

## **A Comparative Study of Translation of Phraseological Units from Russian to English and Spanish**

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### **Abstract**

The study examines the ways of the translation of phraseological units of the Russian language into English and Spanish in a comparative aspect. The article examines phraseological units, selected by continuous sampling from the novel by Vladimir Nabokov "The Luzhin Defense". The authors carried out a comparative analysis of the original version and the translation of this novel into English and Spanish in order to identify the prevailing translation method of phraseological units into the languages under consideration. In particular, the researchers analyze such methods as calque, modulation, reduction, descriptive and lexical ways of translation, etc. All the examples are accompanied by the commentary of the authors. A comparative analysis of the methods of translation of non-equivalent phraseological units from the Russian language to English and Spanish showed that the most frequent way is translation by means of one word or phrase or the search for lexical correspondence in the target language, since this method of translation contributes to the preservation of the semantic and pragmatic components. When translating equivalent phraseological units of the Russian language into the indicated languages, the equivalence is lost. As a consequence, in order to avoid the loss of the degree of equivalence, the translator is forced to combine different translation methods.

**Keywords:** phraseological unit, non-equivalent unit, Russian, English, Spanish, translation methods

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## 1. Introduction

Translation of phraseological units has always been and remains one of the most challenging tasks, regardless of the type of translation. When translating a phraseological unit, the main goal is to create the text that is closest in meaning, structural organization and style to the original. While the idiomatic translation from English and Spanish has been studied in detail, there are still many questions when it refers to the translation of phraseological units from Russian.

According to S. S. Kuzmin, “the most proven way is to try, if it is possible, to translate the Russian phraseological unit with the help of the English phraseological unit. If it is possible...” (Kuzmin). That is to say, to translate, preserving not only the essence of the described phenomenon, but also imagery, metaphor, stylistic and emotional coloring and expression.

Phraseological equivalence can manifest itself to varying degrees. Depending on the differences in terms of expression, phraseological units can be classified into full or partial equivalents, phraseological analogues or non-equivalent units. Some scholars distinguish the so-called “Europeanisms” (phraseological universals), which are characterized by a single origin from European culture. For example, Russian *волосы встают дыбом*, Engl. *make somebody's hair stand (up) on end*, esp. *poner los pelos de punta* (Corpas Pastor, 2003; Abdo & Edgar, 2021; Abiola, 2022).

Any phraseological unit reflects national character traits, peculiarities of national mentality, the history of a nation, its culture and its interaction with other linguocultural communities (Arsenteva et al., 2019; Varlamova & Safiullina, 2015; Iana et al., 2017). As a result, when studying the translation of phraseological units, it is worth mentioning that, along with equivalent units, there is a significant number of non-equivalent phraseological units, which indicates the absence of correspondences in the phraseological system of the target language. Nevertheless, the presence of non-equivalent phraseological units does not mean that their meaning cannot be conveyed in translation.

## 2. Methods

The phraseological units of the Russian language from the novel "The Luzhin Defense" by Vladimir Nabokov (53 units in total) and their translations into English and Spanish were taken as the material of the research.

Within the framework of the study, methods of definitional and component analysis, descriptive and comparative methods, and the method of statistical calculation were used.

The theoretical basis of the research was developed in accordance with the works on the theory and practice of translation by E.V. Breas, S. Vlahov, V.N. Komissarov, S. S. Kuzmina, P. Newmark and others, as well as works on the phraseology of the Russian, English and Spanish languages by E.F. Arsentieva, V.V. Vinogradov, D. Dobrovolsky, A.V. Kunina, Corpas Pastor and others.

### 3. Results and Discussion

An analysis of the translation of equivalent phraseological units of the Russian language into Spanish and English showed that differences in the structures of languages determine the frequent use of calque and adaptation in translation (see Table 1):

**Table 1:** *Equivalent translation of Russian phraseological units*

Translation technique	Number of PU (%)	
	Russian-English	Russian-Spanish
Calque	10 (19%)	8 (15%)
Adaptation	8 (15%)	11(21%)
Transposition	4(8%)	3(6%)
Lexical transformation	1(2%)	1(2%)

As far as it concerns the phraseological units of the Russian language, calque is the most convenient technique to use, since Russian phraseology is distinguished by its versatility, genuine metaphor and imagery. Let's have a look at an example of calque: rus. *Прямо гора с плеч* (Nabokov, 2009), esp. *Me he quitado un buen peso de encima* (), Engl. *that's a real weight off my shoulders* (Nabokov, 2000). Phraseological units of Russian and English are partial equivalents. While the Spanish phraseological unit is an analogue of the Russian version.

The following phraseological units рус. *сама возьмет быка за рога* (Nabokov, 2009), esp. *tomar el toro por los cuernos* ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)), Engl. *she herself takes the bull by the horns* (Nabokov, 2000) are full equivalents, therefore, when using calque, they preserve their structural and grammatical organization, component composition, significative-denotative meaning («смело взяться за самое главное в трудном деле» (Ozhegov, 1994)) as well as stylistic connotation. Note that when translating from Russian into English and Spanish, tracing is one of the most common methods (see Table 1).

When analyzing examples of calque, we often find phraseological units with not identical structural and grammatical organization or component composition. For example, when translating the Russian phraseological unit “*улучив мгновение*” (Nabokov, 2009), we can see that adaptation technique was applied along with calque (esp. *Aprovechando la oportunidad* ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)), Engl. *Grasping the opportunity* (Nabokov, 2000)).

