

Customizing Texts in Russian to English Translation

Presenter Michele A. Berdy

Thank you all for listening to me at the end of May. There were several questions I didn't have time to answer, so I've put them together and given my responses. A lot of the questions – and my replies – are on the line (or cross the line) between language and culture. My comments are the candid and opinionated view of someone living in a country going through bad times. None of this is the last word – just food for further thought.

Questions About Russian and English Language Conventions

- Q:** I work with a news Russian periodical that is translated into English, and one thing that annoys me is that they will have a long quote from somebody who is not identified until the end of the paragraph. Is that bad writing, or is it a Russian convention?
- A:** I think this is part of the “old information first, new information last” convention of Russian writing (and word order in sentences). Or perhaps it is just another convention. In any case, it seems almost universal. According to Russian writers whom I trust, “it sounds better that way.”
- Q:** Also in Russian, they list all his very long titles before finally giving his name. I often reverse this for the English-speaking audience.
- A:** I do, too – except, sometimes, for a newspaper where the house style allows a long title first (albeit, a title that is generally shorter than the Russian: “Deputy Defense Minister Petrov” instead of “Deputy Minister Petrov of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation”).
- Q:** I find that even good Russian writers sometimes make sweeping, unsubstantiated assertions that I cannot bring myself to translate into English without some sort of equivocation (in some cases “it could be said that”). Do you think that Russians have a higher tolerance for that sort of logical leap than Westerners?
- A:** I think that there is a certain percentage of the population in Russia and the US who accept statements like “all politicians are corrupt” or “people can't be trusted” without blinking an eye – or looking for a footnote. There is another percentage of Russians and Americans who want a source, a statistic, or quote – something to back up the assertion.

But if I may be permitted to make a sweeping generalization without statistics or research to back up my argument, I think that the current political and media conditions have begun to have a pernicious effect on readers and viewers in Russia. If reputable Western news outlets don't print an assertion without sources (preferably three) to back it up, Russian news outlets are not so careful. During the election season, a number of US newspapers ran fact-check features for every politician's ad or speech; in Russia, that happens – but in publications that few people read. And then, when talking about politics in Russia, facts are simply hard to come by.

So today the news is filled with polemic and opinion rather than reporting. For example, the standard question in newspaper articles, TV news shows, radio shows, and kitchen chats is: Кому выгодно? (Who profits?) The commentator/reporter/speaker will string out a long speculation on who might profit from some event, but nothing is backed with facts or evidence. It sounds plausible, and people seem to forget that it's all speculation. Once, when someone told me confidently that the West was trying to destroy the Orthodox Church, I asked, “Have you heard of a single case of a Western country discriminating against an Orthodox Church on its territory?” She was dumb-founded. When you live in a country where facts are never offered up, after a while it's easy to forget about them.

So I don't think sweeping generalizations are a Russian convention. I think the unfortunate political situation has conspired to make it easier for people to accept them.

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Q: You were very polite to talk about Russian "formal" writing, but to me it sometimes seems ... boring! Having read a lot of the Soviet press during the USSR days, I sometimes see this as a hangover of Soviet bureaucrateze. How do you look at that? Is it a characteristic of Russian language usage, of a Soviet leftover?

A: I answered this during the webinar, but I wanted to add a bit more. "Writing well" is a high Russian value, and what exactly constitutes "good writing" is bashed into kids' heads throughout their years of schooling. I think that when a Russian sits down to a blank sheet of paper or computer screen, every Mariya Ivanovna and Vera Anatolievna who ever taught them Russian in school pops into their head and they start churning out "correct prose." Some of it is truly boring – what Russians call канцелярский язык (bureaucrat-speak). But some of it just sounds "correct" to Russian readers, however turgid it sounds to us.

It's worth remembering that our American style of "action verbs," short sentences, and brief paragraphs strike Russians as almost comically childish and simplistic. They think it's boring – and like a kid wrote it. It all has to do with our expectations and what we consider "good writing."

Questions About Journalism

Q: In English, we learn in journalism classes in high school to inform the reader "who, what, when, where." This is declining in western journalism in favor of a featurey style. I hate it. You have to read *The Washington Post* to the jump to figure out what the heck happened. My Russian periodical almost never supplies this sort of information. I have interpreted this as sloppy journalism, which is how I view it in English. What do you think?

A: For several decades American journalism has traversed a (to my mind, dreadful) path from reporting to entertaining. More recently the line between a blog (opinion, personal viewpoint, constant insertion of "I") and a news report has blurred considerably. This has a lot to do with the business of selling periodicals (or TV news shows).

That's an interesting observation about the meat of a report being "after the jump." In the old days, the "who, what, where, when, and how" were answered in the first paragraph, and the rest of the article expanded on those issues. Now, when online news sources base their rates for advertisements on how long a reader stays on a site, how many pages they read, and how many articles they click on, the task is to keep you reading and clicking. So the structure of news pieces has changed to answer those "who, what, where, when, and how" questions later in the text. (I personally am driven mad by headlines that make me click on the article only to discover that the header was totally misleading. "Rare Sea Monster Discovered" turns out to be a weirdly shaped rock under three feet of water.)

