

# Auto-translation and Nabokov's autobiography

## Autotradução e a autobiografia de Nabókov

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**Abstract:** This paper tries to explore authors' self-identity in their self-translated autobiographies through a reading of Vladimir Nabokov's self-writing in two languages and presented in three different forms with three different titles. Nabokov's autobiography is a twofold translation on the one hand and three different life-writings on the other hand. The first version was written in English and entitled *Conclusive Evidence*, in which the author seems to be trying to provide evidence for his place in a foreign culture. The second book is the translation of the above-mentioned book, but it was done by the author himself, he approached to this process very creatively, courageously adapting it to a new audience. This Russian version was entitled *Druqie bereqa*, where Nabokov discuss his life in other shores to his compatriots. This book does not include all parts of the first version, and the author chooses suitable information to affect on Russian soul. The third version *Speak Memory* is the most mature form of the author's life writing, who has investigated his identity in two languages, which were almost equal sources to nourish his talent. The article investigates identity searches in Nabokov's autobiographies, contrasting them where relevant.

**Keywords:** Translation; Nabokov; Autobiography; Self-identity; Self-translation.

**Resumo:** Este artigo busca explorar a identidade própria de autores em autobiografias autotraduzidas por meio da leitura de textos de Nabókov em duas línguas, apresentados de três formas diferentes com três títulos diversos. A autobiografia de Nabokov é, por um lado, uma tradução dupla, e, por outro, três *life writings* diferentes. A primeira versão foi escrita em inglês e é intitulada *Conclusive evidence*. Nela, o autor parece estar tentando prover

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evidências para seu lugar em uma cultura estrangeira. O segundo livro é a tradução do supracitado, mas feita pelo próprio autor, que teve uma abordagem muito criativa nesse processo, adaptando-o corajosamente a um novo público. Essa versão russa foi intitulada *Drugie beregá*, e nela Nabókov fala a seus compatriotas sobre sua vida em outras cercanias. O livro não inclui todas as partes da primeira versão, e o autor escolhe informações convenientes para causar efeito sobre o espírito russo. A terceira versão, *Speak memory*, é a forma mais madura de *life writing* do autor, e investiga sua identidade em duas línguas, mas com fontes quase idênticas para fomentar seu talento. O artigo analisa as buscas de identidade nas autobiografias de Nabókov, comparando-as onde se faz relevante.

Palavras-chaves: tradução; Nabókov; autobiografia; autotradução.

After reading Eva Hoffman's autobiography *Lost in Translation* (1998), I came up with the idea whether it is possible to be found in translation. It is not a simple binary opposition perspective pushing me to search what can be obtained in the identity of the author, who had emigrated to another culture with a different language and what identity revealing can take place looking at the own self from distance and through lexical units of a foreign language. Does the author's self-identity gains or loses in such resettlement? At this point my ideas ramified into two major branches, which could not be involved simultaneously in one article: the first one was researching what the author gains having moved to another culture, being forced to speak another language within a different culture. It would bring the research to a linguistic path and prompt to contrast the language of origin and the language of translation to find out what concepts in what language are lexicalized, what feelings are given a word cover and so on. This branch would investigate how the author, expressing the self in a foreign language, using its lexical and grammatical resources feel differently from the self who he used to feel while identifying himself in the native language and the native environment.

The second branch of my thought ramification was how the author's self-identity is understood when the original text is translated. This idea seemed not less inspirational polemic of an area than the first one, because my immediate and initial hypothesis to build the context on this topic was to investigate intriguing sides of the translation process. As a person practicing literary translation, I am cognizant that while a translator reads the original, he tries to digest it first and after translate into a target language. The product of translation thus can be more explicit (sometimes naturalized by the author into the target language culture), informative and comprehensive.

There can be actually the case of a juxtaposition of the author's consciousness, the translator's consciousness and the reader's consciousness involved in one interpretation. If the reader of the original text can allow himself not to understand some cultural, psychological or purely subjective

matters of the autobiography, the translator does not have such a “privilege”. He has to understand the text in original, be able to analyze the author’s identity in order to manage to interpret it logically. Being subjective or illogical is a prerogative of the author who can skip some details of his life in past or run over them without explanation. The translator, on the other side, cannot leave obscure moments unexplained. He is obliged to understand what it means, otherwise the product of his work would look ambiguous or even worse, mistranslated. Both of these themes seemed equally tempting for analysis, and as Robert Frost says in the poem:

The    Road    not    taken,  
 I        kept            the        first        for        another        day!  
 Yet        knowing        how        way        leads        on        to        way,  
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

To compare one text in two languages I had to choose two languages. The source language was undoubtedly English due to the large number of autobiographies written in this language. At this point, I hardly stopped myself from searching an answer to a thought-provoking question about the reason why even people whose native language is not English prefer this language to speak about their lives. As for the target language, I could not choose my native Azerbaijani. There were many reasons for that and the main ones would annihilate the necessity to explain the others. For what is worth, the first one was that many autobiographies have not been translated into Azerbaijani.

