

UDC 81'25  
doi 10.17072/2073-6681-2025-1-24-33  
<https://elibrary.ru/mwubfm>

EDN MWUBFM



## The Role and Place of Metatext in Vladimir Nabokov's Translations and Self-Translations

**Yulia A. Dymant**

Lecturer at the Department of Translation and Professional Communication

Voronezh State University

1 Universitetskaya pl., Voronezh, 394018, Russia. [yu.dymant@gmail.com](mailto:yu.dymant@gmail.com)

SPIN-code: 3742-5260

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9298-1752>

**Yelena A. Knyazheva**

Associate Professor at the Department of Translation and Professional Communication

Voronezh State University

1 Universitetskaya pl., Voronezh, 394018, Russia. [knel@cs.vsu.ru](mailto:knel@cs.vsu.ru)

SPIN-code: 9431-6867

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5104-1820>

Submitted 25 Mar 2024

Revised 17 July 2024

Accepted 30 Sep 2024

### For citation

Dymant Yu. A., Knyazheva Ye. A. The Role and Place of Metatext in Vladimir Nabokov's Translations and Self-Translations. *Vestnik Permskogo universiteta. Rossiyskaya i zarubezhnaya filologiya* [Perm University Herald. Russian and Foreign Philology], 2025, vol. 17, issue 1, pp. 24–33. doi 10.17072/2073-6681-2025-1-24-33. EDN MWUBFM (In Eng.)

**Abstract.** The article considers the role and place of metatext in translations and self-translations by Vladimir Nabokov. Although the functions of metatexts have been the focus of a large number of linguistic studies, they have not been thoroughly analysed yet in the context of translation. The purpose of our study was to investigate the types and functions of metatext as a result of a translator's metacommunication. We analysed the translator's forewords and commentaries in Vladimir Nabokov's translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and compared Nabokov's approach to those of eleven other translators of the novel. We also analysed the self-translations of Vladimir Nabokov's memoirs *Drugie Berega* (Other Shores), *Conclusive Evidence*, and *Speak, Memory*. Using continuous sampling and comparative analysis methods, we selected and systematised 665 text fragments, which were then subjected to discourse analysis. According to Nabokov's idea of faithful translation, the translator's task consists in rendering the meaning of the original text as closely as possible and facilitation of its comprehension by the target text recipients. The study demonstrated that to bridge the linguocultural gap between the author of the source text and the recipients of the target text, Nabokov considered it necessary to provide the readers with metatext as an explicit way of guiding the recipients through the text. The metatext in Vladimir Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* stands out due to its scrutiny and an in-depth analysis of the structure of the original text and its cultural and historical context, which, in turn, served as a basis for making brilliant (although sometimes disputable) translation decisions. Metatextual inclusions observed in Nabokov's self-translated autobiography and, in particular, the way they are changing from version to version convincingly illustrate his ability to tell his life story to different generations of English- and Russian-speaking communities.

**Key words:** metatext; Vladimir Nabokov; self-translation; translator's metacommunication; translator's commentaries.

### Introduction

The present paper explores one of the most distinctive features in translations and self-translations by an outstanding Russian and American writer Vladimir Nabokov, commonly termed as metatext. This area of research has recently become a matter of a particular interest among translation scholars, with quite a number of studies focusing on this aspect of translation [Kashkin 2009; Dubrovchenko 2011; Kashkin, Knyazheva, Dymant 2014; Ostapenko 2015]. In translation studies, translator's metatext is an umbrella term for a variety of genres including forewords and afterwords, footnotes, translator's and editor's commentaries, endnotes, reviews, parodies, translator's memoirs, books and films about translators [Kashkin, Knyazheva, Rubtsov 2008]. In this study, the material being reviewed is narrowed down to the translator's forewords and commentaries in Vladimir Nabokov's translations with particular reference to his translation of *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin and self-translations of his memoirs *Drugie Berega*, *Conclusive Evidence*, and *Speak, Memory*. Using continuous sampling and comparative analysis methods, we selected and systematised 665 text fragments, which were then subjected to discourse analysis.

According to Nabokov's idea of faithful translation (which he further developed into his individual translation method) the translator's task consists in rendering the meaning of the original text as closely as possible and facilitation of its comprehension by the target text recipients [Knyazheva, Dymant 2012; Dymant 2016].

"We must dismiss, once and for all the conventional notion that a translation 'should read smoothly' and 'should not sound like a translation' (to quote the would-be compliments, addressed to vague versions, by genteel reviewers who never have and never will read the original texts). In a point of fact, any translation that does not sound like a translation is bound to be inexact upon inspection; while, on the other hand, the only virtue of a good translation is faithfulness and completeness" [Nabokov 2002: 12].

The analysis of the material in question has shown that commentaries on the socio-historical background of the source text and its culture-specific features combined with an analysis of translation problems and argumentation of translation decisions were some of the tools which Nabokov abundantly used to achieve the desired effect [Dymant 2016]. This approach was fully implemented in Nabokov's translations of *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, *A Hero of Our Time*, and *Eugene Onegin*.

### Metacommunication and Metatext in Translation

The metalingual (also called metalinguistic) function of language was first described by Roman Jakobson as the use of language or "code" to discuss or describe itself. "Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the code: it performs a METALINGUAL (i.e., glossing) function" [Jakobson 1960: 356].

