

**Vladimir Nabokov:  
A Case Study of Multilingualism and Translation**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between translation and multilingualism through an examination of Vladimir Nabokov's works and views on the topic. The main idea of the article is that translation is one of the implications of multi-competence, as defined by Vivian Cook in 1991, and as such is reliant on the translator's cultural grounding. In Nabokov's case, multilingualism and multiculturalism resulted in some very specific approaches in his own translation, as well as in his setting of canons for other translators to follow. Advocacy of the literal style in transliteration which remains faithful to the original author constitutes evidence of the utmost appreciation for the broadening of mental horizons that such foreignization may bring. Some rendering of Nabokov's works into Polish, and the following of his directives in those renditions, were also analyzed by the author of the article.

**Keywords:** translation, Vladimir Nabokov, bilingualism, multilingualism, multi-competence

Language is inextricably tied to our notions of self and is the way in which we define and orient ourselves and others within our cultures. The term culture is not easily defined and depends on the focus of the particular research to be conducted. One of its most valuable definitions comes from the work of Edward Sapir ([1924] 1949), who differentiates between three dimensions of culture: the first one involves everything that an individual obtains from the social group they are a part of. The second "sense" of culture has to do with a particular refinement an individual may represent, which is usually connected to an exceptional following of the given group's norms. The third approach views culture as the ideology attained that gives a person a distinct sense of belonging. It is this last view that most closely reflects the intention with which the author of this paper uses the word culture.

Our utter inability to disencumber ourselves from the web our languages weave, coupled with the exponential growth of English as a global language, has resulted in both a diffusion and enrichment of cultural identity for nearly half a billion people; with more swelling of the numbers of those afflicted with this mixed blessing by the day. This phenomenon could be best observed in the practice of translation, which by definition mediates between different languages and cultures. As human capacity to acquire language seems to be limited, translation grants us the opportunities to become

familiar with foreign literature through which we can gain invaluable insight into another culture.

### **1. Translation as an Implication of Multilingualism**

Translation, as a process of constant shifting between two languages, naturally stemming from individual bilingualism and a heightened literary sensitivity, ought to be viewed as one of the consequences of linguistic multi-competence. The concept of “multi-competence” has been described by Vivian J. Cook (1991, p. 112) as “the compound state of mind with two grammars,” and set in contrast to “mono-competence.” Three of the consequences Cook (*ibid.*) mentions have direct significance for translation processing: the L1 and L2 sharing the same mental lexicon, the ease of code switching between them and the utter inability to cut the L2 processing from L1. Throughout its history there have been many different directives for translators to follow in order to achieve the elusive goal of a fruitful transfer from one language to another. Successful translation is contingent not only on the linguistic proficiency of the translator, but also on his or her expertise in the cultural context of both the source, and the target languages. An inevitable, but natural implication of gaining such expertise is a somewhat confused cultural identity of the translator. This very identity, confused though it may be, is the main factor in how the transfer of meaning happens, what context the translator chooses, what losses he or she is willing to accept and even what errors they may commit along the way.

Since each language and cultural identity are products of a specific culture, we must consider some of the ways to communicate across cultural boundaries. In her efforts to point out how formidable a task this can become, Micaela Muñoz-Calvo (2010, p. 2) notes that “[t]he complexity and multiplicity of cultures and languages, the empire of quantity, makes it impossible for an individual to cope with even fundamental references of literary and scientific works within different languages.” This is the most basic example of why we need translation. Muñoz-Calvo (*ibid.*) defines translation as follows: “Translation is a cultural fact that means necessarily cross-cultural communication because translation enables language to cross borders and helps intercultural exchange and understanding.” This border-crossing in particular signifies the translation’s ability to rise above any limitations to produce communication across different cultures.

George Steiner ([1975] 1998, p. xii) provides a more thorough definition of translation, asserting that it involves the same basic competencies as the use of any single language:

(...) [T]ranslation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the widest semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchanges. To understand is to

decipher. To hear significance is to translate. Thus the essential structural and executive means and problems of the act of translation are fully present in acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding inside any given language. Translation between different languages is a particular application of a configuration and model fundamental to human speech even where it is monoglot. (Steiner, [1975] 1998, p. xii)

Concluding from the citation, the cognitive processes involved in using our native tongues are also employed when navigating between different languages. The author of this thesis has pointed out further that the coexistence of two or more languages in an individual brain compels it to implement much different ways of thinking than is the case of monolinguals.

