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## The Adventures of “Alice” and Lewis Carroll in Russia

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### Abstract

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This article deals with Lewis Carroll's phenomenon in Russia, and the immortal adventures of his famous book “Alice in Wonderland.” In this country, these phenomenons began in 1879 when the book was translated by an unknown author as “Sonya in the country of Divo” (*divo* means *wonder* or *miracle*).

The main aim of this article is to highlight and analyze the reasons for the popularity of the three well-respected Russian translations of Lewis Carroll's “Alice's Adventures in Wonderland” and their main features. I would be focusing on sophisticated Vladimir Nabokov's (1923), anglicized Nina Demurova's (1965) and retold Boris Zakhoder's (1972) versions. Each of them is unique in its own peculiar way.

If the two translations (Demurova's and Zakhoder's) enjoyed tremendous popularity in the Soviet Union and later in Russia with both children and adults readers, the Russian readership came to know Nabokov's work only after reconstruction, and for this reason it is perceived in an ambivalent way by numerous admirers of “Alice in Wonderland.” On the one hand, it is greatly praised, and on the other hand, criticized.

The three translators generated their own models while portraying the main heroine. It is common knowledge that Nabokov made her a Russian girl under the name of Anya. N. M. Demurova preserved her “Englishness”, conveying a young Victorian's mentality. Boris Zakhoder portrayed a brave, inquisitive and ratiocinating heroine.

© 2016 Published by Future Academy [www.FutureAcademy.org.uk](http://www.FutureAcademy.org.uk)**Keywords:** Lewis Carroll; “Alice in Wonderland”; the original text; transformation; translation; the names of characters; the English context.

### 1. Introduction

Lewis Carroll is known as one of the most discussed children's writers (Hunt, 2001). A lot has been written about his untranslatability, due to his intricate linguistic dexterity, and the history of introduction his writing to Russian readers, both children and adults (Modestov, 2006; Nikolajeva, 2015; Demurova, 2003; Hunt, 2004 etc.). In Russia the three well-respected translators: Vladimir Nabokov, Nina Demurova and Boris Zakhoder made Alice one of the most favourite heroines of Russian readership.



It is well known that in this country “Alice” started her adventures in 1879 as “Sonya v stranje Divo”, which, in fact, conveys the same meaning as the English title, but the girl has a different name. Nowadays this translation is known to few admirers of Carroll, mostly academics.

## 2. Purpose of the study

Discussion the impact of Vladimir Nabokov, Nina Demurova and Boris Zakhoder on the reception of Carroll’s favorite character by the Russian public. Furthermore, it might appear useful for educational reasons to concentrate on the character and place names, as well as reality - words and expressions for *culture-specific material elements* used by the translators in question.

The solving of this problem implies using a historical-comparative method for analyzing the same samples from Carroll’s original text in each translation. Nabokov, Demurova and Zakhoder approached their task differently and portrayed Carroll's Alice in different guises.

Nabokov made her purely Russian (he even changed her name for Anya), Demurova preserved a lovely Victorian girl, and Zakhoder produced an active and charming young thinker. Each version is creative, full of Russian idioms, sophisticated puns, parodies and amusing epithets chosen for substituting Carroll’s exquisite language. The three different approaches demonstrated a deeply caring attitude of the translators to Carroll's masterpiece.

Vladimir Nabokov plunged Alice into the atmosphere of Russian lifestyle. Being an incomparable stylist and master of words in the prime of his life, at twenty-four he was at the very commencement of his literary career and a beginning translator. Probably, because of that his “Anya v Stranye Chudes” had plenty of merits as well as drawbacks. Perhaps those drawbacks should not be seen as disadvantages demonstrating his lack of precision in translation, but regarded as examples of dramatic changes in the Russian language since 1923.

No wonder his version of “Alice in Wonderland” was perceived differently by Carroll’s admirers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; some considered it impeccable while others refused to accept his choice of words (one can read about it in different online forums discussing the problem).