The term *metacommunication* was coined by Gregory Bateson [Bateson, Ruesch 1951: 209], and since then the concept and different aspects of the phenomenon in question have been described in psychology, sociology, linguistics, and communication theory [Brown 1977; Wierzbicka 1978; Kashkin 2009; Esser, Reinemann, Fan 2001; Leeds-Hurwitz 2014; Mateus 2017]. In a very general sense, the term refers to adjusting the information within the text so that it would ensure effective communication and enable the addressors to reach their goal [Dubrovchenko 2011]. In oral communication, as Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz puts it, "going meta" permits participants to clarify, resolve, or even prevent misunderstanding [Leeds-Hurwitz 2014]. Otherwise stated, metacommunication refers to secondary communication which clarifies or modifies the meaning of the primary communication. According to Samuel Mateus, *communication about communication* provides "the possibility to indicate how information should be interpreted" [Mateus 2017: 83].

The latter highlights the importance of metacommunication for translation, insofar as its ultimate purpose is to bridge the linguocultural gap between the author of the source text (ST) and the recipients of the target text (TT). When it comes to the works of verbal art, translation scholars as well as translation practitioners agree that it is impossible to render every aspect and detail of a literary text [Nida 1964; Komissarov 1990; Garbovsky 2004; Eco 2001], and some cognitive information or specific connotations are bound to be lost [Lotman 2001]. Hence the importance of various translation techniques most commonly known as translation shifts, which are aimed at compensating for potential losses [Popović 1980; Komissarov 2002]. These techniques are generally favoured by translation scholars partly owing to their 'invisibility' to the target text recipients. It should be noted, however, that translators may sometimes prefer to resort to a more explicit or 'visible' way of guiding the recipients through the text they are reading. In doing so, they provide the recipients with a *metatext* which can perform quite a variety of functions, the dominant one being explanation [Ostapenko 2015].

Thus, for instance, Nabokov's translation of *The Song of Igor's Campaign* includes a very detailed foreword where he dwells on the cultural and historical background of the poem, its literary merits, the problem of the authenticity of the text, peculiarities of its language and style, and the corresponding translation problems. It should be noted that Nabokov praised the poem very highly and considered it one of the finest, even a flawless piece of Russian literature. Therefore, it was important for him to make sure that his readers understood the significance of *The Song*, and this can be viewed as the main focus of the metatext in question, which by the way was initially meant for students of Cornell University. Aspiring to provide his target audience with a complete picture of the historical events on which the story is based, Nabokov makes a genealogic tree of the Russian princes mentioned in *The Song*, and completes the foreword with a map showing the rout of Igor's raid. Nabokov also focuses on the numerous obscure pieces of the original, i.e. fragments which remain unclear or cause controversy among the researchers as to what the author of the source text actually meant. To translate them, Nabokov had to analyse the existing philological studies of *The Song* and find the most plausible explanations.

The metatext in Nabokov's translation of *A Hero of Our Time* focuses on the plot of the novel, its composition, and characters. It is interesting that Nabokov also makes some critical remarks about the individual style of the author.

"The English reader should be aware that Lermontov's prose style in Russian is inelegant; it is dry and drab; it is the tool of an energetic, incredibly gifted, bitterly honest, but definitely inexperienced young man. His Russian is, at times, almost as crude as Stendhal's French; his similes and metaphors are utterly commonplace; his hackneyed epithets are only redeemed by occasionally being incorrectly used. Repetition of words in descriptive sentences irritates the purist. And all this, the translator should faithfully render, no matter how much he may be tempted to fill out the lapse and delete the redundancy" [Nabokov 2002: 13].

These arguments are followed by a passage on his translation method with the same key principle of faithfulness to the original and speculation about translator's work aimed primarily at the reconstruction of the individual style of the author with all its flaws and blemishes. In other words, Nabokov persists that translation should be in every respect source-oriented. Borrowing Friedrich Schleiermacher's metaphor of the translator's goal and, respectively, the ultimate goal of any translation [Schleiermacher 1963], we assume that Nabokov was striving to bring the reader to the writer and follow the reader the whole way through however hard that might be.

### Metatext in *Eugene Onegin*

This highly controversial translation most vividly illustrates Nabokov's dedication to the use of translator's metatext. But at this point, a digression is called for. It turns out that Alexander Pushkin has been less frequently translated into other languages than any other Russian classical author, and the value of his poetry for modern Russian literary tradition can hardly be appreciated by non-Russian readers. Once named an "encyclopedia of Russian life", *Eugene Onegin* poses a great challenge for every translator, since it portrays the Russian society of the 19th century and therefore is heavily loaded with cultural and historical connotations. Generally speaking, translators of *Eugene Onegin* face two major problems. On the one hand, they need to convey the content of the novel and make it understandable to people of different historical and cultural background. At the same time, they also need to reproduce the "bloom" of the original, making the voice of its author heard. The truth is that most often translators are bound to sacrifice either the former or the latter.