However, translation is not only a way of communicating significance across cultures, it is the most invaluable tool for humanity to establish a common literary heritage. Our ability to draw on concepts created in varied languages of faraway nations is something that brings us together and, at the same time, sets us apart from non-human species. In the words of Edith Grossman (2010, p. 14):

[t]ranslation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time. It permits us to savor the transformation of foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own preconceptions and misconceptions. It expands and deepens our world, our consciousness, in countless, indescribable ways. (Grossman, 2010, p. 14)

Since it barely seems conceivable for any person to grasp more than several, or in some rare cases, several dozen languages, it is equally impossible to picture what our literature would be like without translation. One cannot underestimate the value of translation of foreign literary works in the formation of our own identities.

## **2. Translation as Business**

Apart from its most genuine elation-inducing qualities, one should not underestimate the market value of translation. It is undeniably a tool for writers to achieve greater readership. As Edith Grossman (2010, pp. 14-15) points out, for those who are fortunate enough to write in a language spoken by millions translation means additional income and increased personal gratification. For those whose native languages are less common, it may become a means of getting recognition or a chance for survival. “One of the many reasons writers write – though certainly not the only one – is to communicate with and affect as many people as possible. Translation expands that number exponentially, allowing more and more readers to be touched by an author’s work.” Grossman (*ibid.*) goes on to emphasize the significance of translating any literary work into English: “(...) no writer who has never been translated into English can hope even to be considered for a (Nobel – P.R.) prize in literature, because English is the one language all the judges can read.” What is more, Grossman (2010,

p. 15) contends that “[a] book that has not been translated into English has little likelihood of ever being made into a widely distributed movie.” Hence, translation, and English translation in particular, has a defining impact in shaping the landscape of contemporary literature.

In his elaboration on the globality of English and its significance for the modern world, David Crystal ([1997] 2010, p. 4) mentions two reasons for its gaining momentum. The first, seemingly obvious, reason is the fact that English is the mother tongue of the inhabitants in a great many countries. Crystal (*ibid.*) here lists “the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, several Caribbean countries and a sprinkling of other territories.” However, that alone would not be sufficient for a language to achieve such “special status.” The deciding factor in this matter has been the other countries recognizing its significance and offering it a “special place within their communities,” either by sanctioning it as the official language of the country, or establishing as the primary “foreign language” taught in schools. In Crystal’s estimate based on figures from 2001, there are currently more than seventy countries in which English has obtained this “special status.”

While Crystal ([1997] 2010, p. 78) acknowledges the claims that the popularity of English is caused mainly by its perceived grammatical simplicity, he does not assign too much value to them. Instead, he posits that a language becomes a *lingua franca* primarily due to its political prowess, military might and economic efficacy. Finally, Crystal (*ibid.*) suggests that taking in consideration the historical factors and “many of the major socio-cultural developments of the past 200 years, it can be shown that the English language has repeatedly found itself ‘in the right place at the right time.’” Although none of these factors could have constituted the sole cause of its dominance, “together they have put it in the position of preeminence and together they maintain it.” This “preeminence” has resulted in an increasing number of literary works created in English, in particular by authors for whom it is not a mother tongue. One of those writers was Vladimir Nabokov, whose deliberate choice of English has not been without significance in his work, as it has been discussed further.

### **3. Biculturalism and Self-Translation**

Given the correlation between language and culture, one may wonder whether it is possible for a person to be bicultural as well as bilingual, or to identify with more than one culture and feel a sense of belonging to many places. It seems naturally improbable for two cultures of two different countries to influence someone in the same way that their native culture had done. This thesis postulates then that the term bicultural is used to describe a person who was raised in multiple cultures, not simply exposed to them as a child. In the case of the Nabokov family, it would be Dmitri, rather than his father who we would label bicultural. It fails to surprise then that it was Dmitri who helped to

translate many of his father's Russian works into English. This is how Brian Boyd (2012) describes the beginning of their cooperation:

After the success of *Lolita* in 1958, Vladimir offered Dmitri the job of translating an earlier novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, from the Russian. He welcomed Dmitri's rich English vocabulary, his offering multiple options for difficult locutions, and his readiness to have his father have the last word. The translation, published in 1959, would become the basis of a long working partnership, lasting after Vladimir's death. (Boyd, 2012)

Vladimir Nabokov ([1973] 2011, p. 89) has admittedly relied on his son and his wife for help with the translation work of his own novels. This is a testimony not to the lack of his linguistic confidence but rather to the outstanding esteem and trust that he reserved for his loved ones. Nabokov frequently mentioned in his interviews of how alienated he felt from the writer community, and was even more frequently described by others as a "recluse." As a writer, Nabokov ([1973] 2011, p. 90) was predictably then wary of his translators. Asked in a 1967 interview how he related to the translations of his books, VN (*ibid.*) confessed that he and his wife employed a system of "strict checking of every sentence" that was written in the languages they knew. In the case of translations into unfamiliar to him Turkish or Japanese, Nabokov tried "not to imagine the disasters that probably bespatter every page."