However, Nabokov’s translation was highly praised by his publisher (1976) who hailed it as the best Russian translation of the book. Young Nabokov who was born in St. Petersburg and educated there and in Cambridge, produced his version as the first substantial work in 1923 under the pseudonym Sirin and was reputed to receive \$5 for it. As it has been mentioned, today not every Russian reader will agree with the publisher and find Nabokov’s version successful. Yet the more it is read, the more it is evident that it was certainly quite adequate, especially the characters’ dialogues although there are a lot of examples of word-for-word translation: *a little shriek – malen’ki vsvizg; ‘One side will make you grow taller...’ – ‘Odin kraj zastavit tebjia vyrasti’; ‘I can’t remember things...’ – ‘Ya ne mogu vspomnit’veshi’* etc. (1976). Still, these dialogues are lively and the representation of each character is unique, to say nothing of the transformation of poetry – Nabokov’s parodies of Pushkin and Lermontov’s works are full of humour and elegance.

Having omitted the introductory poem “All in the Golden Afternoon,” Nabokov preserved the rest of Carroll’s text and completed it in quite an accurate and imaginative way. However, it is quite

difficult to agree with the publisher that the title of the first chapter of *Ayna* translated by Nabokov as “A Dive into the Rabbit – Hole” (“Nyrok v kroloch’u norku”) sounds quite funny in Russian. The publisher praises the poetical fancies of two pairs of homonyms: 1) *nyrok* which in Russian denotes a diving duck with a reddish –brown head (a pochard) and a diminutive form for the word ‘dive’ (going deep under water); and 2) *norka* implying a small animal with highly valued fur (a mink) and a little hole ( an animal’s burrow) .When saying them aloud both words have a poetical colour as Nabokov uses alliteration : *nyrok-norka* interchanging the consonants [n] and [r]. But ducks do not live in holes – they live in nests. And Anya didn’t dive into the rabbit hole, she fell into it. So, to some readers the humorous effect is lost.

Living in Germany Nabokov probably had nostalgic feelings for pre-revolutionary Russia and gave a reader purely Russian images for many Carroll’s words and expressions.

Zakhoder’s version addresses, first of all, children and has an educational value. He writes an introduction to his translation calling it *Chapter Whatever* (in Russian *Nikakaya*).

Zakhoder wrote that he would not have called the book “Alice in Wonderland”. In his opinion the title does not help to understand that the book tells readers about a small but a very clever girl, and her adventures would be unusual. There would be no spies, Indians, pirates, battles or shipwrecks (Zakhoder).

Boris Zakhoder retold the text brilliantly but in his own way , however, the reading public welcomed his translation as an authentic Russian book. As a result, his translation of “Alice” enjoyed more popularity than some of the Soviet children’s books of the same period. Zakhoder’s text sounds more emotional as he adds quite a few expressive exclamations making Carroll’s characters sound more expressive than in the original version: e.g. Zakhoder’s easily offended mouse doesn’t want to cast pearls before swine, using a quotation from the Bible (from Mathew).

According to Nina Demurova, “Alice” was considered untranslatable. She defined the text as an extended metaphor and did not intend to emasculate it by using boring and feeble Russian equivalents. At first she decided to drop the idea of translating the famous book, but having looked through the existing translations, accepted the challenge.

According to Demurova, one can highlight two general approaches to the interpreting of “Alice”. The first is to bring the English text as close to a Russian child reader as possible by changing English actuals (names, notions, parody poems) by Russian ones as we can see it in Boris Zakhoder’s and Nabokov’s versions. The second approach is to reproduce the text in a thoughtless, illiterate way (Demurova, 1970). The second approach was typical of many Russian translations of Alice in the 19 c. (after 1879).

Demurova wanted to preserve and convey two addresses (to grown-ups and children), giving food for thought to adults and making the text sound profound (for scientists) and ingenuous (for children). For educational purposes it appears relevant to analyze a few samples of Russian equivalents the three translators use for describing *culture-specific material elements*.