As he pointed out in the *Foreword* to the translation (Nabokov 1964), Nabokov sought to provide the English-speaking audience (first and foremost, his students at Cornell University) with a complete guide to the novel so that they could fully comprehend its significance for the Russian culture. Since his primary goal was to convey the 'sense' of the novel, rather than the 'spirit', he chose to sacrifice the poetic form and produced an unrhymed translation accompanied with an enormous body of metatext, which comprised the foreword, the translator's introduction, and a two-volume commentary devoted to nearly every linguistic and cultural aspect of the novel as well as the analysis of translation problems and translation decisions.

The translation is preceded by the *Translator's Introduction*, where Nabokov describes the historical period when the novel was written, as well as the entire process of its creation, starting from the moment when Pushkin got the idea of writing the novel and up to its publication, with references to the poet's drafts, diaries, and letters addressed to his family, friends, and literary people (e.g. Vyazemski, Delvig, Bestuzhev, Kuchelbecker, etc.). In fact, the *Introduction* presents an overview of the novel. It provides general information about its artistic features, the plot and the main characters, focuses on the pivotal event in each chapter, and highlights the elements of Pushkin's autobiography.

This kind of background information outlined in the *Introduction* is further detailed in the *Commentary* – a scrupulous philological and translation analysis of the original text, which is viewed as a basis for the translator's decisions. Generally speaking, the metatext presented in the *Commentary* includes

two kinds of explanations: 1) commentaries on the text of the novel, i.e. its structure, linguistic and culture-specific features, Pushkin's poetic style, and the autobiographical details; 2) commentaries on the process and the results of translation.

To illustrate commentaries of the first kind let us take a few samples of the metatext in question. In the following example, Nabokov dwells on the elegance of the split rhyme "gde vi – devi" in Russian. Opposing any attempt at a rhymed translation, Nabokov still aimed to explain how Pushkin's verse sounds, quite often using analogous literary tools in English.

**E.g.:** *Moi bogini! Chto vi? Gde vi?: The split rhyme gde vi - devi is very beautiful. (See App. II.) In English poetry the analogy is of course not the macaronic and Byronic "gay dens" - "maidens," but rather the pristine use of "know it" - "poet" or "sonnet" - "on it," both of which by now have become trite and drab* (Nabokov 1964: 85).

According to Nabokov the problem facing the translator here is to find a split rhyme in English that would not be too common. In this case, Nabokov saw his task in finding a rhyme, which does not need to reflect the meaning of the original, but rather should reproduce its form and demonstrate how unique it is. Therefore, he comes up with what he believed was a better option: "know it - poet" or "sonnet - on it".

The next example illustrates how thoroughly Nabokov makes culture specific information explicit. In particular, to ensure that his readers understand the social position of the Larins, Nabokov provides a detailed picture of their estate combining factual description with the reference to the practical linguo-cultural experience of the English-speaking audience. For instance, Nabokov considers it important to make it clear that, if the novel was set in Britain, Tatiana Larina would be a provincial girl living in a cottage in a small English town.

**E.g.:** *at our country place. . . in backwoods, in the country. . . In the backwoods of a forgotten village / V derevne nashey... v glushi, v derevne... V glushi zabitogo selen'ya: In England, Tatiana Larin would have been named Rosamund Gray (see under that title Charles Lamb's unconscious parody of a sentimental novelette, with a rake, and a rape, and rural roses) and would have lived in a cottage; but the Larins live in a country house of at least twenty rooms, with extensive grounds, a park, flower and vegetable gardens, stables, cattle sheds, grainfields, and so forth. I would reckon the amount of their land at some 350 desyatins (1000 acres) or more, which is a small estate for that region, and the number of their serfs at two hundred souls, not counting women and infants. A number of these were household slaves, while the rest lived in the log cabins that constituted a village (or several small hamlets). The name of the village, or of the nearest of the hamlets, would be that*

*of the whole estate with its fields and forest. The Larins' neighbors, Onegin and Lenski, were considerably wealthier and might each have had more than two thousand souls.* (Nabokov 1964: 390)

Commentaries comprising the second group, as we have already mentioned, mainly focus on the translation problems and translation decisions. For example, explaining his choice of the English equivalent "country place" for the Russian word *derevnya* Nabokov starts with a semantic analysis and distinguishes the following three meanings in the Russian word: *derevnya* may denote a rural area, a village, and an estate belonging to an aristocrat. The latter could actually consist of several villages. Therefore, the translator's task is to determine the meaning which is contextually relevant and should be reproduced in the translation.

**E.g.:** *Derevnya, gde skuchal Evgeniy: "La campagne ou s'ennuyait Eugene." The Russian derevnya and the French campagne both include the notions of "countryside" and "countryseat." The word derevnya has three senses, and the translator should know which not to choose: (1) Derevnya, in the general sense of country-side, rural life as opposed to the town; v derevne, "in the country," a la campagne. (2) Derevnya in the sense of a village or hamlet; synonyms: selo, sel'tso. (3) Derevnya in the sense of estate, place in the country, countryseat, manor, demesne, land; synonyms: pomest'e, imen'e; example: Derevnya Pushkina v Pskovskoy Gubernii bila men'she Oneginskoy derevni (Pushkin's country place in the province of Pskov was smaller than Onegin's place). Derevnya might include more than one village in the days when a village with all its souls belonged to the landowner. Instead of the correct ma campagne or ma propriete, a Russian squire might use in French the Russism mon village. (See also n. To One: LII: 12.)* (Nabokov 1964: 218).

