Translating Poetry: Russian Translations of Georgian Poetry in the 20 Century

Poezijos vertimai: XX amžiaus gruzinų poezija rusų kalba

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Annotation

Translators of literary texts play the role of a bridge between the two nations. Literary translation remains the process of creativity that totally depends on the translator’s talent and erudition. Literary translation has a worthy role as a bridge for transferring values between different cultures. A poem can express complex or deep feelings. Its shape does not limit the writer. Russian translators of Georgian poetry have different attitudes to the original. Some of them show only the poem’s mood and try to reproduce its musical or euphonic structure; some translations that attain maximum closeness to the original are interesting. The article pays special attention to the translations of Galaktion Tabidze’s poetry by the famous Russian poet Bella Akhmadulina and her attitude to the original. The article also focuses on the Russian poet and translator, Vladimir Poletaev, and his translations of Georgian literary works as well as the attitude of the young translator to the translation process. Translators of poetry meet too many contradictions, but their work helps to break cultural boundaries, expand relations and build cultural bridges with various countries, with people of different cultures and religions.

Keywords: Georgian poetry, intercultural communication, Russian translations, translators, twentieth century.

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Translation has to be treated as one of the oldest forms of man’s intellectual activity. The most important genre of it is literary translation. Translators of literary texts play the role of a bridge between the two nations and participate in intercultural communication. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that the reader of the literary text can take in adequate information in his native language about a different culture.

The idea of standardization has not touched literary translation, because the process of individual creativity totally depends on the translator’s talent and erudition. Despite the fact that today many people speak a foreign language or read fiction in the original, interest in the quality of literary translation is not decreasing. Readers can evaluate translation’s quality and the adequacy of the translated literary text and themselves compare it to the source text. From this point of view, poetic translation seems quite a peculiar phenomenon. Naturally, the translator of poetry should avoid both a “calque” of the original, that is, an unreasonable attachment to the text as well as too much freedom in relation to the source text and interpretation. It is necessary to find some kind of middle ground that is often difficult to reach. As American scholar, Stephen Jones, notes,

Translation is never satisfactory. The colour, nuances and rhythms of any language are too delicate to survive transformation. Something is always lost. Poetry is particularly unforgiving in a translator’s hands. The fine movement and subtle rhythm of a poem can become like amateurish country dance. (Jones, 1994, 25)

The translator requires deep insight into the artistic world of the author of the source text; he needs great skill in recreating the target text as closely to the original text as possible. In Givi Gachechiladze’s view, poetic translation has the same methodological principles as the prose one, but this genre still has its own peculiarities. “The most important
and essential feature of poetic translation in comparison with prose
translation is its conventional free character: strict verse composition and
conventional character do not allow for finding a direct correspondence … Not only direct linguistic correspondences, but even direct metric
correspondences are impossible, though the main feature of poetry as an
organized form of speech, is expressed only in metre…” (Gachechiladze,
1966, 310)

Poetic translation is accompanied by specific difficulties. Translation
of lyrics requires translating sensations, rhythm, intonation, even nuances.
Sometimes the translator may even change words in order to maintain the
music of the poem, its tonality. Many translators don’t attempt to follow
the original’s rhythm or metre, rather they concentrate on the feel of the
poem, on its delicate impressionism. As Giorgi Tsibakhashvili puts it,

If we recognize that the translator’s main task is to achieve an ideal
equivalence between the source text and the target text, then the only duty of
the translator will be not to attempt to show his own self, but to attain such
closeness between the target text and the source text so that the translation
gives the reader an impression that the author is speaking directly to the
reader, without any intermediate translator. (Tsibakhashvili, 2000, 195)

Poletaev’s Translations

In 1983, Vladimir Poletaev’s (1951-1971) book The Sky Joins the
Earth was published in Tbilisi. This is the only book published after his
death. The book includes examples of his original poetry, translations,
notes, and essays. In his literary heritage, the greatest place is occupied by
the translation of samples of Georgian literature. The object of our interest
is translations of Georgian literary works and the young translator’s
attitude to the translation process. The schoolboy Poletaev wrote a letter
to his friend and discussed his future plans. He prepared for entering
Maxim Gorky Literature Institute and chose the Georgian language from
several languages taught at the Department of Translation:

I will study the Georgian language and the history of the Georgian culture and
Georgia. The latter – ancient and modern – is the richest in the whole world.
(I do not exaggerate.) Georgian culture, which is contemporaneous with
Greek and Roman, deserves deep and serious study. A hard and an interesting
work is awaiting me.” (Poletaev, 1983, 110)
Actually, a translator, who studies the language of another culture, becomes a researcher of the latter. Poletaev’s sense of purpose and determination regarding the major “line” of his work are rarely encountered at his age. The few years of his life vividly depict the fact that he was loyal to his goal. The greatest part of Poletaev’s translated works was represented by Georgian poetry. He translated N. Baratashvili’s “Merani,” G. Orbeliani’s “To Aragvi,” and other poems written by G. Tabidze, I. Grishashvili, G. Leonidze, S. Chikovani, O. Chelidze, T. Chiladze, A. Sulakauri, E. Kviatashvili and M. Kakhidze. Before starting the process of translation, Poletaev studied the original thoroughly. This fact was indicated by his remarks and notes made on the working sheets or diaries. Poletaev was not ashamed of “his imitative translations, because he was studying.” (111) He interpreted with a special attitude, a special respect, towards the original and towards his predecessor translators. Poletaev admitted, that “being a pupil of these teachers was very difficult.” (Ibid.) For him the peak of a literary translation was Bunin’s interpretation of “A Song about Haivata,” while a strong impression of childhood was connected with Roland’s Song, interpreted by Sergei Bobrov. Poletaev’s remarks about the process of interpretation make the assessment of his translations easier.

Poletaev searched for an appropriate standard for translating Tamaz Chiladze’s and Otar Chiladze’s poems. He achieved this goal. As Poletaev notes, “The authors of the original praised me. I feel, that the poems are readable.” (114) It’s worth mentioning that during the assessment of Giorgi Leonidze’s Russian translations, Poletaev drew the following conclusions: “Nikolai Tikhonov’s Leonidze writes with oil – with plentiful shining colors. Pasternak’s translations present refined and transparent colors. It’s a watercolor.” (115)

Poletaev treated I. Grishashvili’s poem “Triolets at Shaitan Market” as a translation-commentary. He transferred only the essence of the poem and did not load it with the vocabulary of the city of the nineteenth century. Are there any untranslateable poems? “There is not a poem, which cannot be translated. It is a lock with an unfitting key.” (126) Poletaev distinguishes a type of a “commercial translation” in which the interpreters prepare interlinear translations. Some of them even believe that the work is ended at this stage, and it’s time for being paid. Such facts usually take place during the interpretation of white poems, when translators choose less dispersed languages with different exotic intonations. (126-127)
A poem can express an entire complex or deep feelings. Its shape does not limit the creator. Even one line of a really poetic persona can express everything that must be uttered. It’s worth mentioning that everything false and meaningless is alien to Poletaev. He believes that a translator and a poet have a spiritual connection: „... И овладев теченьем речи, / Не признавая произвола, / Попробуи, натяни на плечи / Рубаху мертвого Паоло. / Иные морщатся, куда нам, / Но я на измышления эти, / Одним подвигнут Тицианом / И только перед ним в ответе. (30)

Poletaev managed to penetrate deeply into the artistic world of Georgian writers and comprehend it, find the relevant metre for each translated poem because, as he puts it, “translation by means of the metre of the original, its thoughtless transferring to another language, looks like “planting palm trees in the tundra.” (133) Poletaev’s poetry as well as his translations show expressiveness, dynamism and deep poetic imagery. The article presents Poletaev as a translator and emphasizes that he managed to create very unique translations. This collection by a young poet and translator represents a significant and interesting example of intercultural communication.

‘Untranslatable’ Tabidze

The cultural-literary policy of the Soviet Union was fully defined by the course of the domestic policy of the Soviet government and the Communist Party. Soviet ideology tried to get a new cultural phenomenon – Soviet culture on the basis of the merging of national cultures. For the achievement of this goal familiarity with national cultures and literatures and their rapprochement were necessary. The authorities tried to deepen literary relations and what is important they tried to achieve this through practical translation activity. The end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s of the twentieth century were a very fruitful period for the translation of Georgian poetry.