The main, and unquestionably most credible biographer of the famous author, Brian Boyd (2008, p. xix) offers a fascinating insight into why Nabokov began to self-translate:

Translation helped turn him from a Russian writer into an English one. Living in the Russian emigration in Germany in the 1930's, he found the first English translation of one of his novels so bad that he translated a second himself, then rewrote from scratch in English the first novel translated, then another novel directly in English, although he was still also writing in Russian. (Boyd, 2008, p. xix)

Hence, it was the translation into English that Nabokov chose as his instrument of traversing the passage from one language to another, and a tool allowing him to commit his new writing habits to his newfangled multicultural identity. Having performed his own transliterations also sanctioned the development of specific translation theories, which need to be considered by anyone attempting to interpret and prepare a rendition of any of Nabokov's works.

#### **4. Nabokov's Translation Canons**

For those who are not fortunate enough to appreciate Nabokov's works in any of the languages they were originally written, multiple translations in various languages are available. The author of the original works, who prided himself on his translatorial

skills, set some very exact rules for rendering not only his books, but for translation in general. Nabokov (1941, p. 3) lists the following criteria: talent, thorough knowledge of the “two nations and the languages,” including “social background of words, their fashions, history, and period associations.” The final but paramount condition is “mimicry” though. For Nabokov (*ibid.*), a true translator must “be able to act, as it were, the real author’s part by impersonating his tricks of demeanor and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of verisimilitude.” In the author of this thesis’ opinion, the above constitute a reliable set of canons that are essential for introducing an original author, in his or her true form, to the general reading audience.

Nabokov’s journey to acquire such definite views on the topic, in particular in regards to poetry translation, is so described by Brian Boyd (2010, p. 10):

[W]hen he began to teach Russian literature in American colleges, he came to decide that translating rhymes into rhymes was a criminal procedure: it necessitated inaccuracies, it required deviations from the original, and it put into the original poet’s mouth phrases he had never dreamed of. It left the student who knew a smattering of Russian befuddled and the student who knew no Russian in the dark as to whether this or that image or detail was the poet’s or the translator’s. Nabokov became an ardent champion of literal translation, and an ardent foe of rhymed translation. (Boyd, 2010, p. 10)

His previous formidable achievements in translating rhymed poetry notwithstanding, Nabokov ([1964] 1990) set out to promote a different attitude in translation altogether. In the Foreword to his translation of Pushkin’s (1833) *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov (*ibid.*) points out and gives examples of three kinds of translation:

Attempts to render a poem in another language fall into three categories:

(1) Paraphrastic: offering a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator’s ignorance. Some paraphrases may possess the charm of stylish diction and idiomatic conciseness, but no scholar should succumb to stylishness and no reader should be fooled by it.

(2) Lexical (or constructional): rendering the basic meaning of words (and their order). This a machine can do under the direction of an intelligent bilingual.

(3) Literal: rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation. (Nabokov, [1964] 1990, pp. vii—viii)

What can be immediately inferred from the above citation is Nabokov’s utter disregard for the “free” style of translation. Nabokov (*ibid.*) is not concerned with making a text “readable” in the target language, neither does he feel that it is the translator’s responsibility to “bring the text closer to the reader” in any way. A computer, operated

by someone with sufficient knowledge of two languages and a brain seems to be a more reliable option for transferring the original text accurately. The ultimate goal in translation; however, is a word-for-word rendition, which obviously ought to respect the cultural and grammatical differences between the languages of the original and target texts.