Some of the commentaries of the second group also provide reasoning for the choice of lexical equivalents based on a thorough analysis of the pragmatic aspect of certain words and expressions in the original text. For example:

**E.g.:** *Gave it up / Mahnul rukoyu: There is one obvious case in which literalism has to yield (and settle for an exhaustive gloss): when the phrase concerns national gestures or facial movements, which become meaningless in accurate English; the Russian gesture of relinquishment that mahnul rukoy (or rukoyu) conveys is a one-hand downward flip of weary or hasty dismissal and renouncement. If analyzed in slow motion by the performer, he will see that his right hand, with fingers held rather loose, sketches a half turn from left to right, while at the same time his head makes a slight half turn from right to left. In other words, the gesture really consists of two simultaneous little movements: the hand abandons what it held, or hoped to hold, and the*

*head turns away from the scene of defeat or condemnation. Now, there is no way to translate mahnul rukoy by means of a verb and of the word "hand" or "with hand" so as to render both the loose shake itself and the associations of relinquishment that it has.* (Nabokov 1964: 19)

Here Nabokov is dwelling on a phrase, which describes a very Russian element of the body language. The problem facing a translator is that the Russian phrase *mahnul rukoy* does not merely describe a particular movement a person makes with his/her hand, but rather conveys the emotions experienced by the person at the moment. Therefore, this commentary is two-fold: on the one hand, it is aimed at visualizing the gesture, and at the same time, it gives the idea of its referential and pragmatic meaning. For this reason, Nabokov chose a functional equivalent and rendered the phrase *mahnul rukoyu* as gave it up.

It is remarkable that Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* became a matter of considerable debate and severe criticism [Wilson 1965; Chukovsky 1988]. Thus, K. I. Chukovsky wrote that the translation was poor if for no other reason than being prosaic [Chukovsky 1988]. And indeed, translating poetry through the prose did not comply with the existing conventional norm at all: according to the Russian translation tradition, rhyme should be translated with rhyme. Yet another reason for criticism was connected with the metatext as such.

Critics believed that making your way through the two volumes of commentaries is not what most people would call their idea of enjoying the novel. But was this translation really meant for the general public?

Being a lecturer at Cornell University and teaching Russian literature, Nabokov at first had to use the available translations, which he found by and large absolutely inadequate. Therefore, he decided to create a *proper* translation himself – a translation that would be *faithful* and would allow his students to understand how Pushkin's novel was perceived by the Russian readers. This leads us to the conclusion that the *Commentary* in fact was initially meant for a very limited audience.

Studying Nabokov's translation, we were also interested in how other translators of *Eugene Onegin* were trying to bridge the linguo-cultural gap between the writer and the reader. In our research, we compared 11 translations of *Eugene Onegin* by Yevgeny Bonver, Christopher Cahill, Alan D. Corré, Ch. Johnston, A. S. Kline, S. N. Kozlov, Gerard R. Ledger, Dennis Litoshick, Clive Phillipps-Wolley, Bayard Simmons, and Henry Spalding. The research has shown that most of the translators (except for Christopher Cahill) opted for rhymed translation, and half of the translations under comparison included metatext in the form of translators' notes and forewords (Table).

The results of comparative study of metatext in the translations of *Eugene Onegin* into English

	Foreword /Introduction	Afterword	Translator's commentaries	Endnotes	Footnotes
V. V. Nabokov (1964)	+		+		
Yevgeny Bonver (2002–2003)					
Christopher Cahill based on the literal translation of Vladimir Nabokov (1999); the 1st chapter					
Alan D. Corré (1999)	+				+
Ch. Johnston (1979)	+			+	
A. S. Kline (2009)					
Kozlov S. N. (1994)	+			+	
Gerard R. Ledger (2001)					
Dennis Litoshick (2001)					
Clive Phillipps-Wolley (1917)					+
Bayard Simmons (1950)					
Henry Spalding (1881)					+

Our further research has shown that when the translators resorted to using metatext, if any, they most often employed forewords and footnotes (or endnotes, which are the same thing as footnotes, but placed at the end of each chapter or the whole novel,

rather than at the foot of the page). However, in contrast to Nabokov's metatext, these forewords present just a brief description of the challenges faced by the translators of Pushkin's novel, and the advantages of a particular translation (or rather what the translator

deemed to be of higher priority – the poetic style, or the cultural and historical realm).

For example, a preface by Alan D. Corré is a stanza copying the rhythm of the original and acknowledging that the translation just gives “the merest taste of his <Pushkin's> great work” and is sometimes “a little free”. Ch. Johnston in his foreword criticises Nabokov's translation for being unrhymed, but at the same time he still gives tribute to his work:

“Anyway, it should be possible now, with the help of Nabokov's literal translation and commentary, to produce a reasonably accurate rhyming version of Pushkin's work which can at least be read with pleasure and entertainment, and which, ideally, might even be able to stand on its own feet as English. That, in all humility, is the aim of the present text” (Johnston 1979).