Nina Demurova omits the name of the flower *daisy* (in Russian *margaritka*) as it is not typical for Russian children to make daisy chains using little *margaritkas* with yellow discs and small white or pink petals. Nabokov uses the word *romashka* which means an *ox-eye daisy* and is widely known in

Russia. It is also possible that despite his willingness to portray Alice as a little Russian girl, being a young man he was not very much interested in *daisy chains* and for this reason gives a peculiar Russian colour to the word *chain*: instead of describing *a string of daisies* that have been joined together by their stems to make a necklace, he gives the variant *tsep'* which in Russian means a series of linked metal rings. Yet, his admirers might regard it as Nabokovian style.

Zakhoder in his turn uses the expression *a daisy chain* (in the English meaning of the expression with the Russian name *margaritkas*) as for him the flower itself does not seem important.

The next example is the word *hedge* as the rabbit pops down a large rabbit hole under the hedge.

In Nabokov's version the rabbit disappears under *the dog rose bush* (in Russian *shipovnik*) which is a delicately scented Eurasian wild rose with pink or white flowers, which commonly grows in hedgerows. Thus, Nabokov omits the word *hedge* itself (in Russian *izgorod'*). Dog rose bushes are typical of Russian cottages. Zakhoder says that the Rabbit disappears under *the thorny prick-hedge* (in Russian *koluchaya izgorod'*) and Demurova also chooses the word *izgorod'*. For a Russian reader *izgorod'* means *fence* which is made of stone, wood or wire, but not formed of bushes or shrubs.

While falling Alice can see a jar labeled ORANGE MARMALADE.

Demurova gives the variant *orange jam*, so does Zakhoder, while in Nabokov's version it is *strawberry jam* as it was more familiar to Russians. All the three translators avoid the word *marmalade* as in Russian it doesn't mean a *citrus fruit preserve* but *fruit jellies* very popular with Russian kids.

The translators use different measures of length: Nabokov uses *versty*, an old Russian word (1.1 km), Demurova – miles and Zakhoder – kilometres.

In the chapter "A Mad Tea – Party", the March Hare offers Alice some wine which is preserved in Demurova's and Nabokov's translations as wine in England was often given to children with water to avoid infection in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Zakhoder's version the Hare offers Alice some cake as children should not be given wine which also seems justifiable.

Demurova and Nabokov use the word Christmas when Alice wants to give her feet a new pair of boots for Christmas, while Zakhoder suggests the word *elka* – *a New Year's tree* (as in Soviet times most children got presents for the New Year).

For Alice's boots Nabokov chooses the word high boots as Russian winters are cold.

Translation of children's literature requires a particular attention to literary images and is supposed to consider the age group of the target audience. Besides, it is acceptable to produce a retold text or the translation with the elements of retelling. "The funniest" and "the cleverest" Alice caused her translators a lot of problems as the main character in the book is the English language. It is based on paradoxes, word play, riddles and the opposition of fantasy and children's logic (Modestov, 2006).

### 3. Conclusions

1. Due to Nabokov's, Demurova's and Zakhoder's translations Russian children had access to Carroll's masterpiece which contributed greatly to enhancing their cognition and literary outlook.

2. The translators demonstrated deep penetration into Carroll's creative intention which was not to instruct but to amuse children in an educational mode.

3. As Russian explorers maintain, the Word may become a wonder and at the same time a hollow sound that is why it should be treated with great care ( Gal, 2001; Modestov, 2006).

### Recommendations

1. The translator should perceive the initial creative idea of the author, bearing in mind the specific socio-cultural, linguistic and stylistic features of a foreign text.

2. A novice translator should do his/her best to transform a certain text with as few losses as possible without making it boring or emasculated.

3. While translating a book of fiction for a certain age group translators should consider the peculiarities of the latter.

4. When translating a contemporary book it is advisable to consult with the author of the original.

5. The translator should always respect the author and think of avoiding various mistakes by developing careful and responsible attitude towards the original.

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