Soviet ideology approached works, which were chosen for translation selectively and only those approved by the stringent committee gained the right to be introduced to habitants of the Soviet Empire. After Azerbaijan had become independent, many books were translated from different languages, but even among them, there still can hardly be found autobiographies. Besides, we have an extreme scarcity of autobiographies in Azerbaijani literature - and a lack of investigations in this field -, in spite of the fact that there are plenty of biographies, memoirs and a great deal of research works

on these genres. The reason for reticence in speaking about the own life in this culture is an area of investigation that comprehends different fields, such as Cultural, Philosophical and Psychological Studies.

So, to cut to the chase and skip all details of my preparatory process, I landed on the investigation of self-identity in translated autobiographies on the materials of Nabokov's autobiography. While studying the materials on the topic I got across with very intriguing and rather unexpected sides of a gigantic iceberg. Among these sides, the most considerable two are: Nabokov first wrote his autobiography in English and entitled it *Conclusive Evidence*, published in 1951. The author himself translated it<sup>2</sup> into Russian in 1954 and called it *Other Shores*. In 1966 the author published an extended edition with the title, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. The second version was an edited compilation of *Conclusive Evidence and Other Shores*. This very fact formed a hypothesis that the author while translating his work from English into Russian would have come up with fresh ideas about identity.

This is a unique and very important literary event, as the literary world does not contain many autobiographies double-self translated. If we just say that through expressing himself in Russian - in his first translation from English into Russian - he looked at himself, his life and time from the Russian language perspective, it would be highly reductive. If only to roughly generalize, we would say that the protagonists in *Inclusive Evidence*, *Drugie Bereqa* and *Speak, Memory* have differences in self-identity. It is discernible that while translating the Russian version (some places, ideas which were absent or understated in the original English text) into English he approached to his narrative - and through it to his life more maturely - and the story developed spirally adding more details about the author's identity, his perception of this identity and his own interpretation of things. It is the content side of Nabokov's autobiography.

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<sup>2</sup> It was free translation adjusted to Russian-speaking readers.

Self-translation is related to personal self-presentation, when the author feels that he cannot trust a translator to represent his personality to the world. Conscious about differences in identity perception in diverse cultures the author translates his work creating a new identity, more comprehensible to readers of the target language and culture. Nabokov's threefold creative writing or twofold auto-translation is one of the rare unique opportunities to observe how the author evaluates his identity living in different cultures and expressing himself in different languages.

The second interesting point was an abundance of attitudes to this curious twofold translation and scarcity of investigations on the topic of changes in identity perception when it comes to each of these texts. The weirdness of the matter was the following: Nabokov's creativity was a favorite area for investigations, and comparative analysis was also a popular approach among Russian critics. Nabokov's creativity had been studied by both Russian and other critics. But autobiographies as a genre and self-identity in life-writings are not popular areas for literary investigations in Russia. These fields are well-developed in English-speaking literary criticism, where two previous versions of Nabokov's autobiography are not well known. Of course, there were interesting articles mentioning differences between the English and the Russian versions, studying some techniques comparatively. But considering the scale of scientific results and where such researches on self-identity dynamics in two languages could arrive, it creates a fertile area for much larger investigations.

The first version of the autobiography entitled *Conclusive Evidence* was introduced in 1951. Nabokov translated this book into Russian as *Drugie berega (Other Shores)* in 1954, to translate it back into English in 1967 entitling it *Speak, Memory*, which was the last edition of his “linguistically chameleonic autobiography” (KLOSTY BEAUJOUR 1989: 12).

Grayson (1977: 11) notes that it was a unique auto-translation as its last version *Speak Memory* not only reworks *Conclusive Evidence* but also

incorporates the changes made in *Drugie Berega*. There are suggestions that the first, somewhere a rudimentary version of the autobiography is *Mademoiselle O*, which was written in French, translated into English by the author himself and became a chapter of all versions of Nabokov's autobiography. Christine Raguette-Bouvard (2000: 499) noted that “the version of *Mademoiselle O* that appears in *Speak, Memory* is the ‘transposition into English of memories in French that occurred in Russia’.” This claim, which makes identity through cultural-linguistic realities even more convoluted, is not very powerful because only one chapter was written in French<sup>3</sup>. The first book is a self-analysis in its initial form. The object of the investigation is the author's life. The second book is again self-analysis, but it is more mature as for its subject it has the author whose identity investigation is based on the previously defined identity. As phenomenologists insist, the first reading differs from the second one. Michelle de Montaigne noted that “after writing the own life the author is a different person”.