Similarly, the footnotes and endnotes used by the translators are basically very brief comments regarding the proper names, places, and other Russian realia used in the text (e.g. *Theocritus: Greek pastoral poet, third century, B.C.E* (Corré 1999)). Some of Henry Spalding's notes are a bit more detailed, and Alan D. Corré provides a few comments on his choice of equivalents (e.g. *In this Rousseau who loved the right, I'm sad to say just wasn't right. Pushkin rhymes prav, the genitive plural of pravo “rights” with prav, the short form of the adjective pravyy, “right.”* (Corré 1999)).

At this point we would like to clarify that Nabokov was obviously not the only one who resorted to the use of metatext in his translations, but the way he employed it was quite unique. Besides the evident difference in the amount of background information, Nabokov's metatext stands out due to its scrutiny and the in-depth analysis of every tiny detail regarding the structure of the original text and its cultural and historical context, which in its turn served as a basis for making brilliant (although sometimes disputable) translation decisions.

### Metatext in Nabokov's Self-Translations

The analysis of metatext as an essential part and distinctive feature of Nabokov's translations would not be complete without a look at his self-translations. It is worth mentioning that self-translation as such presents a really promising field of study, and its fascination lies in the fact that linguistic and translation theories behind the phenomenon are rather controversial. On the one hand, a self-translating author is generally believed to be the most faithful translator, since s/he knows exactly what s/he wants to say to the readers and therefore there could hardly be any problems in understanding and decoding the original message. One might even think that a self-translated text is bound to be a precise copy of the original. But the fact is that self-translating authors more often than not considerably revise their works [Frizman 1970; McGuire 1992;

Beaujour 1995], and in this respect Nabokov was no exception. For instance, in the preface to his self-translated memoir *Conclusive Evidence*, he emphasizes that a text recreated for a different audience and in a different language is no longer “the same” (Nabokov 2004).

The material under our examination included three versions of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography. The first one, *Conclusive Evidence*, was written in English (Nabokov 2004). It was then translated by Nabokov into Russian and published under the title *Drugie Berega (Other Shores)* (Nabokov 2004). Later Nabokov created a new, revised, updated, and even more detailed English version *Speak, Memory* (Nabokov 1989). Using the continuous sampling analysis of the three versions we managed to sort out a large number of metatextual inclusions, which vary from version to version depending on the target audience and the language used. We differentiate between three major groups: 1) cultural and historical commentaries; 2) meta-linguistic commentaries; and 3) commentaries on translation decisions.

Commentaries of the first type are of a very typical nature for Nabokov since they are generally meant for overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. The English versions of the autobiography were initially written for Americans, who knew little about the Russian culture and history. For instance, while addressing the English-speaking audience Nabokov focuses on Russian political realia. This can be illustrated by the following passage devoted to Nabokov's description of his childhood and youth in Russia.

**E.g.: *Speak, Memory*:** *Politically he [Nabokov's father] was a “Kadet”, i.e. a member of the KD (Konstitutsionno-demokraticheskaya partiya), later renamed more aptly the party of the People's Freedom (Partiya Narodnoy Svobody). In 1906 he was elected to the First Russian Parliament (Pervaya Duma), a humane and heroic institution, predominantly liberal (but which ignorant foreign publicists, infected by Soviet propaganda, often confuse with the ancient “boyar dumas”!).* (Nabokov 1989: 80)

In this paragraph Nabokov explains two realia, which refer to the first decade of the 20th century: *Kadet* (the acronym which stands for the political party under the name of *Konstitutsionno-demokraticheskaya partiya*) and *Pervaya Duma* (the first Russian Parliament). The nickname of the party is transliterated into English as *Kadet*, and followed by the abbreviation *KD*, which Nabokov also transliterates. Although later the party was renamed, Nabokov still uses the original name and the corresponding abbreviation to show the readers where the nickname *Kadet* comes from. It should be noted that this part of the text is missing in the previous version written, or, to be precise, ‘translated’ into Russian for the Russian audience.

The second group includes metalinguistic commentaries very similar to what we observed in *Eugene Onegin*. They mainly concern the meaning of specific Russian words, set phrases, or even sentences, which Nabokov found either so accurate or charming, that along with the translation he used transliteration to give the idea of the original form. Moreover, in his self-translations Nabokov quite often does not even give any translation of such phrases. Instead, he uses metatextual insertions to emphasize the culture- and language-based untranslatability of a particular word or phrase, although he still explains their meaning in the source language and their use in the source text.

For example, in the following passage Nabokov comes up with an explanation of the Russian adjective *brezgliv* which he leaves 'untranslated' in the target text and which is used in the Russian language to characterize a specific personal quality. While doing so Nabokov provides his readers with very expressive details of the person's behaviour.

**E.g.: Speak, Memory:** *after which he marched, with the same purposeful steps, but now dripping and purblind, back to his bedroom where he kept in a secret place three sacrosanct towels (incidentally he was so brezgliv, in the Russian untranslatable sense, that he would wash his hands after touching banknotes or banisters).* (Nabokov 1989: 72)

Once again, we should note that such commentaries were only meant for the English-speaking readers. Obviously enough, Nabokov did not deem it necessary to comment on the word *brezgliv* (брезгливый) when he used it in the Russian version. But it is interesting that in *Drugie Berega* we observe a similar technique, i.e. untranslated English words with metalinguistic commentaries. For example:

**E.g.: Drugie Berega:** *За брекфастом яркий паточный сироп, golden syrup, наматывался блестящими кольцами на ложку, а оттуда сползал змеей на деревенском масле намазанный русский черный хлеб.* (Nabokov 2004: 99)

In this passage of the Russian version, Nabokov explains to his Russian readers what "golden syrup" is (яркий паточный сироп), although the realia as such is left untranslated.

