Lost in Translation: Winnie-the-Pooh in Russian and English

According to Winnie-the-Pooh, “You can’t help respecting anybody who can spell TUESDAY, even if he doesn’t spell it right; but spelling isn’t everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn’t count” (Milne 220-221). For the professionals who translate children’s literature from English to Russian, spelling is only the beginning. Not only does a translator have to spell Tuesday, but he has to convey both the denotation, or dictionary definition, and the connotation, or additional association, of the word in the context of the rhythm and rhyme of the work as a whole. Furthermore, the translator has to communicate the feeling, message, and main idea of the work to a reader who sees the world from a fundamentally different linguistic, social, and cultural perspective.

Translating the meaning and the message of the work can be mutually exclusive. In the word Tuesday, the denotation and the connotation of the word are almost identical. But what about when Pooh says, “Poetry and Hums aren’t things which you get, they’re things which get you. And all you can do is go where they can find you” (Milne 285)? In English, the expression “things which you get” means both “things you find” and “things you understand,” and the expression “things which get you” means both “things that find you” and “things that trick you,” so the sentence is both a nonsensical rumination about the world of Pooh and a perfectly rational observation about the incomprehensibility of poetry. But in Russian, the word “находить” only means “to find,” and the word “Кричалки” (Zakhoder 195) only approximates the meaning of the made-up word for the songs that Pooh hums to himself while he wanders through Hundred-Acre Wood and digests his daily pot of “hunny” (Milne 25). And speaking of Hums, what about a poem? Should the translator translate the sound, the sense, the rhythm, or the rhyme?
In the second example, the translator has a choice: he may perform a literal translation, which conveys the meanings of individual words but not the message of the complete work, or he may prefer an interpretive translation, which takes liberties with the text but communicates the message of the work as a whole. Most translation theorists agree that when it comes to children’s book translations, the balance between conveying the meaning and the message of the work often tips toward taking more liberties with the text in order to better communicate the message of the work as a whole. However, translation theorists differ on whether taking liberties with the text is negative or positive for readers, writers and published works.

Zahar Shavit alleges that “the translator of children’s literature can permit himself great liberties regarding the text because of the peripheral position children’s literature occupies in the polysystem” (171). In other words, the literary community does not apply the same standards of accuracy to the translation of children’s literature as to religious texts or classic novels because children’s literature is at the bottom of the literary hierarchy. According to Shavit, not only can a translator of children’s literature “[adjust] plot, characterization, and language to the child’s level of comprehension and his reading abilities,” but he can also manipulate the text in accordance with the target culture’s social agenda, or “what society thinks is ‘good for the child’” (172).

But Finnish scholar, translator, and illustrator Riitta Oittinen “[does] not agree with views where translation is seen as a mechanistic act […] and the translator’s action is relegated to obscurity, if not invisibility” (3). Oittinen argues that instead of being invisible “repeaters” and “reflectors” of the original text, translators should develop a dialogue with illustrators and readers in order to determine what works best in the context of the culture. According to Lennart Hellsing, there is nothing wrong with keeping the classics alive by keeping them readable (cited
in Metcalf 295); according to Oittinen, “the original author benefits if her/his books are translated in a live, dialogic way so they live on in the target language culture” (31).

Oittinen and Shavit would agree that like most other children’s book translations, Boris Zakhoder’s translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* from English to Russian tends toward the liberal. Shavit would assert that this is because translations of children’s literature have a hidden agenda: promoting society’s presupposition of “what is good for the child” (172). The evidence: Englishman A.A. Milne wrote *Winnie-the-Pooh* at the turn of the last century, but by the middle of the 1900s, the communist Soviet Union was on the outs with the capitalist Great Britain. Could it be a coincidence that the Russian version of *Winnie-the-Pooh* doesn’t mention England at all? Zakhoder’s version omits the part where Christopher Robin meets a bear named Winnie at the London Zoo (Milne 3), which reveals that *Winnie-the-Pooh* is set in England. Additionally, the Russian version makes no attempt to translate Briticisms like “Hallo!” (Milne 18), “luncheon” (44), “stoutness” (25), “gorse-bush” (13) and “Oh, bother!” (27), which reflect the fact that Pooh has an English accent.

By taking the bear out of the country, the Russian translation of Zakhoder subtracts the satiric side of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. In both the English and Russian editions, Pooh has a passion for doing stoutness exercises, going hunting, and drinking tea. In England, being stout, going hunting, and drinking tea are seen as the distinguishing features of the well-bred English gentleman, so by humorously recounting how Pooh’s pursuit of game, tea, and, of course, honey gets him into trouble, *Winnie-the-Pooh* gently pokes fun at the well-bred British person. But in Russia, these activities do not have quite the same associations. Without knowing that Pooh is British from an extratextual source, Russian readers cannot comprehend that the character of Pooh in *Winnie-the-Pooh* corresponds to a certain kind of person in British society.
Unlike Shavit, I would like to argue that the English-to-Russian translation of Winnie-the-Pooh is more liberal because English-to-Russian translators of children’s books are located toward the top, not toward the bottom, of the literary ladder. In contrast to Russian-to-English translators, who tend to be “seen and not heard,” English-to-Russian translators include such literary luminaries as the “Russian Shakespeare,” Mikhail Lermontov; the Nobel Prize winner, Boris Pasternak; the author of the controversial classic Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov; and the writer of the popular poems for children, Samuil Marshak. Accordingly, the Winnie-the-Pooh translator, Zakhoder, is a renowned writer and poet in his own right.

