

**Stylistic aspects of translating nonsense in “Linguistic Tales”
by Liudmila Petrushevskaya**

The extraordinary kind of literature labeled as “nonsense” is a genre dating back to English Mother Goose rhymes and L.Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” which is based upon the principle of filling the improbable or non-existing word-form with easily derivable sense. A similar endeavor to create definite images in terms of “indefinite” language is embodied in the form of “linguistic fairy tales” by Liudmila Petrushevskaya, a very talented and controversial Russian writer. These ‘tales’ stand out from the rest of her works, mostly serious, dramatic, and psychologically sophisticated.

Her books are translated into the English, French, German, Italian and Scandinavian languages and are sought after by publishers interested in high-quality women’s writing. She received the prestigious Pushkin Prize, awarded by the Toepfer Foundation in Germany for a lifetime achievement. In 1992, she was short-listed for the first Russian Booker Prize – a famous British literary award. But above all her prizes and awards the writer herself cherishes the one that reveals her half-hidden love of the most intriguing and at the same time clear genre – the fairy tale.

This clear and unpretentious genre can be viewed as a gauging instrument for measuring a writer’s literary mastery as it requires a special compressed use of language, combining rich imagery and unobtrusive didacticism. Moreover, quite a few of characteristic features of Petrushevskaya’s prose allow us to consider it in terms of nonsense strategies and techniques.

In his “An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense”, the Dutch scholar Wim Tigges speaks about nonsense as a specific form of discourse operating between four basic artistic domains: myth (possible contexts), irony (presenting conflicts between domains of reality), realism (symbolic reference to real domains), and metafiction (fiction about fiction), the latter being most intimately connected with nonsense [1]. Close analysis of Petrushevskaya’s tales testifies to their proximity to major constituents of nonsense repertoire enumerated in Tigges’s monograph [1: 56]:

1. Mirroring, reversals, inversions and topsy-turvydom.

In Petrushevskaya’s tales one could find inversed metaphors, reversals of phonemes, different cases of ambiguity, ambivalence and conundrums. For example, the first story “Once Upon a Time There Lived Tr-r” from the cycle of fairy tales called ‘non-human adventures’ is completely based on the interplay of interjections: the characters bear the names Tr-r (interjection of threat), Aha (interjection of understanding), E-ee (interjection of contradiction) while the object they row about is called Boom-Boom (which is onomatopoeic word denoting the sound of thumping or bouncing).

2. Imprecision, or playing with boundaries which implies false contrasts in language, exaggerations and miniaturizations, manifestations of the implicit, dissolution of boundary between fiction and reality.

In the story “Mother-cabbage”, which is made up as an extended allusion to Anderson’s “Thumbelina”, the main heroine has a little daughter – Droplet – whom she had found on a cabbage leaf and thought at first it was a tiny drop of dew.

3. Infinity, which presupposes stringing, seriality, sequence of events without cause and effect, nesting text within a text, circularity of narration.

In fact, quite a lot of Petrushevskaya’s stories are either united into cycles (Non-Human Adventures, Linguistic Fairy Tales, Barby’s Adventures, Adventures with Magicians, Royal Adventures, and Adventures of People) or structured by the pattern of “story-within-a-story.” This device helps the writer to make all her characters – animals, birds, insects, vegetables, kettles, alarm-clocks, planes – talk and communicate the stories of their lives to each other and the reader.

4. Simultaneity – the strongest semiotic device, which involves ill-matched pairs of objects or combination of disparate elements, portmanteux words (two words collapsed into one meaning or two meanings packed up in one word: e.g. smithy=lithe+slimy), neologisms (they must appear to be “normal” words keeping to the laws of syntax, morphology, and phonetics), and creatures, described in more or less mimetic terms.

The world of Petrushevskaya’s tales is inhabited with the most incongruous beings: here you could meet an alarm-clock that is planning to marry a pitcher; then it suddenly changes its mind and makes a proposal to the glasses, but ends up tying the knot with a pillow.

5. Arbitrariness: the medley, variation, repetition, syntagmatic and paradigmatic allusion, perversion of proverbs, parodies.

The most “children’s” of Petrushevskaya’s stories are based upon syntactic parallelism or lexical repetition. Take, for example, the hilarious “Gimme Some Cabbage,” or the above-mentioned “Once Upon a Time There Lived Tr-r”, or very thought-provoking “He-Mollusk and She-Mollusk.” Some tales involve play upon the hackneyed proverbs, sayings and children’s nursery rhymes – like “Donkey and Goat”, “He, Who Loves, Will Carry in His Arms,” “You Bring Only Tears” etc.

Among the nonsense themes and motifs mentioned by Tigges, the most often met and efficiently utilized in Petrushevskaya’s tales are the following:

– time and space rearrangement;

- animals' and things' personification;
- food, clothing and furniture as factors helping to sustain or modify identity;
- the motif of eating or being eaten.

