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ON VARIETIES OF THE TITLE IN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF GRIBOYEDOV'S COMEDY

The history of British and American translators' special interest in Griboyedov's comedy is already more than one and a half centuries old. For this period ten full translations of different authors were published and these works are marked with the great variety in rendering of the comedy's title. The searchings of semantic and stylistic adequacy in English variants of Griboyedov's title are being analysed in the article.

Key words: title, Griboyedov, comedy, variants, translation, adequate analogue.

As is generally known, a title is an extremely important component of any text, including the literary works, of course. Its essential relationship with the content and message of the book were and are realized in various ways, however there are common functions of the title for all literary epochs, styles and genres. The title is always an *icon* (in semiotic sense of the word) of the book and at the same time the first word (or words) in it. Besides, as was acutely marked by Sigismund Krzhizhanovsky, "the title treats the book so, as it treats its speech material". This remark is added by a kind of comment: "The title operates with the words of the book, as it treats things and events, taken from space and time..."¹

Certainly, the functions of a title can be more or less varied in the limits of different stylistic directions or genres. For instance, the specific goal of the titles pointing to the genre peculiarities of the texts was rather typical for the Old Russian literature. "...The genres of the Old Russian literature were well 'organized' in the respect, that they were usually marked declaratively in the titles of the literary works..." [1, p. 61]. Later on such the marks were more often exceptions than the rule, though the examples of the above-mentioned manner of entitling can be found in Russian as well as in other national literatures of the XVII–XX centuries.

The moralizing function of the title was frequently presented in the literature of the European Neoclassicism; it is enough to recollect the titles of several comedies by Molière. In the fiction of the Age of Enlightenment the deviation from this rule took place not so rarely; as an example we can mention usage of the word *history* in three novels by Henry Fielding, the words *Life and Opinions* in the first novel by Laurence Sterne etc. An extra-textual character of the title became possible and even typical considerably later (for instance, in the postmodernist fiction).

Beyond doubts, the iconic function of a title determines the importance of its correct translation into foreign languages. Numerous translators, who tried to keep in the title the corn of the content, failed, because their variants were ponderous, sometimes odd and often had little in common with the original one. Let us mention as an illustration the funny title in the translation of Shakespeare's comedy "Merry Wives of Windsor", made by Russian Empress Catherine the Great: "That is How to Have a Basket and Clothes" ("Vot kakovo imet' korzinu i beljo") [2, p. 13].

¹ These observations are developed by Sigismund Krzhizhanovsky in his seminal book: Кржижановский С. Поэтика заглавий / С. Кржижановский. – М.: Никитинские Субботники, 1931. – 32 с.

The first variant of the title, which Alexander Griboyedov had chosen for his comedy was following: "Woe to Wit" („Gore umu"). A. Slonimsky considered, that this word-combination was equivalent semantically to the other, moralizing formula: "The Punished Free-thinker" ("Nakazannyj Vol'nodumets") [3, p. 61], which obviously corresponds more to the tradition of Neoclassicist dramaturgy. But later the playwright changed the syntactic connection of the used words and preferred that other title, under which the comedy became well-known for Russian and even foreign readers and spectators. At the end of the XIX century and moreover in the XX century the second title assumed a specific quality of a steady phraseological combination and entered the Russian phraseology together with many phrases and word-combinations from the text of the comedy, numerous verses from which really "became the proverbs", confirming the wise prophecy of clear-sighted Alexander Pushkin [4, p. 127].

The history of British and American translators' special interest in Griboedov's comedy is already more than one and a half centuries old². The first attempt to make the acquaintance of English audience with the comedy took place in Great Britain in 1857[5]. The author of the prosaic rendering, Nikolaj Dmitrievich Benardaki, simply transliterated the Russian title of the work of Griboyedov, evidently considering that this phraseological unit can not be adequately translated into English. Almost a half a century after it, Leo Wiener collected the two-volume anthology of Russian Literature (in English) and included into it his own rendering in prose of five scenes from the second act of the comedy under the title "**Intelligence Comes to Grief**"³. Later his rendition of the full text of the comedy was issued as a separate book under the title "**The Misfortune of Being Clever**".

