

Notes on Translating Russian Fairytales

Caroline Scielzo

Fairy tales are a unique literary genre that entertain and inform readers of all ages. Not only is the audience of a fairy tale democratic in that it includes children as well as educated adult readers, but the appeal is universal and steeped in human oral tradition. The translator of a fairy tale has an exceptionally demanding task. This person must be able to convey in a second language the intrinsically simple first level of plot and the sensitive, crucial underlying threads of cultural myth in such a way that foreign and transgenerational readers sense the original complexity. In today's world a computer may theoretically accomplish many translating functions with its human counterpart needed only for revisions, but it is technically impossible to program a machine for the sensitivity to latent content subconsciously understood by even a child.

The child, for instance, is captivated by the magical adventures of the fairy tale, but it is not the plot alone which enthralls. As Bettelheim has suggested (1977), there is a subconscious awareness of confronting material which elucidates real life situations and strengthens internal resources through inherent myth. Translating attention must be directed to the symbolic language and structure in the story as a voice connected directly to the subconscious. Retaining this level of a fairy tale is as crucial as it is difficult, for within the symbolic myth lies the substance of the whole work.

While a single thematic plot may appear in the fairy tales of widely dispersed nations, it is always reworked in the unique cultural

overtones that present it anew and shed light on the national culture selecting the theme. Thus a great deal may be learned about deep levels of cultural experience through the investigation of its fairy tales. For the translator, there is a challenge to retain the charm of a folk story while at the same time transmitting its abstract meaning and value to readers of all ages within a second and foreign environment. To convey this complexity successfully is a challenge to the art of translating.

Exploring some problems of translating Russian fairy tales into English for an American reading public can provide specific examples of the cultural and linguistic challenges involved in fairy tale translation. The Russian historical experience afforded a prolonged and isolated development of oral tradition through centuries of mass illiteracy. Only in the mid-19th century did a fundamental study of fairy tales appear when Afanas'ev collected and catalogued the various stories, and serious scholarly studies of native folklore were undertaken. The results of these efforts show clearly-defined characters and purely Slavic fairy tales as well as Slavic reworkings of universally known folk tales. The fairy tale language itself, now written down, was seen to have derived from the ancient dialects of old Rus', a purely Russian source (Poltoratzky 1964).

In the original form, characteristic folklore word-weaving approaches semantic poetry by supplying fine nuances to thoughts and feelings. This may be accomplished in nouns by the use of suffixes which often have no corresponding elements in English. Diminutives such as "úshka" or "yátka" denote tenderness, as in the word "bábushka" for grandmother. Other suffixes like "okhónek" or "eshének" convey a pejorative tone. The prefix "po" sometimes limits the action of a verb, and short forms of adjectives

change their temporal quality. While translating attention must be given to these subtleties of an older syntactical construction, it is possible to capture the tonality through the prudent use of additional adjectives in English. Verb particles like "batz!", "skok!" or "klop!" are even less demanding, having a myriad of pop culture variations in English to capture sound effects and the immediacy of action: "bash!", "bang!" or "pop!"

Considering the etymological development of names and key words in the Russian fairy tale may, however, be a necessity for a thorough appreciation of linguistic levels at work in a story. The one possible exception here involves the names of some juvenile heroes. The common occurrence of the name Ivan for the child hero may best be left as such in preference to a translation of John. While John might spark in the American reader's mind a more comfortable recognition than the Slavic Ivan, Ivan is preferable since attempt should be made through such details to preserve the national flavor of the original. Likewise, the heroine Vasilisa, traditionally suggesting the priest's daughter, is best left in the original.

