with "chik" should not confuse readers.

Another term occurs in the story "Choynski", in which Mark recalls his visits to his grandmother and grandfather, when they talked about the pre-war period in Latvia and the old habits and traditions that vanished afterwards. Among other things, his grandmother recalls that "there was character called a sharmanka who went from town to town /.../ In Russian he was called a *katarinshik*, my grandfather interrupted"[5] (Ibid., 119). A *sharmanka* was a miniature portable barrel-organ usually played by a man, a vagabond, who wondered from town to town, earning his living by playing the device, doing tricks and predicting the future. The term is fully embedded in the Russian cultural consciousness, and occurs in numerous fictional and documentary texts.

Code-switching also has a "referential function". In my opinion an extra-textual explanation is necessary as I assume the term is unfamiliar to Slovene readers and evokes no association. The same is true for *Katarinshik.*

The last term discussed in this analysis is *Babushka,* which appears in the same story when mother tells Mark that "Babushka is gone, Misha." The term is then repeated at the end of the story when Mark gets to the cemetery and wails in Russian: "Babushka, babushka, g'dye tih, maya babushka?" (Ibid., 126). The function of code-switching is expressive when speakers use more than one language to stress their self-identity or feelings to others in the conversation. The author may have used code-switching to intensify his grief. There is a certain difficulty with keeping this word intact in Slovenian, as this is in fact a false friend. The same word in Slovenian refers to a typical Russian wooden nesting doll called a Matryoshka. To avoid any possible misunderstandings, I would translate the term as "babica" (grandmother).

4 CONCLUSION

Translating code-switched texts requires thorough knowledge not only of the source and target languages, but also of the language used in the switching, not to mention the pragmalinguistic functions of the code-switching texts. Clearly, there are numerous further research possibilities for coping with code-switching in literary translations. One of them, of course, is whether code-switching should be translated or explained at all, as, naturally, the author's primary intention is to

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5   The story of this name is associated with the fact that one of the first and most popular tunes played with this instrument was the French song "Charmante Catherine".

switch between codes in the narrative to illustrate the process of cross language transfer, even at the expenses of fluent, undisturbed reading for the audience. In any case, a careful study of the translation of such code-switched texts closely guided by the socio-cultural rules of communication in a given linguistic community can enhance our understanding of the translation process.

The findings of the current research merely suggest and by no means determine how code-switching may be rendered in a translation. Though the analysis here focused on only a few of the most illustrative examples of English-Russian code-switching in Bezmozgis's narrative, I believe it allows for an adequate assessment of the possibilities of the use of domesticating and, above all, foreignising strategies. Following advocates of the foreignising method, I suggested keeping most of the original terms intact to avoid minimising the foreignness of Bezmozgis's narrative and to retain the original referential function. Providing intra- or extra-textual explanations depends on the translator, and can be used in those examples that the translator assumes are unknown to the reading audience. Future translators of Bezmozgis's prose may, of course, opt for a different decision, as each translation is an individual and unique act of cultural transference.

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