In 1924 a British journal "Slavonic Review" published the first successful poetical translation of the comedy, belonging to Sir Bernard Pares; in a year this version was issued as a separate book [6]. The book was supplied with an introduction by a well-known connoisseur of Russian and European literatures D.S. Mirsky (Svyatopolk-Mirsky), who lived then in England and obviously consulted the translator. As a matter of fact, this version was remaining the most popular and generally used one in English pedagogical and theatrical practice during more than thirty years.

Nevertheless, in spite of the indisputable merits of Bernard Pares's work, it did not become the last attempt to translate Griboyedov's comedy into English. In the second half of the XX century several new versions appeared. In 1961 the translation of Franklin D. Reeve was published; it was named "**The Trouble with Reason**" [7]. Ten years later a new version by Joshua Cooper was issued in the series "Penguin Books" under the title "**Chatsky, or the Misery of Having Mind**" [8]. For the last third of the century the works of Franklin Reeve and Joshua Cooper ran into several editions.

On the eve of the bicentenary of Griboyedov, which was celebrated in 1995, British and American translators' interest in the famous comedy went through revival. In 1992 almost at the same time two new so-called "acting versions"⁴ appeared. One of them belonged to a widely-known English novelist Anthony Burgess and was entitled "**Chatsky (The Importance of Being Stupid)**" [9]. Another one was made by a professional American playwright Alan Shaw, who is mostly known as an author of the libretto for the popular musical "My Fair Lady", based upon Bernard Shaw's famous comedy "Pygmalion". This version was entitled "**The Woes of Wit**" [10]. In a year a new, bilingual (sic!) edition of the play was issued in New York; this translation was made by Beatrice Yusem [11], and her version on a level with the classical work of Sir Bernard Pares can be considered as one of the most adequate English translations of the famous comedy in both semantic and stylistic aspects⁵. Her variant of the title sounds so: "**Distress from Cleverness**".

² A survey of reception and interpretation of Griboedov's comedy in great Britain and USA can be found in the dissertation of N. Voronova (Н.П. Воронова. Комедия А.С. Грибоедова «Горе от ума» в англоязычных переводах: восприятие и интерпретация: автореф. дисс. ... канд. филол. наук. – Саратов, 2005).

³ The similar construction can be met in the contemporary (1978) poetical translation of the title into German language – "Verstand schafft Leiden" (transl. by A. Luther).

⁴ The translations were prepared for the concrete theatrical companies.

⁵ About the translation of B. Yusem see my review of it in: *The Modern English Review*, Warwick, No. 1(92), 1997. – Pp. 263–265.

The beginning of the third millenium was marked by appearance in Great Britain and the USA of some new versions, among which the work of Mary Hobson must be distinguished. It was published by the solid American publishing house "Edwin Meller Press" [12]⁶. The translator received the jubilee Griboyedov Prize for this work and later was awarded the memorable Pushkin medal in Russia.

The list of translations and renditions convinced of the fact that the intensive searchings for more or less adequate analogue for Griboedov's title in English language appeared to be not so simple task for British and American translators. The exact coincidences in their variants can be met comparatively rarely. Only Alan Shaw and Mary Hobson chose the same English words for the title, but an author of the earlier rendition used the word "Woe" in plural, somewhat *domesticizing* and *lowering* the sense of the whole set expression, while the newest translator not without reason preserves the singular form in accordance with Russian original text.

Other cases of coincidences are not noted, but there are the similar variants. Meanwhile every next author tries to escape the literal reiteration of the previous translations, changing the common words in the analogical syntactical constructions to the synonyms. For instance, "**The Misfortune of Being Clever**" (Leo Wiener), "**The Mischief of Being Clever**" (Bernard Pares), "**The Misery of Having a Mind**" (Joshua Cooper), "**The Trouble with Reason**" (Franklin Reeve), "**Distress from Cleverness**" (Beatrice Yusem). It is noteworthy that Bernard Pares adds in brackets to the English translation a transliteration of the original Russian title; methinks, that such the addition can be attended for the specialists or Russian-speaking readers, but tells not so much to the wide audience in Great Britain, countries of the Commonwealth and USA. It should be said in all fairness that the collocations chosen by Franklin Reeve and Beatrice Yusem have been not, incidentally, used in any of perceding and subsequent versions.