In his commentaries, Nabokov often focuses on the reasons and the necessity of copying the syntactic patterns of Russian sentences in the English text. For example:

**E.g.: Conclusive evidence:** *"Bozhe moj" (mon Dieu – rather than "My God"), where has it gone, all that distant, bright, endearing (Vsjo eto daljokoe, svetloe, miloe – in Russian no subject is needed here, since these are neuter adjectives that play the part of abstract nouns, on a bare stage, in a subdued light).* (Nabokov 2004: 350)

Here Nabokov deliberately violates grammatical norms of the English language ("all that distant, bright, endearing") striving to render the form of the original text.

Commentaries of the third type are devoted to the translation process, i.e. Nabokov speculates on the choice of the best possible equivalent. For example:

**E.g.: Conclusive evidence:** *Then, in June again, when the fragrant mahaleb was in foamy bloom...* (Nabokov 2004: 80)

**Drugie Berega:** *И опять в июне, на восхитительном севере, когда весело цвела имени безумного Батюшкова млечная черемуха...* (Nabokov 2004: 81)

**Speak, memory:** *Then, in June again, when the fragrant cheryomuha (racemose old-world bird cherry or simply "racemosa" as I have baptized it in my work on "Onegin") was in foamy bloom...* (Nabokov 1989: 30)

As we can see, the original passage undergoes considerable changes in the two translated versions: in the source text written in English, we find just a neutral reference to a tree called *mahaleb*. In the Russian self-translation, the reference to the tree is quite emotional and is related to the image of the tree created by a Russian poet Konstantin Batyushkov (имени безумного Батюшкова млечная черемуха). In *Speak Memory*, Nabokov, fascinated by the sound of the Russian word *cheryomuha* (which corresponds to the English name of the tree – *mahaleb*), resorts to his customary use of transliteration and gives the following commentary: *"cheryomuha (racemose old-world bird cherry or simply "racemosa" as I have baptized it in my work on "Onegin")*". Here Nabokov remembers a neologism *racemose*, which he created for his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, obviously not being satisfied with conventional English equivalents. It is interesting that the neologism as well as the reference to this translation appears only in the last version of the autobiography seeing that his translation of *Eugene Onegin* was only finished in 1964.

## Conclusion

Nabokov's craftsmanship as a writer, translator, and a self-translating author is brilliantly manifested in his mastery of form and content of the literary text. Although the use of the metatext which Nabokov creates time and again in the process of translation and self-translation has been a matter of violent debates among both translation scholars and literary critics, it seems to be that *modus operandi* which he constantly falls back on to explore and convey the original message.

In his translations, Nabokov resorted to metatext because he believed it to be the only acceptable way to create a *faithful translation*, i.e. not merely a free adaptation, but a text that would let the readers im-

merse in the cultural, historical, and linguistic background of the original and fully apprehend its literary value.

Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* appears to be one of the most illustrative examples of his way of rendering Russian classical literature into English, where he sought to provide the English-speaking audience with a complete guide to Pushkin's novel. That was the key idea behind the translator's metatext and in particular the two-volume commentary devoted to nearly every linguistic and cultural aspect of the novel as well as the analysis of translation problems and translation decisions.

Metatextual inclusions observed in Nabokov's self-translated autobiography and the changes they underwent in *Conclusive Evidence*, *Drugie Berega*, and *Speak, Memory* convincingly illustrate his individual way of telling his life story to different generations of English- and Russian-speaking communities.

### Sources

Pushkin A. *Evgeny Onegin (A Novel in Verses)*. Transl. into Eng. by Y. Bonver. 2002-2003. Available at: [http://www.poetryloverspage.com/yevgeny/pushkin/evgeny\\_onegin.html](http://www.poetryloverspage.com/yevgeny/pushkin/evgeny_onegin.html) (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Pushkin A. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*. Transl. into Eng. by Ch. Cahill. 1999. Available at: [https://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/pml1/onegin/cahill\\_1999.docx](https://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/pml1/onegin/cahill_1999.docx).

Pushkin A. *Eugene Onegin*. Translation of Cantos 1 and 2 into Eng. by A. D. Corr  . 1999. Available at: <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/corre/www/pushkin/> (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Pushkin A. *Eugene Onegin*. Transl. into Eng. by Ch. H. Johnston. 1979. Available at: [http://lib.ru/LITRA/PUSHKIN/ENGLISH/onegin\\_j.txt](http://lib.ru/LITRA/PUSHKIN/ENGLISH/onegin_j.txt) (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Pushkin A. *Eugene Onegin*. 2009. Transl. into Eng. by A. S. Kline. Available at: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineaspushkin.htm> (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Pushkin A. *Eugene Onegin: Novel in verse*. Transl. into Eng. by S. N. Kozlov. 1994. Available at: <https://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/pml1/onegin/>

Pushkin A. *Pushkin's Yevgeny Onegin: a dual language version*. Transl. into Eng. by G. Ledger. 2001. Available at: <http://www.pushkins-poems.com/> (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Pushkin A. S. *Eugeny Onegin*. Transl. into Eng. by D. Litoshick. 2001. Available at: <http://lib.mediaring.ru/LITRA/PUSHKIN/ENGLISH/litoshik.txt> (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Pushkin A. *Eugene Onegin*. Transl. into Eng., comment. by V. Nabokov. In four vols. New York, Bollingen Series LXXII, 1964. V. 1. 345 p. V. 2. 547 p. V. 3. 540 p. V. 4. 435 p.

