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**VERBAL FORMS IN PUSHKIN'S VERSES:  
EXPRESSION OF TENSES IN THE ORIGINALS  
AND IN TRANSLATIONS**

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**Abstract.** *The author of this paper discusses the expression of tenses in poetic texts given in Russian and Serbian languages. The translation of two Pushkin's poems has been used to show the relation of a Serbian translator towards the original in the domain of expressing tenses through various verbal forms.*

Aleksandr Sergejevich Pushkin had made the first steps toward Serbian literature: the writer of great reputation in Russian and world literature did not wait for the Serbian people to recover from the oppression that had lasted for several centuries and to develop the literature and culture through which his work could have been presented to a Serbian reader. Namely, way back in 1820, Pushkin composed a poem "To the Daughter of Karageorge". Not only that he was collecting Serbian folk songs, but in 1835 he published a collection of poems with Serbian themes "The Poems of Western Slavs". Dostoyevsky stated for these poems that "they represent pearls in Pushkin's string of pearls, diamonds among his gems"<sup>1</sup>.

However, Serbian culture has not remained indebted to Aleksandr Sergejevich Pushkin; today, two centuries after his birth, Pushkin's works are not only the readings for writers and literary historians; hardly any of the educated Serbs had never read major works of Pushkin.

Pushkin's works have been, and still are, translated in our country. Every generation of writers are testing themselves in translating Pushkin's works, among other things.

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<sup>1</sup> According to: Luka Šekara, *Srpska narodna pjesma u ruskoj književnosti 19. vijeka*, Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of Srpska, 2000, p. 54. Reader can get here a detailed information about the interest of A. S. Pushkin for Serbian folk songs.

Although the languages are related as Slavic, it is not easy to translate poetry from one to another. Translation is not only limited by different characteristics of Russian and Serbian verse, as each language includes all of its characteristics into its verse. Moreover, "each time we have to put exceptional effort into understanding the level of the complex system of a natural language in which relations are moved and changed according to the demands of a specific type of literary texts"<sup>2</sup>. In this respect, it is absolutely understandable that the demands are the strictest with poetic literary texts.

The linguistic devices necessary for creating a literary work include, of course, the tenses that indicate the time of actions or state of being - and verbal forms are principal in that. With regard to the forms of verbs, the Russian and the Serbian languages differ a lot. While Serbian operates with a very rich verbal system for the time references, this system is now reduced to practically three verbal forms in Russian. The most interesting aspect of this may be observed if we compare the manners of indicating the past: there is only one preterit verbal form in the Russian language, while the Serbian language has preserved four of them - the perfect, pluperfect, aorist and imperfect tense. All of the four forms are in use in the modern literature. In this paper, I have tried to show the way Serbian translators treat Russian originals regarding the usage of verbal forms in indicating the time of actions, and I analyzed the translations of two Pushkin's poems as the examples thereof.

The greatest congruity of the two languages exists in the indication of the present. Both languages express the present in the same manner, by applying the forms of the present tense. Also, the two languages are similar in constituting differences between referential and non-referential present actions<sup>3</sup>. This can be illustrated in the poem "Winter Evening" by A. Pushkin, the first of the two poems that shall be observed herein. Namely, feelings, motives and pictures are often attributed to the present in poetry, and the mentioned poem has the same characteristic. We shall illustrate it through the first stanza of the poem:

Буря мглою небо кроет,  
Вихри снежные крутя;  
То, как зверь, она завоет,  
То заплачет, как дитя,  
То по кровле обветшалай  
Вдруг соломой зашумит,  
То, как путник запоздалый,  
К нам в окошко застучит.

Our famous professor of Russian and literary translator Miodrag Sibinović interpreted these verses like this:

Буря небо омотава,  
Вихорове снажне плете.  
Час ко звери заурлава,  
Час заплаче као дете,

<sup>2</sup> Novica Petković, *Pesnički jezik*, Literature and Language XXXI/3-4, Belgrade 1984, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> The manners of expressing referential and non-referential present actions in the Serbian language may be observed in more details in the book: S. Tanasić, *Prezent u savremenom srpskom jeziku*, The SANU Institute for the Serbian Language, Belgrade, 1996.

Час по крововима белим  
 Ненадано зашушти сламом,  
 Час ко путник окаснели  
 У наш прозор куцне само.<sup>4</sup>

The correspondence between the original and the translation with regard to the choice of tenses may be observed at the first glance. In the first two lines of the original, a referential present action is expressed through a form of imperfective present tense. The same is applied in the translation. Further in the original, there are the verses containing the form of perfective present tense used to express non-referential present actions: *завоеет, заплачет, зашумит, застучит*<sup>5</sup>. Being that in the Serbian language present non-referential actions are expressed both by perfective and imperfective present tenses, it was possible to retain the identical form in the translation. However, the translator changed the verbal aspect in the first line: he used the imperfective present form *заурлава*, which may also express non-referential actions, the actions that recur by certain laws. In this case, of course, the applied verbal form expresses a repeating action. This way, nothing essentially changed in the description; the translator may have achieved something in his own expression: made a gradual transit from the referential to the non-referential present was achieved by the imperfective aspect, applied to the present tense verbs that were used in the previous two lines. Thus, there is the imperfective aspect in this verse (similar to the previous two verses, where referential present actions are expressed), but it expresses a non-referential present action, like in the verses that follow.

It is important to mention here that the first part of the last stanza of this Pushkin's poem is constructed by exact repeating of the first four verses of the first stanza, with identical verbal forms, both in the original text and in the translation as well.