A renowned author is more likely to follow the Oittinen model of translation as a creative process that adds to the original work rather than a mechanical process that just copies it. Instead of trying to translate Milne’s work word for word, Zakhoder captured the spirit and style of Milne with his own additions. For example, Zakhoder’s skill as writer and translator allowed him to add humor that did not exist in the original Winnie-the-Pooh. When Zakhoder translated “Pooh” as “Пух,” the Russian word for “fluff” or “stuffing,” he both captured the phonetic pronunciation of the original text and added the humor of the fact that Pooh’s name is perfect for a stuffed bear. Zakhoder added even more original humor by translating “Heffalump” (Pooh’s mispronunciation of “elephant”) as “слонопотам,” a mishmash of the Russian words for “elephant” (слон) and “hippopotamus” (гиппопотам). But unlike Milne’s humor, Zakhoder’s humor is not tied to the cultural context of a certain country. Consequently, Zakhoder’s additions could even be considered a change for the better: an international interpretation of Winnie-the-Pooh for the Russian-speaking world.

Oittinen suggests that when we judge translations of children’s literature, the layout and the illustrations are just as important as the text itself (cited in Metcalf 295). In the English
edition, the illustrations were created by E.H. Shepard, a neighbor of Milne, who based his character designs on the stuffed animals of the real Christopher Robin, the boy for whom his father, A.A. Milne, wrote *Winnie-the-Pooh* (see Figure 1). After Milne died, he left the rights to *Winnie-the-Pooh* to four different groups, who came into conflict over who really owned the biggest piece of the Pooh pie. Disney bought out the rights of one of the groups and basically won the “battle of the books” over who can legally employ the characters (“Disney Claims Victory in Pooh Tussle”) (see Figure 2). The result has been a homogenous image of *Winnie-the-Pooh* in the English-speaking world.

Unlike in the United States, no one group in Russia owned the exclusive right to draw *Winnie-the-Pooh*. In fact, after the Soviet government banned the Shepard-Disney version because Walt Disney was allegedly anti-communist, it commissioned a new version that encouraged Russian illustrators to create a wide variety of original character designs (“Overview of Jurisprudence on the Overlap between Copyright and Trademarks, including New Types of Marks”) (see Figure 3). The result has been a heterogeneous constellation of interpretations of *Winnie-the-Pooh* in Russian.

The “translation” of the illustrations created a tradeoff between appropriateness for the original text and appropriateness for the target culture. On the one hand, English illustrator Shepard had access to A.A. Milne, Christopher Robin, and the original stuffed animals, so his illustrations were probably the most faithful to Milne’s original vision. Additionally, Shepard’s illustrations complemented the playful humor of Pooh in the context of the original text (see Figure 4). For example, in the scene in which Pooh climbs the bee tree, the text is positioned vertically next to the picture of Pooh climbing the tree. The height of the column of text
highlights the height of Pooh’s honey tree. The interplay between the text and the illustrations contributed to the cult-like status of Winnie-the-Pooh in the English-speaking culture.

On the other hand, the Russian illustrations complemented Winnie-the-Pooh in the context of the target culture. Arguably, the Russian illustrations reflect the cultural appropriation of an English-speaking icon into Russian culture (see Figure 5). For example, because the bear is often considered the symbol of Russia, most Russians have a clear conception of how a bear should look. Although Pooh has been drawn by various and sundry Russian artists since the turn of the century, most of his incarnations still look surprisingly similar to Misha, the bear who served as the mascot of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Specifically, the Russian bears have darker coats, larger heads, shorter limbs, and rounder tummies than their English-speaking counterparts (see Figure 6). Additionally, Pooh’s Misha-like character design may be more reflective of Russia’s cultural reality. On a discussion board titled “Russian Pooh,” a informal Pooh fan named Lev Polyakov wrote, “Disney’s Winnie-the-Pooh looks like he ate too much honey (i.e., he’s too sugary), while on the other hand, the Russian Pooh feels like I could talk to him about the war in Iraq, while drinking some vodka. Even though I don’t drink, I would much prefer the latter.” The cultural relevance of “Russian Pooh” helps explain why Winnie-the-Pooh was equally popular in Russia: in 1985 alone, Vinni-Pukh sold over 3.5 million copies (Pooh Properties Trust).

In translations of children’s literature, the balance between conveying the meaning of individual words and the message of the work as a whole often tips toward communicating the spirit and style of the author rather than the word for word translation of the text. Shavit alleges that the literary community does not apply the same standards of accuracy to translations of children’s literature because children’s literature is at the bottom of the literary food chain.
However, Oittinen argues that the literary community benefits when children’s books are translated in accordance with the cultural context of the reading audience. I argue that we should expand our criteria for evaluating translations to include not only textual accuracy but cultural relevance. To paraphrase Eva-Maria Metcalf, a critic of Oittinen, we should ask not only “Is this translation accurate?” but “Is this translation appropriate for the message of the author in the context of the age, society, and culture of the audience?” (293).
Figure 1: Shepard’s Pooh

Christopher Robin’s Stuffed Animals

Shepard’s Illustrations

Figure 2: Disney’s Pooh-Opoly

Disney’s Animated Pooh

Disney’s Creepy CG Pooh

Figure 3: The Many Faces of Russian Pooh

Figure 4: The Battle of the Poohs

Russian Pooh

English Pooh
Figure 5: Cultural Appropriation in Action

Disney Pooh Nesting Dolls

Figure 6: Shepard’s Pooh

Misha, Moscow Olympics Mascot

Russian Pooh
Works Cited


Shavit, Zahar. “Translation of Children’s Literature as a Function of its Position in the Literary

<http://www.jstor.org/view/03335372/ap020008/02a00160/0>.

**Pictures**