Nabokov wrote his autobiography for the first time. He started writing his second autobiography with the experience provided by his first identity attempt. According to the writer in his *Speak, Memory*:

This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English retelling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before (FREMONT-SMITH 1967).

These words, coming from the author and from the translator at the same time, give a comprehensive explanation why the last version of the autobiographical practice named *Speak, Memory* is subtitled *An Autobiography Revisited*. Nabokov did not just translate his life writing because he merely did not trust professionals to do this; he overtook this task

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<sup>3</sup> Even though it also creates an area for discussions about why Nabokov started his memoirs (or his identity search) in French, why he decided to turn them into autobiography (more comprehensive or elaborate self-identity) and why he continued this everlasting search in English and Russian.

because he was the only person who could identify himself individually and culturally to both himself and readers of different linguistic communities. In each autobiography, he was a different person with diverse experiences provided different time spans supplied by the years of his exile.

The two English versions and the Russian version are not a mere forward and backwards translation. Self-translation “is closely linked to the representation of self” (WILSON 2009: 186), autobiography is a search of an identity; self-translation of the autobiography is a search for identity using cultural and linguistic tools. To explore the dynamics of the author's self-identity searched in Nabokov's autobiography in two languages might shed light on to what extent language forms our self-perception. In this respect, Nabokov's *oeuvre* continues to grow, and with every new translation or edition of his writing, his legacy swells accordingly (LANG 2009).

In the preface to his translation of *Conclusive Evidence* into Russian writes, he writes: “The present Russian book as compared to the English text is like the uppercase letters as compared to italics, or a staring face as compared to a stylized profile” (NABOCOV 2004: 7). Reading the author's interviews about his translations, his feelings about this experience, the reader can conclude that his major aim to translate *Conclusive Evidence* into *Other Shores* had an ultimate intention to rewrite it for Russian readers. In his interview to *Playboy* Nabokov talked about his translation of *Lolita*:

I imagined that in some distant future somebody might produce a Russian version of *Lolita*. I trained my inner telescope upon that particular point in the distant future and I saw that every paragraph, pock-marked as it is with pitfalls, could lend itself to hideous mistranslation. In the hands of a harmful drudge, the Russian version of *Lolita* would be entirely degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases or blunders. So I decided to translate it myself. (TOFFLER 2013)

Whether Nabokov was afraid of false paraphrases or blunders or he wanted to express himself in a more accomplished way, we cannot say. But both of these reasons are an attempt to avoid misunderstanding and fallacious identity. The first question, aroused in comparative analysis of these works is



why the author changed the title of his work in translation. *Conclusive Evidence* in literal translation would be *Итоговое доказательство*. The original of this book seems to intend explanation when it concerns the Russian identity, the process of resettlement, the identity alteration of immigrants to foreigners. The Russian version is not an effort to create a picture, as it does not need to introduce a familiar context to compatriots. It is more aesthetic than informative. Comparing the frequency of color names used in both the original and translation, Polozova found their amount considerably prevailing in Russian. The more individual, personal Russian version addresses to compatriots, who do not need extra explicit explanations. *Other shores* are more emotional and feel provoking, and this title would better suit to Russian readers' character and provoke their expectancies. Being bilingual in quality differs from having knowledge of two languages. Bilingualism means to think within scopes of two different cultures keeping in mind both of them simultaneously with a relative preference of each at a time.

However, a bilingual author is different from a bilingual speaker, as writing a literary work is a creativity which affects back at the creator's personality, making him reassess many aspects of life through understanding the own characters. Writing an autobiography is a search of self-identity and if the author has an experience of literary writing in both languages, his mind would hesitate and strive to find better ways to express itself. Sometimes it would seem to the bilingual author that a particular idea could be better expressed in one language or another. It is not a mere case of lexicalization of different concepts more or less precisely in diverse languages, due to what a bilingual person continually feels insufficiency in an idea and feeling expression. It is a probability of perception of a particular idea or feeling in different cultures through the resources of the language this culture owns. Transition to the second language is not a simple process and it often requires refusal of the own style, linguistic resources adapting them to the

expectancies of the target culture in the language of which the author starts writing.