It is extremely difficult to translate the works of the well-known Georgian poet Galaktion Tabidze. They are enriched with poetic images. One of the Russian poets and translators, A. Mezhirov, wrote the following lines on Tabidze’s photo: “And the poetry emerged from a blue smoke again. It is untranslatable. It is subordinated only to the native language.” (qtd in Javakhadze, 1987, 103)

However, the public knows about Tabidze’s note of 1955, where the poet writes about the translators of his poetry:
One thing is quite vivid for me: it is frequently said that Galaktion Tabidze’s translators are not good and this conventional saying has acquired a systematic character. This means that someone is greatly interested in non-improvement of translating activities and in scaring off translators – it’s impossible to translate Galaktion Tabidze; he is a genius and a translator must be a genius; an ordinary translator will not reach him and will be necessarily defeated … and a translator is constrained to avoid my works. However, Shota Rustaveli’s “The Man in a Panther’s Skin” has been translated. No one intends to say to the interpreter “how do you dare to work on “The Man in a Panther’s Skin.” If it happened we would not have approximately ten different translations of “The Man in a Panther’s Skin. (qtd. in Javakhadze, 1987, 102)

The characteristic feature of the translators of Galaktion’s poetry is the difficulty of overcoming their subjectivism. The reader who knows the language of the original and the translation and who can differentiate good poems from weak ones, vividly sees the following relations of an original and a translation: 1. an original poem is weak and its translation seems rather good; 2. an original poem is good and its translation is weak; 3. an original and its translation are different poems. Obviously, an ideal interpreter is a person who provides us with an adequate translation, who does not infringe on the content of the original and fully transfers it into the translation, one who does not start translating a weak poem even for the purpose of improving it in a translated version, one who does not create a new poem in the course of the translation. However, we cannot avoid the fact that sometimes the translation of a weak poem creates a wonderful new one. The literature and the language of translation are enriched in this way. An important work is created. During the interpretation of the classical poetry an interpreter must be less subjective. It must be taken into account that “during the process of translation a translator feels a demand to express his/her own opinion and share a fascinating aspect of the original with the reader. All translations must comprise inner-topics, which are paid a contribution by a translator.” (Ginzburg, 1981, 13)

The majority of interpreters perceive each line subjectively and such perception may stipulate the possibility of the creation of a new poem, which greatly differs from the translation. It’s worth mentioning that a word-for-word interpretation must be of the highest level, comprising each word, enriched with commentaries indicating the peculiarities of the text, its mood, the rhythm of a poem, the rhyme and the number of lines.

Georgian readers have special attitudes towards the translations of Galaktion’s poems. A lot of interesting interpretations are among these
translations. The Georgian reader looks for the colour, music and poetic images in the interpretations of Galaktion’s poetry. Poetic images, which are identical to a fresco with the color of a texture influence a reader aesthetically and emotionally. Today we can say that Galaktion’s poetry is distinguishable among the variety of translations. It is a well-known fact that every new interpretation represents new and unknown facets of an original. Accordingly, parallel translations enable us to make comparisons and evaluate the most complete one which approximates to the original. The end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s of the 20th century was a very fruitful period in the translation of the Georgian poems. A special interest was aroused by Galaktion’s poetry. Therefore, Galaktion’s poetry was translated into the Russian language by M. Sinelnikov, P. Antokolski, E. Nikolaevskaja, I. Snegova, B. Akhmadulina, and V. Kvachakhia.

Special attention must be paid to the famous Russian poet, Bela Akhmadulina (1937-2010), who wrote: “I wanted Galaktion to shine in the Russian language as happened in the Georgian one. When I walk in Tbilisi at night, it seems that Galaktion’s ghost accompanies me. I know his poetry. I know which idea is held in a particular poem, but he relies entirely on the music, which cannot be transferred precisely. Don’t ask me to do the impossible. I can only tell the Russian reader that all of these poems sound divine in the Georgian language, and I want the Russians to believe that Galaktion is the greatest poet.“ (qtd. in Margvelashvili, 1973, 123) Here is the translation of the beginning of the poem “Snow”: „If only remember how near the bridge, / The snow showered the elbow womanly / And hold in oneself winter humidity / And such endurance of one’s love.“ (Ibid.)