The names of the fantastic characters in the fairy tales, on the other hand, are ripe with imagery that often challenges the translator's skill and demands etymological consideration. The figure Morózko, for instance, may be left simply in a transliterated form or may be presented with its etymological roots as "Father Frost," since the root "moróz" means frost in the original. Leaving the name in transliteration has the advantage of conveying the character's ethnic background and thus retaining a purity of style at the risk of alienating the reader's emotion by presenting too "foreign" a figure. Translating the character as Father Frost maintains the symbolic etymological reference but weakens the tonal

flavor of its foreign origin. Both choices may be acceptable depending on the style selected by the translator, and consistency within a selected style is an appropriate expectation.

The name of the demonic figure Kashchéy is probably best left to transliteration. In so doing, a conscious decision has been made to forego the skeletal implications of his name, which derives from "kost'," meaning bone. The character's original ties to the world of the dead can be recaptured by including his attribute "bessmértnyi" and translating it literally as "deathless" in place of the more comforting "immortal." Thus "Kashchéy the Deathless" becomes a successful combination of transliteration and translation to present the suggestibility of his Russian name.

Perhaps due to a matriarchal strain of Russian folk culture, the greatest complexity lies not in the male personifications, but rather in the female. The richness of this folk personification is exemplified by the witch Bába-Yagá and presents an intellectually stimulating problem for the translator.

Unlike her male counterparts Morózko and Kashchéy the Deathless, Bába-Yagá demands the deepest understanding and threatens us with the deepest loss. While her name is probably best left in its transliteration, a wealth of suggestiveness escapes the foreign reader. The latent meaning of the name Bába-Yagá conveys to the native Russian a familial closeness with a "granny" witch connected to the self, a subconscious matriarchal voice.

The first part of her name, "Bába," is the root that in modern Russian gives us "bábushka" or grandmother. Its implications extend to include a peasant woman or, ultimately, woman herself. While the word "bába" may be understood in context to have either positive or pejorative connotations, by definition it always refers to an adult woman. The stem "Yagá" is

more elusive. Purely Slavic etymology provides such variations as the Polish "Yejęndza" or "Jędza" and Czech "Yejęzinka" or "Jěžinka," all meaning "evil bába." Roman Jakobson traces the word to the primitive form "enga," which he relates to the Old English "inca" or "grudge" (1945:649). Still another derivation summarizes the meaning as illness or nightmare. A more likely origin of the word is the early Latin "anguis" meaning snake. The first references to Bába-Yagá in oral tradition had been to a "snake-bába," and the Latin derivation seems most natural since it retains the etymological source of this original "snake-bába." This Latin root had likewise affected the Lithuanian and Polish words for snake, although in modern Russian it was reduced to "úgor'," or eel, the water snake.

In its most common interpretation Bába-Yagá is simply defined as a witch, a bába-witch, an old granny witch. The latent significance of the name is also interesting as the first letter of the elusive "Yagá" also means the personal pronoun "I" in Russian. Because of the importance of sound value in folklore, the Latin root "anguis" or snake was doubly rich, since on Slavic ground it afforded a double suggestion. This interpretation is aided by the hyphen connecting the two parts of the name Bába-Yagá, or possibly "the (old) woman-who-is-I snake."

Bába-Yagá's role in the fairy tales is that of an integrating force promising new life. It is usually the case that young girls are sent to the forest by unloving mothers or step-mothers to resolve their fate through an encounter with the witch. In fulfilling the emotional and domestic demands of Bába-Yagá, the young heroine gains the symbolic light needed to guide her from the dark forest to a bright and mature outer world of adulthood. It is interesting to note that this light is often portrayed as a burning flame within a skull, an indication that

it is internal illumination which has been earned during the encounter. The wise heroine has confronted and resolved her conflicts with the mythical witch. Those who fail this arduous process are destroyed.