The final four lines of the stanza next to the last one are of particular interest for the topic of this paper. They are as follows:

Спой мне песню, как синица  
 Тихо за морем жила;  
 Спой мне песню, как девица  
 За водой поутру шла.

In Miodrag Sibinović's translation, the verses are worded like this:

Певај, како сеничица  
 Живи иза сињег мора  
 Певај, како девојчица  
 Носи воду са извора.

The only significant difference between the original and the translation may easily be observed. In the original, a preterit verbal form was expressed two times, and both times it was translated by a present tense, with the meaning of a present action. This proves that a translation does not have to stick firmly to the original with regard to certain linguistic

<sup>4</sup> The original and translated verses are cited according to the book *Dva veka Puškina. Pesme i bajke*, edited and translated by Miodrag Sibinović, Interpres, Belgrade, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> It is of no importance here that this is the only form by which future perfective actions are expressed in the Russian language

means. A translator uses the expressive possibilities of his/her own language in order to make a successful translation, while the original text does not have to be copied in every detail.

The difference between Russian and Serbian is much greater in expressing the past. Its origin lays in the above mentioned fact that the Serbian language contains four verbal forms: perfect, pluperfect, aorist and imperfect tense – compared to the perfect tense in the Russian language. There is only one verbal form in Russian. In certain circumstances, though, it is supported by perfective and imperfective forms of the present tense, just like in the Serbian language. The verbal aspect is, therefore, given a very important role in this: the imperfective aspect is applied to stop the action, while the action is started and gains in dynamics by the perfective aspect. In other words: "it results in the opposition to the perfective action (...) and the imperfective action (...) "<sup>6</sup> ... as if the perfect form of the imperfective verbs connotes 'the present in the past' by its compositional meaning"<sup>7</sup>.

All of the facts about the perfect tense of imperfective and perfective verbs are familiar to the Serbian language, as well. However, the very fact that the Serbian language includes greater number of preterit verbal forms confirms that in this respect bigger differences may be expected in Serbian with regard to Russian, particularly in the translation. This is illustrated herein by the translation of the poem that Pushkin wrote under the title "К\*\*\*". Miodrag Sibinović published this poem as "*Теби\*\*\**". I shall cite the first three stanzas of the poem.

Я помню чудное мгновенье:  
 Предо мной *явилась* ты,  
 Как мимолетное виденье,  
 Как гений чистой красоты.  
 В томленьях грусти безнадежной  
 В тревогах шумной суеты,  
*Звучал* мне долго голос нежный,  
 И *снились* милые черты.  
*Шли* годы. Бурь порыв мятежный  
*Рассеял* прежние мечты,  
 И я *забыл* твой голос нежный,  
 Твои небесные черты.

Miodrag Sibinović translated these verses like this:

Ја памтим дивно магновење:  
 Преда мном *синула си* ти,  
 Ко неко кратко привиђење,  
 Лепоте генијални лик.  
 У грчу чежње безнадежне,  
 Кроз људског неспокоја глас,  
*Одзвањаху* ми речи нежне  
 И дуго *сањах* љупки стас.  
*Прођоше* лета. Вихор снажни  
*Распрши* чари снова тих,

<sup>6</sup> B. A. Uspensky, *Poetika kompozicije. Semiotika ikone*, Nolit, Belgrade 1979, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

*Не памтим више речи нежне,  
Нити твој небески лик.*

It can be seen that the translator used three preterit forms according to the form of the perfect tense in the Russian language: the perfect tense, the aorist and the imperfect tense. There was no need for the pluperfect tense here, as its usage is specific – to express a past action that took place (or, rarely: was taking place) before another action in the past. In the first stanza, the Russian perfect tense was translated as a form of the perfect tense, as well; the same verbal aspect – perfective – was applied, also. In the second stanza, the imperfective perfect form appears twice in the original. This form was not used in the translation: the first perfect tense was translated as the imperfect tense form, *одзвањаху* – and in the other case, the verb *сањати* was given in a form that may have the meaning of both imperfect tense and aorist. The original third stanza contains three verbs in the perfect tense form: the first was translated as the imperfective, and the other two as the perfective verbs. The translator made significant exceptions here. He used the aorist instead of the imperfective perfect tense in the first case. In the second case, again, he used the aorist in the place of the perfective perfect tense. The third perfect of a perfective verb was translated as an imperfective present form: changing from the past into the present. It does not represent any great turnabout whatsoever, regarding the linguistics: it is well known that the perfective perfect tense is characterized by its resultants: after the action is performed, the state it caused remains. Because of that, it was possible for the translator to apply a present tense form to emphasize the resulting state.

Of course, a greater choice of linguistic means offers much more possibilities to apply them in different ways. This implies that the choice applied to this translation was not the only one possible. Works of some other translators that I have consulted may represent a proof to this, but these translations were not taken into account here, due to the limited space.

. . .

This brief analysis leads to the conclusion that Russian and Serbian reflect their specific manners of expressing time by means of verbal forms in poetry, as well. These specific traits are also reflected in the comparison of the translations of two Pushkin's poems with their originals. However, these characteristics do not represent either advantages or disadvantages that could prevent us from reading good Serbian translations of Pushkin's poetry.

## **GLAGOLSKI OBLICI U PUŠKINOVIM PJESMAMA: ISKAZIVANJE VREMENA U ORIGINALU I PREVODU**

**Sreto Tanasić**

*U ovome radu autor se bavi iskazivanjem vremena u poetskom tekstu ruskoga i srpskog jezika. Na primjeru prevoda dviju Puškinovih pjesama pokazuje se kako se srpski prevodilac odnosi prema originalu upravo u pogledu iskazivanja vremena glagolskim oblicima.*