Joshua Cooper's variant needs also some reservations. Here the name of the protagonist precedes the original formula – "**Chatsky, or the Misery of having a Mind**". It may be supposed that the setting a name of the main personage in the beginning of the title, Cooper tried to smooth possible impressions from the further clumsy translation of Griboyedov's title proper. But another reason is also possible. As far as the title itself is referred mainly to the protagonist of the play, the appearance of his name in the first line of the work could be natural and reasonable. Besides, the translator, who knew Russian text of the play quite well, comprehended its organic, genetic relationship with the tradition of West-European *high comedy* [13], for which titles of the kind were rather typical⁷.

In the translation of Anthony Burgess the most interesting is the second part of the title which is put in brackets – "**The Importance of Being Stupid**". Undoubtedly, this word-combination was addressed first of all to the potential spectators, the experienced theatre-goers and last but by no means not least – to theatrical directors. This non-standard and significant subtitle brings to mind association with Oscar Wilde's witty comedy "The Importance of Being Earnest". Formally effective is, Anthony Burgess's subtitle has little in common with the original Russian title and besides, clearly shifts the semantic accent and creates a certain antithesis between the title and subtitle. The artificial correlating of satirical and moralizing drama by Griboyedov with the brilliant "cup and saucer comedy" of Oscar Wilde is absolutely unfounded either in historical or in stylistic aspect; it breaks the relationship between the title and the body of the text.

Though occasionally literalism can be useful by the rendering of the title, it is impossible to expect over-literal variants from the newest translators, especially in the reproducing the title. The phraseological combination, which became a real phraseological **unit** in the author's language can easily turn into absurdity in the language of translation, where quite the different phraseological and literary traditions become apparent. However, the translators' freedom of

⁶ The first variant of Mary Hobson's translation was published in 1995 and had semantically correct but too verbose title: «Too Clever for Comfort, or the Misfortunes of a Thinking Man». This translation is analysed in the article of E. Ablogina (Е.В. Аблогина. «Горе от ума» в английском переводе Мэри Хобсон // *Вестник ТГПУ*. Вып. 8 (98). – Томск, 2010. – С. 33–36.

⁷ The tradition of entitling the literary work with the name of its protagonist appeared to be stable and exists even nowadays. See, e.g.: Заградка, Мирослав. Поэтика заглавий русской литературы XX века [Электронный ресурс] // *Sine arte, nihil*. Сб. научн. трудов в дар проф. Миливое Йовановичу / ред. Корнелия Ичин. – Белград; Москва, 2002. – Режим доступа: <http://www.russian.slavica.org/article 291.html>

ignoring the literal approach to the original text must be reasonably limited. Within these limits the associative semantic relationship between the chosen title and the content of the literary work must be in essence preserved. Sharp stylistic and especially semantic discrepancy between the title and the body of the text is scarcely permissible.

There need be no doubts that in the English-speaking world the keen and talented translators will try to create new English versions of Griboyedov's comedy, which is surely doomed to the long life in literature and theatre, as it is proved by the history of culture for the last almost two centuries. In spite of all their respect for the predecessors' works, translators of the next generations will evaluate some moments in the previous versions critically, the more so as English language is not an unalterable system. It is obvious that the searchings for an adequate (semantically and stylistically) analogue for the title of the play will remain one of the most difficult tasks.

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Підвищений інтерес британських та американських перекладачів до грибоєдовської комедії налічує вже більш ніж півторастолітню історію. За цей період не менше десяти перекладів різних авторів побачили світ. Запропоновані англомовними авторами назви комедії позначені чималою різноманітністю. Пошуки різними англомовними перекладачами семантичної та стилістичної адекватності з авторською назвою комедії аналізуються у цій статті.

Ключові слова: назва, Грибоєдов, комедія, варіант, переклад, адекватність.

Повышенный интерес британских и американских переводчиков к комедии Грибоедова «Горе от ума» насчитывает уже более чем полутравековую историю. За это время не менее десяти переводов, выполненных разными авторами увидели свет. Предложенные англоязычными авторами названия комедии отмечены существенной вариативностью. Поиски большей семантической и стилистической адекватности в англоязычном воспроизведении названия комедии рассматриваются в этой статье.

Ключевые слова: название, Грибоедов, комедия, вариант, перевод, адекватность.

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