For the purpose of stylistic analysis in terms of artistic translation, we have chosen one of the three fairy tales united by Petrushevskaya under the common rubric title “Linguistic fairy tales”. In Russian, this fairy tale’s title is pronounced “Pus’ki biatyie” and bears nearly as little sense to a native speaker of Russian as its transliteration would to an English-speaking person. But, after reading the story, the Russian reader would definitely attribute the mysterious ‘pus’ki’ to some recognizable if unpleasant and naughty creatures whose images are brought to mind by the magical force of sound association. Given below are the classes of “nonsense” words used by Petrushevskaya together with their associative meanings and suggestions for their translation.

Nouns

Pus’ki – small, mean, stupid creatures	Jerklets
Kalusha – rather big, awkward hybrid of a domestic bird and a ragged boot.	Goose+fowl = gowl
Kalushata – its offspring	Gowlings
Napushka – some place, evidently covered with grass, remotely resembling forest or field	Wabe (borrowing from Carroll)
Butiavka – small, stingy, stinky, cunning creature	Stinkette

Verbs

Siapat’ – to move awkwardly and slowly	Wobble+trundle = trobble
Uvasit’ – to catch a glimpse of, to see	Glance+catch = glanch
Volit’ – to shout, cry, scream, shriek	Shriek+howl = shrowl
Triamkat’ – to eat, munch, guzzle	Gobble+crunch = crobble
Podudonit’cia – to droop, fade, slouch	Droop+slouch = drouch
Vychuchit’ – to vomit, spit out	Vomit+spit = vopit
Vzdrebeznut’sia – to wake up, shake, rouse oneself	Shake+rouse = shrouse
Sopritiuknut’sia – to pull oneself together,	Repull oneself

Adjectives and intensifiers

Nekuzaivaia – bad, uneatable	Verminous+pernicious=vermicious
Liubye – good and lovable	Goodable
Biatyie – iniquitous, obnoxious	Inoxious
Ziumo-ziumo – very	Zery-zery

The final variant of translation resulted in the following (compare to the original [2]):

INOXIOUS JERKLETS

Once a gowl with gowlings trobbled along the wabe and glunched a stinkette, and shrowled:

– Gowlings! Gowlings! A stinkette!

The gowlings trobbled over and crobbled the stinkette. And drouched. The gowl shrowls:

– Oyee! Oyee! The stinkette is vermicious!

When the gowlings vopitted the stinkette, it shroused, repulled itself and trobbled from the wabe. And the gowl shrowled to her gowlings:

– Don’t crobble stinkettes! They are goodable but zery-zery vermicious.

Meanwhile the stinkette shrowls behind the wabe:

– The gowlings drouched! The gowlings drouched! Zery vermicious! Jerklets inoxious!

Сяпала Калуша с Калушатами по напушке. И увазила Бутявку, и волит:

– Калушата! Калушаточки! Бутявка!

Калушата присяпали и Бутявку стрямкали. И подудонились.

А Калуша волит:

– Оее! Оее! Бутявка-то некузявая!

Калушата Бутявку вычучили.

Бутявка вздребезнулась, сопритюкнулась и усяпала с напушки.

А Калуша волит калушатам:

– Калушаточки! Не трямкайте бутявок, бутявки дюбые и зюмо-зюмо некузявые. От бутявок дудонятся.

А Бутявка волит за напушкой:

– Калушата подудонились! Зюмо некузявые! Пуськи бятые!

Leanne Hinton distinguishes four categories of sound symbolism (all of which are present in Petrushevskaya’s tales) [3].

1. Corporeal sound symbolism or the use of certain sounds and intonation patterns to express the internal state of the speaker, emotional or physical.

2. Imitative sound symbolism or onomatopoeia (already mentioned cases of clock’s ticking, the “song” of the plane and others).

3. Synesthetic sound symbolism_or acoustic symbolization and rendering of non-acoustic phenomena, like the usage of high vowels and palatal consonants in diminutive forms and conveying the idea of bigness with the help of long vowels and deep voice.

4. Conventional sound symbolism or analogical association of certain phonemes with certain meanings – phonesthemes – which were used in translating “Pus’ki biatyie”. Phonesthetic creation is especially obvious in the realm of blends, some of which were so successfully introduced into English by Carroll – for instance, the classical examples of “chortle” and “galumph.”

In terms of artistic form, Petrushevskaya’s fairytales bear resemblance to the literary nonsense genre. Her “alternative fiction”, as its name implies, offers an alternative viewpoint through its commitment to aesthetic principles instead of overtly political causes and impresses the reader by its independence, freshness and technical mastery. Petrushevskaya’s fiction seems to predict that the future of literature lies in an absurd, fantastic, phantasmagoric art of Hypotheses instead of Purpose, or, to a certain degree, in the art of Nonsense instead of Sense.

Literature

1. Tigges, Wim. Ed. 1988. *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. – Costerus New Series. Vol.67. – Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V. Publishers. 2. Петрушевская Л. Книга приключений. Соб. соч. в 5 тт., т. 4. – Харьков: Фолио, 1996. 3. Hinton, Leanne et al. Eds. 1994. *Sound Symbolism*. – Cambridge University Press.