

## By Any Other Name Would It Smell Just as Sweet? Or How to Learn to Translate Iconic Lexis

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### Abstract

The authors' research into translation strategies from English into Russian unveils a sad fact: only 40% of expressive iconic lexis is represented in the translation by similar means. The result is a decrease in the quality, adequacy, and completeness of the translated text. To overcome the deficiency in the stylistic value of the translation, we suggest that basic iconicity theory be taught at universities as part of the General / Literary Translation course. To this end, we developed a 5 step algorithm, comprising such unique methods as phonosemantic compensation and simulation, to be used along with traditional translation techniques.

**Keywords:** literary translation, iconic lexis, phonosemantics, expressivity, translation transformations

A famous adage from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" states that 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet', implying that the form of a word has nothing to do with its meaning. The great dramatist may be surmised to share his views on the conventionality of language units with the outstanding 20<sup>th</sup> century linguist F. de Saussure who claimed that the two sides of the language sign are not related (Saussure, 1995). Other linguists and philosophers disagree and supply numerous examples to prove their point: lots of words in natural languages are icons or signs where the signifier mirrors at least some properties of the signified [Peirce 1994; Воронин 1982]. If this is so, it has to be admitted that by some other name, a rose may not only smell less

sweet, it may stink. This means translators are to be aware of the iconic properties of the text they are working on and to learn how to deal with iconic lexis.

The modern approach to literary translation implies preserving the communicative effect of the original (L1) in its translation (L2), along with all its expressive means [Бреус 2001; Федоров 1983]. The latter embrace those of phonetic nature: alliterations, assonances, sound imitations and symbolisms [Беседина 2019; Якобсон 1985], as expressivity is closely connected to the sound properties of the text [Fudge 1970]. For these reasons, without the transfer of the specific sound fabric of L1 to L2, the translation cannot be considered complete or adequate.

When looking into iconic vocabulary translating strategies, the authors used a corpus of parallel L1 / L2 samples from modern British and American books (about 4000 pages) and their translations into Russian [Ворошнина 2020]. About 600 English lexical items were gathered constituting over 5000 word usages, as well as their Russian counterparts. Phonosemantic analysis of the material was conducted based on theories of language iconicity and phonosemantics; the iconic status of the lexis was verified with the help of iconic vocabularies [Flaxman 2016; Шляхова 2004].

The comparison of English original and Russian translated texts reveals that only 40% of iconic lexis is represented in the translation by similar means. In 13% of cases the type of iconicity is preserved, as in (1): ... *some coffee **slops** onto the floor* (S. Kinsella. Confessions of a Shopaholic) / ... *бурая жидкость **выплескивается** на пол* (trans. А. Корчагин). Here two verbs from two different languages and not etymologically related have very similar sound forms (sharing 3 consonants and 1 vowel of practically the same articulation though in a different order: /slop/, /pl'osk/) and semantics: 'spilling liquid producing a specific noise'; both can be classified as instants-continuants [Воронин 1982].

Another 28% of examples transform the original iconicity into different phonosemantic metaphors. Thus, English and Russian words belong to different phonosemantic classes, e.g.: (2) ... *Winnie became a ballerina, **twirling and swirling and twiddling and twaddling** on her tippy-toe tootsies until...**crash!*** (L. Owen. *Winnie on Patrol*) / ... *Винни превратилась в балерину и **закрутилась, закружилась, завертелась, завращалась** на цыпочках-носочках, но... **Бабах!*** (trans. Т. Славникова).

Sadly, cases of complete loss of the iconic character of expressive lexis in translation constitute about 60% of the corpus. (3) demonstrates the noise continuant *shuffle* rendered with a neutral word: *On the sidewalk that bordered Hemlock, he **shuffled** along, going nowhere* (J. Grisham. *Skipping Christmas*) / ... *он **вышел** из дома на Хемлок-стрит и бесцельно **двинулся** вперед по тротуару* (trans. Н.В. Рейн). The reasons for iconicity loss in translation may be manifold, but as about 13% of the original iconic lexis occurrences are simply missing in the translations analyzed, e.g.: (4) *Finally, after much **kicking and rumpling** of sheets, sleep started to take over* (B. Jacques. *Redwall*) / *Наконец, он начал **засыпать*** (trans. А. Александрова), it could be surmised that rendering phonosemantic features into L2 presents a professional problem. To help resolve it, a linguo-didactic roadmap for translators has been developed.

To analyze the iconic features of an original literary work, a prospective translator has to master at least the basics of iconicity theory and phonosemantics [Воронин 1982]. We propose that these be incorporated into the General / Literary Translation course at the university level. Awareness of the iconic means of a book, alongside its genre peculiarities, is crucial for a quality translation.

After identifying iconic items in the L1 text, a search for similar phonetically motivated words in L2 can be made with the

help of dictionaries of expressive vocabulary, slang, dialects, or synonyms. To heighten the phonosemantic component in the Russian representation of *shuffle* in (3), the translator may come up with a wide choice of words: *шаркать, ковылять, шлепать, брести, чопать, влачиться*, etc. Of these, *плестись* and *тащиться* seem to fit the sound image of the original word better than others, all 3 verbs being noise continuants with fricatives /ʃ, f, sʲ, ʃʲ/. It should be emphasized that the process has to be accompanied by stylistic assessment, as Russian expressive lexis tends to be of low register.

Translating word for word, without any lexical or grammatical transformations, is next to impossible [Комиссаров 1973], but the translator may at least choose a word of the same iconic value [Шамина 2021], e.g., a verbal instead of the predicate form as in: (5) *I... **tapped** down the steps, and hurried away* (T. Chevalier. Remarkable Creatures) / *Я... спустилась, **постукивая** каблуками, с крыльца и поспешила прочь* (trans. Г. Яропольский). This way, the iconic value of (4) can be restored, if Russian verbals are used instead of English gerunds: *Наконец, **побрыкавшись** и **поворочившись**, он начал засыпать*.

Phonosemantic compensation involves the use of iconic elements elsewhere if a direct translation of a L1 word is not iconic in L2. In (6) the verb *thunder* is rendered by a verbal phrase in which the noun gives the reader the idea of noisy movement: *As he **thundered** down the family staircase, she listened* (J. Fellowes. Snobs) / *Она прислушивалась, как он **с грохотом сбегает** по лестнице* (trans. П. Ю. Щербатюк).

Phonosemantic simulation allows the translator to keep the sound associations of L1 in L2 at the level of a sentence or paragraph by increasing the frequency of relevant sounds in the context. (7) demonstrates the sounds of a non-iconic Russian prefix mirror iconically relevant sounds of the English verb: *Draco Mal-*

foy was **strutting** (/str/) around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy (J. K. Rowling. Harry Potter and Chamber of Secrets). / Драко Малфой **расхаживал** (/ras/) по школе с таким заносчивым видом, словно его только что сделали старостой (trans. Е. Петрова).

The observations above deepen the conviction that a complete and adequate literary translation is only possible when the iconic features of the original are preserved. The algorithm designed by the authors should enable future translators to preserve the expressive iconic character of the original composition to the fullest.

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