Nabokov protests about this comparison, writing that:

Conrad knew how to handle readymade English better than I; but I know better the other kind. He never sinks to the depths of my solecisms, but neither does he scale my verbal peaks (KARLINSKY 2001: 282-3).

In further interviews, Nabokov made this idea perfectly clear, expressing it in 1964 as it follows: “I cannot abide Conrad's souvenir-shop style, bottled ships and shell necklaces of romanticist clichés” (PLAYBOY 1964). In the preface to his translation into Russian, he also mentioned that the process of transition from Russian into a foreign language:

(...) if I were, for example, Joseph Conrad, who did not leave any trace in his native (Polish) literature before he started to write in English. But in the chosen by his language (English), he masterfully used conventional formulas. When in 1940 I decided to get transferred to English, my misfortune was that for more than fifteen years I had been writing in Russian, through these years I coined my brandmark on my tools and my predecessors. Transition to another language would mean that I am rejecting not only Avaakuum, Pushkin, Tolstoy or Ivanov, my nanny, Russian publicists, to put all of these into a nutshell, it is not rejection of the general language, but from individual sinew style (PLAYBOY 1964)

In his interview to *The New York Times*, Nabokov again expresses his attitude reporting this matter:

It irritates me a little when people compare me to Conrad. I am not at all displeased in a literary way; that isn't what I mean. The point is Conrad had never been a Polish writer, he started right in as an English writer. I had had a number of books in Russian before I wrote in English. My books were completely banned in Russia and circulated among the Russian emigres only. There were millions of them. (THE NEW YORK TIMES 1951)

As an evidence of this interview, we can notice that the English variant seems to be description of Russian soul and its perception of the surrounding while resettling from culture to culture. It explains individual and cultural identity interwoven into each other. The Russian text is more colorful and descriptive in the intention to build an image of Russian culture, but to make

the pictures more expressive and emotional. The Russian text is addressed to natives, who do not need extra detailed explanations in order to see through the author. The Russian variant is more personal and emotional - the author addresses his compatriots, with the same mentality and with the same past (POLOZOVA).

In general, the autobiographical trilogy of V. Nabokov is a unique composition which contains three different retrospective texts and which have neither specific functions nor characteristic ones when it comes to traditional autobiographies. All three parts of this trilogy have common features attributing unity to them as a unified work. However, each book has its specific unity and specificity, which opens interesting researching possibilities and perspectives.

In his 1966 foreword to *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Nabokov announces that this is “the final edition” of a text, like the butterflies so dear L. L. Petit. *Speak, Memory* has gone through “multiple metamorphosis” the present version being the outcome of a “diabolical task”, the “re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English retelling of Russian memories in the first place” (NABOKOV). Researches of Nabokov's creativity witnessed the writer's quest for a suitable title for each of his books. *The Person in Question* was the title chosen for the 1951 edition, *Speak, Mnemosyne* and *The Anthemion* for the 1954 Russian edition. These titles also reveal the author's identity search from different perspectives. The final version of the last edition was named in 1967 *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, which was not only a revisited text but also a reworked version of this life-writing.

Each of the three books by Nabokov has different and specific purposes, which are determined by cultural surrounding while writing a particular book and the level of psychological maturity in identity search. The aim of the first version of autobiography is to demonstrate evidence about a new writer who has come to their country. The chapter entitled “Exile”, talks about the

author in the third person. This chapter is excluded in Russian translation, because the author is not the third person for them, who are reading this autobiography not from “other” shores, but from that where the author himself belongs.

If the first autobiography is more ontological as it tries to confirm the own being, it builds the skeleton of his past life. In the second autobiography, written in Russian and aimed at the other audience, it seems that the described past is being deeply perceived and comprehended, what makes the second version more lyric. The third autobiography uses postmodern tendencies, enters dialogues with the readers and openly reconstructs the past using new aesthetic solutions required by changing literary principles.

In the last version of his autobiography Nabokov is more confident; his voice is firm, central and leading. This is a position of a confident Victor who recognized his own self-identity through endless analyses. If after writing the own life, the author changes because he becomes able to look at his life as a whole, having jumped outside everyday routine and fragmentariness of daily life. Nabokov reached this maturity after his first autobiography. The second autobiography was commenced by him as description of the own life by somebody who did not only live this life but also described it with the intention to look at it from the outside and introduce it to the world. After writing the first autobiography he seemed to have lived his life twice, for the first time as a novice, for the second time as a mature analyzer. The second and third versions of the autobiography were built on the experience he had lived twice.

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