There are other symbolic stumbling blocks of language to be found in the stories tied to Bába-Yagá. The witch's hut is always found deep in the forest, which in the original is "les dremúchyí" or its plural, "lesá dremúchiye." The first word translates rather conveniently as woods or the more preferable "forest." The word "dremúchiye" in modern Russian means "dense" or "thick," but coming from the root of such words as "dremóta" or "dremát'," it means drowsiness or slumber and lends itself to interpretation as a dream world or realm of the unconscious. The forest is in fact universally considered a symbol for the subconscious, although it must have had a special significance for a people living among particularly dense wooded growth where the entrance of children into the forest was the entrance to death. For all these reasons a sensitive translation must render the location as a deep forest. To translate the Russian terms as dense woods suggests a literal abundance of wooded growth and impassibility rather than the more likely complexity of a subconscious dream world. The dreamy states created by "dremúchiye" in the original are recreated by the acoustic suggestion of "deep" and "far" in the English "deep forest."

Another problem arises in dealing with the stylized rhymed epithets connected with Bába-Yagá. In her folkloristic development the witch incorporated aspects of death and cannibalization in her personification. The constant threatening attributes of the witch as skeletal and cannibalistic are known to all Russian children in a stylized rhymed epithet: "Bába-Yagá-Kostyanáya nagá," which translates as "Bába-Yagá the bonylegged" and loses the rhyme

of the original, subtracting from its onomatopoeic horror which builds to the final unrhymed line: "She'll eat you up!"

Likewise there is a problem with Bába-Yagá's hut. Noted as standing with its front to the forest and back to the heroine, the guest must request that the hut turn around by using a special set formula. "Izbushka, izbushka! Stan' k lesú zádóm, a ko mne péredóm" transmits the command that the hut stand with forest behind it and child in front. It carries the weight of an "Open Sesame!" order, but attempts to preserve the rhyme should not trivialize and might well be foregone.

The keen sense of smell by which Bába-Yagá usually identifies her living guest as "smelling of Russian bone" is another such stylized epithet. Still another variation is "From a Russian bone, not a sound was heard, not a glimpse was seen, and now a Russian bone has come to me of its own free will." These epithets are best left literal and not changing "Russian" to a mere national reference, since their implications are universal in the sense of "the living." The reference to the smell of bone is fine as is and serves as a reminder of that unison of the witch to death made through skeletal associations.

It is almost always the case that formulas or epithets, rhymed or unrhymed, provoke concern in the translation of fairy tales. An attempt must be made not to lose any subconscious points of reference and to continue the plot of the story. If rhyme is then possible, so much the better.

As a rule, a reader enters the English-speaking fairy tale world by being told of "Once upon a time." Since this expression triggers automatic assumptions and responses, it is almost always preferable to any attempt to accommodate Russian equivalents. It is a reasonable rendering of the "zhilibyli" heard by the Slavic audience. Similarly, a fairy tale ends in such

a way as to return the reader to reality after a fantasy. This technique is also embedded within a culture and is most successful when so respected. The rhymed Russian conclusion "I sejhás zhivút--khleb zhuyút" meaning they are now living and chewing their bread has no place in a serious English conclusion. Another variation, "Stáli zhit'-pozhivát'--dobrá nazhivát'," slides more easily into the English expectation of "And they lived happily ever after"--a time-honored conclusion that should not be overlooked.

Symbolic structures within the fairy tales are always greater than the first and obvious meaning of a string of words. Reflecting their heredity of folklore, the symbols and expressions are collective in origin and thus a valid point of international exchange. It is the obligation of the translator to make this exchange possible even if in the magic realms of a fairy tale there is no pat solution, no rule of thumb, for translating these symbols. Etymological sensitivity and an openness to verbal suggestion are valid technical skills to be developed. Finally, there are many ways in which a translation is a different product than the original, yet the goals for translating fairy tales seem rather clear. First, the story must give pleasure to readers of all ages interested in fantasy. The translation, like the original, must then concern itself with the underlying struggle unfolding in the drama. It must facilitate a subconscious understanding of the latent conflicts and the attempts at resolution. Thus a good fairy tale, as we have known since childhood, is a lesson in integration. Through translation this experience can be shared with members of other cultures and their problems and values more fully understood and appreciated.

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