I think there are some Russian periodicals that publish news reports more or less according to the "who, what, where, when, and how" model (*Vedomosti, Ekho Moskvy*). But a lot –most? – don't. I think this is the result of a perfect storm of pressures. Newspapers and magazines that used to publish 5,000-word articles lost their readers, and many of them folded. Media are now owned by corporations or individuals who want to make a profit, and that means drawing as many consumers as possible (so the news source can charge higher ad rates). The owners have scrambled to figure out how to get and keep readers/viewers/listeners. Younger writers, who never got schooled in the basics and were never forced to write a gazillion "who, what, where, when, and how" articles as cub reporters, now just write whatever strikes their fancy. And then the political climate and censorship (self- or otherwise) means that asking those questions and answering them for many stories is either dangerous or, in some cases, suicidal. Right now there isn't much of a demand for that kind of journalism, and until there is – and until it's safe to produce it – we'll unfortunately be reading lots of poorly written articles.

Questions About Sources

Q: Can you recommend good source of translation/interpretation related literature?

A: I don't think I'm the right person to ask. I've got a shelf of translation theory texts that I try to read every once in a while and then abandon quickly – they seem to have nothing in common with the actual practice of translation. But I do like books by translators, like Mona Baker's book *In Other Words*, and the terrific book by Vlachov and Florin, *The*

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Untranslatable in Translation. The articles in *MOSTY* (published by R. Valent) are also filled with very useful articles by working translators.

Q: What are some existing reference sources for "templates" – in any field – if you know of any?

A: In your public library or local bookstore, you can find dozens of books on how to write just about anything – newspaper articles, personal correspondence, business correspondence, press releases, etc. There are also dozens of them in Russian, even with names like Как написать пресс-релиз or Пресс-релиз: Правила составления. (I saw those on ozon.ru.) For museum guides and catalogs, I go to auction houses and other museums (or their websites). And I spend a lot of time Googling.

Questions about Customized Texts

Q: I perform both customized newsletters for clients as well as official document translation for clients in need of translation for USCIS, medical clinics, banks, etc. Is there a standard set of translation "rules" for official documents, i.e., when to format into a table, when to just do line by line as one would with a passport, and, if so, would you be able to send a link? Additionally, is there ever a time when you might indicate that a text has been customized, for instance, for an American audience?

A: I don't think there is a set of rules, unless you find that certain kinds of texts written in English always do something a certain way. That is, if you are translating, say, medical histories, I'd suggest you check out a number of American medical histories. If you see that a certain format or style is always (or almost always) used, you can use that as a rule.

For example, I translated a number of Russian museum catalogs and had a terrible time with the descriptions of the exhibits. The convention – in both Russian and English – is to briefly describe the article (gold with silver inlay, size, engraving text, etc.) and then write a paragraph or so about its history, maker, provenance, etc. I didn't know how to "properly" translate the brief description until I got a dozen auction house catalogs of sales of Russian art. The convention in English was standard across auction houses, so I simply used that as my "rule" and rewrote the Russian to match it.

That's a good question about indicating customization or not. With commercial and non-commercial organizations' texts (newsletters, ads, announcements, annual reports, etc.), I don't think that's necessary. These organizations and companies can rightfully adapt their material as they chose for any audience. With texts in which you've moved sentences around, cut them in half, changed the paragraphing but haven't added or deleted anything – no.

However, I can imagine a situation in which an article or an interview published in a Russian periodical gets customized for a US-based periodical. If it is altered substantially, I think you might want to note that in order to indicate that it is significantly different from the original.

Q: What percentages in words occur when you go from Russian formal language to English marketing language?

A: If I've understood the question correctly, you want to know if the English text shrinks or expands. In general (and this is a big generalization), the text in English is shorter since the convention in English is for succinct language and – especially in marketing – not a single unnecessary word.

Q: How long would you say it has taken you to do each of your "genre analyses," to get to the templates you put together for the two languages?

A: For short texts, it usually takes a couple of hours, give or take. For longer format texts (annual reports or books) – it can take anywhere from a half day to several days.

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Q: How receptive have your clients been to your suggestions that their text needs to be adapted/customized? I'm generally a technical translator, so my experience in this is limited, but I find that authors are extremely concerned that their voice and their style will get lost. When you do run into resistance from your clients, are you generally able to overcome it, or do you often find yourself having to throw up your hands?

A: When someone in the PR department of a company has produced a text that was corrected by the department head and signed off on by another six company vice-presidents, there can be some indignation and concern that I'll ruin the text. But when I explain why I propose this, and point out that their text, as written, is great for a Russian audience but not effective with an English-speaking audience – they always agree.

For example, the author of the film synopsis I cited during the webinar might have felt aggrieved that her prose was being rejected. But the synopsis was for a foreign film festival catalog, and the film company – and author – didn't want their synopsis to stand out as “weird” – so once they understood that, they readily agreed. They have since become steady clients because of the “added value” I bring to a translation task.

That's what I like about this – you're not just translating words, you're kind of going up another step and translating at the level of conventions, genres, and culture. You become a greater part of the process, invested – in a way – in your client's success. My clients really appreciate that I don't translate and keep my mouth shut – I tell them what will and will not work in English and make suggestions based on examples. They might be a bit nervous at first, and grumble a bit. Sometimes things are not negotiable, or they want me to tone down some hype. But so far, it's been a positive collaboration.