

Title: Oblomov: (Re)Translating a Classic
Author: Stephen Pearl, Independent Scholar

There is a crucial and under-appreciated distinction between the task of translating a hitherto unknown foreign language literary work for the purpose of making it available for the first time to readers in the target language and that of re-translating a classic. In the latter case, translators expose themselves to, and indeed invite, not only comparison with previous translations, but also the haunting question of the very *raison d'être* of the new translation itself. For this reason, a re-translation is in a sense as much about the nature and quality of the translation as about the original work itself – something to which most reviewers remain oblivious or indifferent. It is this which adds an extra dimension of responsibility, vulnerability and challenge to the task, and entails a number of daunting policy choices and judgment calls. This paper gives an account of just some of these, all of which confronted me in translating *Oblomov*.

Bridging the time, place, context, and cultural gaps. An account of some of the daunting policy choices entailed by the re-translation of *Oblomov*:

Should the language of the translation be contemporaneous with that of the original – or contemporaneous with that of the reader? Is it the translators job to “explain”, either in the text, or in footnotes, terms or phenomena likely to be unfamiliar to the reader – or should the dramatic or narrative intent of the author be the guide? E.g. the complications of *коинаж* vs. *ассигнации*.

The unique problem posed by translating into English, which has by now splintered into a number of different Englishes. E.g. British vs. American.

Can, and should the same approach be taken to narrative as to dialogue? E.g. Material realities dictate that Goncharov’s characters travel in Dickensian horse-drawn vehicles and wear Dickensian clothing, but should they speak Dickensian English?

At which point, if ever, should transliteration replace translation? E.g. “sputnik” vs. “satellite”, “samovar” vs. “teapot”/kettle”, and last but by no means least, “Oblomovshchina” vs. “Oblomovism”.

What trickle-down effect have Freud and Marx had on English and Russian respectively, and how, if at all, should this factor affect certain areas of translation? E.g. the traditional and unsatisfactory rendering in Russian of such Freudian concepts as “frustration”, and such Marxist concepts as “противоречия [капитализма]” in English. The problem of “you”. English, almost alone among the world’s major languages lacks the facility afforded by a singular and a plural version. What to do about this дефицит, especially in such a dialogue-dense work as *Oblomov*, particularly, but not only, in the confrontations between Oblomov and his nominal social inferior, Zakhar. (E.g. The Russian reader of the original automatically absorbs the fact that in spite of the fact that Zakhar uses language to his master, which may come across as unbridled insolence to the English reader, he nevertheless instinctively and unfailingly respects the class boundaries imposed by the use of the pronoun *Вы* + the plural verb when addressing Oblomov and *они* when referring to him. See also the subtleties of the various deferential pronouns and plural verbs used by Pshennytsina when referring to her own brother who occupies the lowest rank on “The Table of Ranks”).

Is literary translation better done by native speakers of the source language or native speakers of the target language? The point of departure for this issue is a tradition

unique to the translation of Russian classics into English, namely that in the past it has been considered natural and normal for them to be translated by native speakers of Russian who may or may not have possessed a native mastery of English. By contrast, English translations of classics from other languages seem to have been exempt from this tradition (and the works of Proust, Cervantes, Goethe, Omar Khayyam, and, of course, the Latin and Greek classics which, if only by default, have been translated as a matter of course by native speakers – and writers – of the target language.)