Pushkin A. *Evgenie Onegin: A Romance in Verses*. Transl. into Eng. by B. Simmons. London, 1950. 134 p.

Pushkin A. *Eugene Oneguine: A Romance of Russian Life in Verse*. Transl. into Eng. by H. Spalding, 1881. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/23997> (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

Nabokov V. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York, Random House, Inc, 1989 [1966]. 142 p.

Nabokov V. *Other Shores: A Memoir*. Moscow, Zakharov, 2004 [1954]. 448 p.

Phillipps-Wolley C. *A Russian Rake*. 1917. Available at: [http://www.archive.org/stream/songsfromyoungma00philuoft/songsfromyoungma00philuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/songsfromyoungma00philuoft/songsfromyoungma00philuoft_djvu.txt) (accessed 24 Sep 2023).

### References

Bateson G., Ruesch J. *Communication. The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New York, WW Norton & Company, 1951. 314 p. (In Eng.)

Beaujour E. K. Translation and self-translation. *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 714-725. doi 10.4324/9780203357767. (In Eng.)

Brown A. L. *Knowing When, Where, and How to Remember: A Problem of Metacognition. Technical Report No. 47. Psychology*, 1977. (In Eng.)

Chukovsky K. Onegin na chuzhbine [Onegin abroad]. *Druzhba narodov* [Peoples' Friendship], 1988, issue 4, pp. 324-347. (In Russ.)

Dubrovchenko E. M. Spetsifika metakommunikatsii kak osobogo tipa obshcheniya [Specifics of metacommunication as a type of communication]. *Lingua Mobilis*, 2011, issue 2, pp. 79-82. (In Russ.)

Dymant Yu. A. Pervichnost' i vtorichnost' teksta avtoperevoda v svete funktsional'noy modeli R. O. Yakobsona [Analyzing primary and secondary text features in self-translation through the use of Roman Jakobson's communication model]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 22. Teoriya perevoda* [Moscow State University Bulletin. Series 22: Lomonosov Translation Studies Journal], 2016, issue 3, pp. 87-100. (In Russ.)

Eco U. *Experiences in Translation*. Transl. by Alastair McEwen. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001. 135 p. (In Eng.)

Esser F., Reinemann C., Fan D. Spin Doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany: Metacommunication about media manipulation. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2001, issue 6, pp. 16-45. doi 10.1177/108118001129171982. (In Eng.)

Frizman L. G. Prozaicheskie avtoperevody Baratynskogo [Baratynsky's prosaic self-translations]. *Masterstvo perevoda* [The Art of Translation], 1970, issue 6, pp. 201-216. (In Russ.)