Galaktion’s poem “Snow” presents an unrepeatable impressionist landscape, where the poet’s snow is violet. Therefore, the word-for-word translation of the beginning of the poem sounds thus: “I love deeply the virginal spread of the violet snow.” The given violet snow creates an unrepeatable poetic image, which is not present in Akhmadulina’s translation. In this case, we deal with an independent poem, which has more expended lines. Akhmadulina’s translation of Galaktion’s well-known lyric, “Mary,” also creates an independent poem. A lot of ideas were expressed regarding this particular poem. However, Akhmadulina’s goal was reached – Russian readers became interested and felt the greatness of Tabidze’s poetry to a certain extent. Generally, we should mention the peculiarity of the language of translation and the traditions of writing a poem. We can even consider the national identity and specificity
which cannot be fully transferred into the language of translation. These facts are vividly seen during the interpretation of a lyrical poem. Tabidze became intimately linked to the rich traditions of Georgian national poetry and raised it to those new heights, which could be comprehended by any civilized nation. However, it was difficult to attain this. Nowadays, most difficult is the transformation of Galaktion’s poetic images. The famous Georgian poet, Lia Sturua, wrote in this respect: “A high thought and a bright logic need an appropriate emotional form, which cannot be reached by professionalism. The ability to create a poetic image is an attraction. Poetry cannot exist without this attraction.” (qtd. in Gulisashvili, 1979, 112) The imaging of a poetic image is presented via different forms. It greatly depends on a poet’s manner of writing, their style and worldview.

Despite the difficulties of the translation of Georgian poetry (in this case, Galaktion’s poetry) we come across very qualified translations, which approximate an original. They play an important role in the development of inter-cultural communication and cultural dialogue. A bridge is erected for the connection of cultural spaces, and this bridge is built by a translator as a result of hard work. Today, during the process of globalization, Galaktion’s words “Poetry above all” sounds like an appeal and the greatest necessity for the translation of the poetry of different countries appears. The creation of new interpretations means new connections, new relationships and the erection of new cultural bridges.

**Conclusions**

The following conclusions can be made:

1. A poetic translation is a very complicated phenomenon, which requires a translator’s hard work and talent. An exemplary image of an interpreter was created by Russian translator Vladimir Poletaev, who studied the Georgian language and thoroughly analyzed Georgian literature, especially, the Russian translations of the works of the Georgian poets of the 20th century. Poletaev’s life was brief. Despite this fact, he left us quite interesting material, comprising translations and interesting ideas about the process of translation. Poletaev treated an original delicately. He tried to maintain the style of the original and major aspects of its content. Poletaev used poetic devices for an organic insertion into the structural “gauge” of the target language and for the creation of a complete poetic cloth.
2. The end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s of the twentieth century was a very fruitful period for the translation of Georgian poems. Special interest was aroused by the poetry of Georgian poet, Galaktion Tabidze. The interpretations of Galaktion’s poetry were diverse. At different periods his poems were translated into the Russian language by M. Sinelnikov, P. Antokolski, E. Nikolaevskaya, I. Snegova, B. Akhmadulina, V. Kvachakhia, and etc. The existence of a parallel translation is very important, because every new interpretation discovers unknown covered layers of an original and new discoveries become vivid. Sometimes a poet goes beyond an original via his/her subjective perception of a word-for-word translation, and as the result of such perception a new poem can be created; for example, Akhmadulina’s translations differ from the original, even the structure may be abrogated. However, Akhmadulina’s goal is reached – Russian readers are interested and feel the greatness of Tabidze’s poetry to a certain extent.

3. Literary and particularly, poetic translations play an important role in the development of inter-cultural communication and cultural dialogue. The translation of a poem is the result of special work and talent. Sometimes such work creates masterpieces, which are deeply interwoven into the target language and their foreign origin seems unimaginable. Therefore, today, during the process of globalization, the greatest attention must be paid to caring about the development of poetic translation and to the reinforcement of the role of the translator – the erector of a cultural bridge.

Literature