### 5. Translating a Translator. The Polish Perspective

One of the people who majorly contributed to Nabokov's popularity in Poland is undoubtedly Robert Reuven Stiller. Stiller is a linguist who studied Polish, Slavic and Scandinavian languages in addition to journalism and Indian studies, a polyglot who knows approximately 30 different languages and a translating potentate. Stiller has published over 300 books, most of them translations from English, German, Swedish, French, Malay, Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian and Sanskrit. In his work as a translator, Robert Stiller has adapted an impressive magnitude of most important works of foreign origin for the Polish reader. Among the most notable works of English literature that Stiller transferred into the Polish language were Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (in version A, focusing on the English terminology and version R, based on the Russian references included by Burgess), or Ian Fleming's *James Bond* series. Thus far, Robert Stiller has translated two of Nabokov's books: *Lolita* in 1991 and the *Pale Fire* in 1994. Stiller's rendition of *Lolita* was the first in Poland and constituted an introduction to Nabokov for the Polish audience. In the epilogue to his translation of *Lolita*, Stiller (1991) admitted that for him the genius of Nabokov is contained in four, maybe five books. He then proceeds to list *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *The Gift*, Nabokov's adaptation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and Nabokov's own *Ada, or Ardor*. In the Introduction to the Polish version of *Pale Fire*, Stiller (1994) claims that the fictional lands of the book strangely remind him of Russia or Poland. Having grown up in Belarus, speaking Russian, Stiller does seem to be predisposed to detect Slavic sentiments, which might have been missed by others in reviewing this piece of Nabokov's work.

What is especially compelling in the manner in which Robert Stiller translated *Pale Fire*, is the fact that he used translator's notes to do so. The original version of the book consists of a foreword by a fictional editor (Charles Kinbote) of the fictional poet (John Shade), four parts of the poem by Shade, a list of commentary notes and an index of names at the end. Stiller (1994, pp. 345-393) included an additional list of notes that not only help Polish readers understand Nabokov's intentions better but also seem to constitute an integral part of the book. On the one hand, through the employment of this tool Stiller (*ibid.*) does bring the audience closer to the author of the original and shows off VN's literary aptitude. On the other hand; however, Stiller (*ibid.*) deprives the readers of an opportunity of independently researching whatever questions may arise while reading and imposes his own interpretation upon them. The author of this

thesis dares to presuppose that Stiller's (1994) version of *Pale Fire* would not have been met with Nabokov's approval for the lack of humility it shows in failing to follow the most literal equivalence.

In 1998 there appeared a new version of Polish translation of the *Pale Fire*. It was brought forth by Stanisław Barańczak and Michał Kłobukowski. Barańczak (1998) has translated Nabokov's *Poem in Four Cantos*, an artfully constructed iambic pentameter or heroic couplet with masculine rhyming into a thirteen-syllable verse. It is a form of a poem well established in Polish literature, and used by some of the best Polish poets. It is also worth noting that, unlike Stiller's (1994) version, the 1998 rendition of *Pale Fire* did not include the original poem in English. Both Barańczak and Kłobukowski (1998) seem to be particularly committed to removing all foreign traces from Nabokov's work. Although they might have succeeded in providing a very transparent translation, they seemed to have disregarded some Nabokov's own teachings on proper translation, as well as the very essence of Nabokov's prose which is the author's literary presence in his own work. In rendering of the parts of the book written in prose and completed by Kłobukowski (1998), and especially in his immediate translation of any foreign term appearing in the text, there seems to be an indication of a lack of faith in the readers' ability to infer the meanings of such terms and the author's intentions behind their usage. It hardly seems likely that a reader so limited in his or her capacity to comprehend would even consider reaching for one of Nabokov's works.

## 6. Conclusions

Vladimir Nabokov constitutes a proper example of how multilingualism and translation are intertwined. Bilingual, possibly even trilingual, Nabokov seems to provide evidence outstanding linguistic aptitude, so often associated with multi-competence. For Nabokov (1941, [1964] 1990), there seems to exist a fine line between transmutation and transmogrification in the free style of translation. Therefore, in his own transliteration practice, VN perceived the literal translation to be much superior and honest. Since translation is still the only way for many readers to become acquainted with a foreign author, and it bears interest to review some of the renditions that made it possible for a Polish reader to experience Nabokov's work. Nabokov's popularity in Poland seems to oscillate as much as it does elsewhere, and he may also be viewed here as an "elite" writer. To the Polish audience, Nabokov is known not only for his most famous English language literary achievements, but also for his earlier works that he composed in Russian. Perhaps because of the Slavic sentiments, the latter works seem to have a special appeal to Nabokov's Polish fans. Although at least one of those adaptations might not have been welcomed by Nabokov, the myriad of ways in which one can read and interpret any of his works continue to add ever greater depth to this writer's legacy as well as our understanding of translation itself.



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