- Garbovsky N. K. *Teoriya perevoda* [Theory of Translation]: a study guide. Moscow, MSU Press, 2004. 544 p. (In Russ.)
- Jakobson R. Linguistics and poetics. *Style in Language*. Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960, pp. 350-377. (In Eng.)
- Kashkin V. B. Metakognitivnye issledovaniya perevoda [Metacognitive studies of translation]. *Desyatye Fedorovskie chteniya* [Proceedings of the 10th Fyodorov Scientific Conference], 2009, issue 10, pp. 230-242. (In Russ.)
- Kashkin V. B., Knyazeva D. S., Rubtsov S. S. Metakommunikatsiya perevodchika v primechaniiakh i kommentariyakh [Metacommunicating in translator's footnotes and commentaries]. *Yazyk, kommunikatsiya i sotsial'naya sreda* [Language, Communication and Social Environment], 2008, issue 6, pp. 110-119. (In Russ.)
- Kashkin V. B., Knyazheva E. A., Dymant Yu. A. Metakommunikatsiya perevodchika v perevode i avtoperevode [Translator's metacommunication in translation and self-translation]. *Vestnik Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Lingvistika i mezhkul'turnaya kommunikatsiya* [Proceedings of Voronezh State University. Series: Linguistics and Intercultural Communication], 2014, issue 4, pp. 103-108. (In Russ.)
- Knyazheva E. A., Dymant Yu. A. O perevodcheskom metode V. V. Nabokova [Towards translation method of Vladimir Nabokov]. *Yazyk, kommunikatsiya i sotsial'naya sreda* [Language, Communication and Social Environment], 2012, issue 10, pp. 231-247. (In Russ.)
- Komissarov V. N. *Teoriya perevoda (Lingvisticheskie aspekty)* [Theory of Translation (Linguistic Aspects)]. Moscow, Vysshaya shkola Publ., 1990. 253 p. (In Russ.)
- Komissarov V. N. *Sovremennoe perevodovedenie* [Modern Translation Studies]. Moscow, ETS Publ., 2002. 424 p. (In Russ.)
- Leeds-Hurwitz W. Metacommunication. *Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue*, 2014, issue 25. Available at: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/key-concept-metacomm.pdf>. (In Eng.)
- Lotman Yu. M. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. I.B. Tauris, 2001. 288 p. (In Eng.)
- Mateus S. Metacommunication as second order communication. *KOME*, 2017, issue 5 (1), pp. 80-90. doi 10.17646/KOME.2017.15 (In Eng.)
- McGuire J. Forked tongues, marginal bodies: Writing as translation in Khatibi. *Research in African Literatures*, 1992, issue 23 (1), pp. 107-116. (In Eng.)
- Nabokov V. Translator's Foreword. In: Lermontov M. *A Hero of Our Time*. Woodstock, New York, Ardis Publishers, 2002. 210 p. (In Eng.)
- Nida Eu. *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill Archive, 1964. 331 p. (In Eng.)
- Ostapenko D. I. *Perevodcheskiy metatekst: tipologiya, struktura i funktsii* [Translator's Metatext: Types, Structure, and Functions]. Moscow, 2015. 226 p. (In Russ.)
- Popovich A. *Problemy khudozhestvennogo perevoda* [The Issues of Literary Translation]: a handbook. Moscow, Vysshaya shkola Publ., 1980. p. 196. (In Russ.)
- Schleiermacher F. *Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens* [On the Different Methods of Translating], 1963. Available at: <http://users.unimi.it/dililefi/costazza/programmi/2006-07/Schleiermacher.pdf> (accessed 24 Sep 2023). (In Ger.)
- Wierzbicka A. Metatekst v tekste [Metatext inside a text]. *Novoe v zarubezhnoy lingvistike. Lingvistika teksta* [Advances in Linguistics Abroad. Text Linguistics], 1978, issue 8, pp. 402-424. (In Russ.)
- Wilson E. The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov. *The New York Review*, 1965, 15 Jul. Available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/jul/15/the-strange-case-of-pushkin-and-nabokov/?page=1> (accessed 24 Sep 2023). (In Eng.)

## Функция метатекста в переводах и автопереводах В. В. Набокова

Дымант Юлия Александровна

к. филол. н., преподаватель кафедры перевода и профессиональной коммуникации

Воронежский государственный университет

394018, Россия, г. Воронеж, Университетская площадь, 1. [yu.dymant@gmail.com](mailto:yu.dymant@gmail.com)

SPIN-код: 3742-5260

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9298-1752>

## **Княжева Елена Александровна**

**к. филол. н., доцент, доцент кафедры перевода и профессиональной коммуникации**

Воронежский государственный университет

394018, Россия, г. Воронеж, Университетская площадь, 1. knel@cs.vsu.ru

SPIN-код: 9431-6867

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5104-1820>

*Статья поступила в редакцию 25.03.2024*

*Одобрена после рецензирования 17.07.2024*

*Принята к публикации 30.09.2024*

### **Информация для цитирования**

Dymant Yu. A., Knyazheva Ye. A. The Role and Place of Metatext in Vladimir Nabokov's Translations and Self-Translations // Вестник Пермского университета. Российская и зарубежная филология. 2024. Т. 17, вып. 1. С. 24–33. doi 10.17072/2073-6681-2025-1-24-33. EDN MWUBFM

**Аннотация.** В статье представлены результаты исследования метатекста в переводах и автопереводах Владимира Набокова. Несмотря на то что проблема функционирования метатекста в различных речевых жанрах традиционно привлекает внимание лингвистов, актуальность заявленной темы связана с ее переводческим аспектом, который в настоящее время является недостаточно изученным. Соответственно, цель нашей работы заключалась именно в том, чтобы рассмотреть виды и функции метатекста как продукта метакоммуникативной деятельности переводчика. Данное исследование выполнено на материале перевода романа А. С. Пушкина «Евгений Онегин», осуществленного Владимиром Набоковым, в сопоставлении с одиннадцатью версиями других переводчиков, а также автопереводов биографического романа писателя «Другие берега», “Conclusive Evidence” и “Speak, Memory”. При отборе и систематизации эмпирического материала был использован метод сплошной выборки и сравнительно-сопоставительный метод, что позволило составить представительный корпус примеров, включающий 665 фрагментов. При обработке данного материала были использованы методы классификации и дискурсивного анализа. Проведенное исследование показало, что использование метатекста в виде эксплицирующих комментариев переводчика является практической реализацией переводческой концепции В. В. Набокова, согласно которой задача переводчика заключается в максимально полной и точной передаче смысла исходного текста. Метатекст в переводе «Евгения Онегина», созданный на основе глубокого анализа структуры оригинала и культурно-исторического контекста, направлен на снятие лингвокультурного барьера и является основой предложенных В. В. Набоковым переводческих решений. Метатекст, представленный в автопереводах мемуаров В. В. Набокова, ориентирован на разные поколения русскоязычных и англоязычных читателей. Данный вывод сделан на основании различий в объеме и характере информации, выявленных в ходе сопоставительного анализа трех версий.

**Ключевые слова:** метатекст; В. В. Набоков; автоперевод; переводческая метакоммуникация; переводческий комментарий.