If the translation of partial equivalents implies adaptation to the grammatical structure of the language, then in this case we are dealing with transposition. For example, the Russian “*казалось, сердце не выдержит*” (Nabokov, 2009) was translated as: Engl. *the heart would not hold out* (Nabokov, 2000), esp. *sus corazones no hubieran podido resistir* ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)). Obviously, in the process of the translation, grammatical transformations were made: the singular was replaced by the plural in the case of translation into Spanish; used a different tense and mood.

In some cases, the meaning of phraseological units becomes more important than its external and internal organization. Since in any language the system of phraseological units is rich and diverse, it is quite possible to find a lexical correspondence to the translated phraseological unit. Thus, it is necessary to find a phraseological unit which would correspond

to the lexical meaning of the phraseological unit of the source language, but, possibly, would be based on a different image.

The English language, in comparison with Spanish, is quite traditional, nevertheless, sometimes, when translating from Russian, the so-called “updating” of phraseological units occurs. (Kuzmin) So, in the novel we come across “*He mak strašen čërt, kak ego maljout*” (Nabokov, 2009). It is translated into English as “*The devil’s not as black as his painters*” (Nabokov, 2000), and in Spanish - “*El diablo no es tan malo como lo pintan*” ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)). The use of these phraseological units is the same: they are used when someone wants to say that thinking about something is too pessimistic - an unjustified exaggeration. Nevertheless, the Russian phraseological unit means that some phenomenon is not so scary as it might seem at first glance. The English phraseological unit, like the Spanish phrase, means that something is not so bad. Thus, in the process of translation, the “scary” component is replaced with the “bad” component.

The lexical method of translation is often used when translating fiction in the case of a high degree of equivalence of phraseological units. Nevertheless, one should not forget that this technique involves the translation of the meaning of phraseological units, which implies that the structure, component composition, stylistic coloring, figurativeness of phraseological units is lost. Therefore, in such cases we are talking about the absence of equivalence.

Having analyzed the methods of translation of non-equivalent phraseological units, we can conclude that the main methods of translation are lexical and descriptive. In some cases, the meaning of the correlation between the original words and the target text may change, which allows the use of modulation as well. The comparison of examples of phraseological units translated into English and Spanish shows that the lexical method of translation dominates both when translating from Russian into English, as well as from Russian into Spanish. Therefore, this method of translation is most applicable in order to obtain an adequate result when translating non-equivalent phraseological units of the Russian language into English or Spanish (See Table 2).

**Table 2:** *Non-equivalent translation of Russian phraseological units*

Translation technique	Number of PU (%)	
	Russian English	Russian Spanish
Calque	5(9%)	3(6%)
Description	3(6%)	5 (9%)
Modulation	4(8%)	5(9%)
Lexical transformation	17(32%)	16(30%)
Omission	1(2%)	1(2%)

If we analyze the following example, it will become obvious that the Russian phraseological unit can be translated using calque into English, while the translation into Spanish is realized with the help of transposition, the result of which was a complete change in the meaning of the text: Rus. *жизнь проглядела* (Nabokov, 2009), Engl. *life itself had*

overlooked (Nabokov, 2000), esp. la vida misma habían menospreciado ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)). The Spanish version literally means "life itself was underestimated", which does not correspond to the original.

Another example illustrates the use of calque method applied to translate of the non-equivalent phraseological unit of the Russian language: Rus. *не по дням, а по часам* (Nabokov, 2009), Esp. *no por días, sino por horas* ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)), Engl. *not by the day but by the hour* (Nabokov, 2000).

However, calque can create a phraseological unit that may seem rather unnatural. In such cases, the search for alternative translation methods becomes inevitable. Thus, the Russian expression "*раскусить кого-либо*" ("to understand, to know well" (Ozhegov, 1994)) is translated into English by means of the description: "to get a thorough look at" (Nabokov, 2000). While it is translated into Spanish as "estudiarlo mejor" ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)).

Modulation technique allows to deduce the meaning of an inequivalent phraseological unit. In this case the context plays an important role. Let's have a look at the following phraseological unit: "*входить во вкус.*" In Nabokov's novel "The Luzhin Defense" we come across this phraseological unit in the following context: "*стараясь быть любезным и сам входя во вкус, говорил Лужин*" (Nabokov, 2009). Although it is convenient to translate this phraseological unit with the help of calque, we can witness different approaches in translations. The English translator used the analogue "enter into the spirit of things". Meanwhile the Spanish translator resorted to modulation of the phraseological unit. He emphasized the relation between the action and the purpose:

Esp. "*Explicó Luzhin, tratando de agradar, pero, al mismo tiempo, deseando dar una respuesta precisa*" (Nabokov, 2000).

Engl. "*Said Luzhin, trying to please but also entering into the spirit of things*" ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)).

Another example of modulation is also the translation of the Russian phraseological unit "*чего моя нога хочет*" (Nabokov, 2009) into English ("There is nothing like freedom" (Nabokov, 2000)) and Spanish ("No hay nada como libertad" ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com))). Russian phraseological unit is used when a person wants to say that he will do what he wants, that is to say, he is free in his decisions and actions. When translating the original text, the translators transformed the meaning of this phraseological unit and expressed it in the phrase "There is nothing better than freedom." So, when correlating the original and the target language text, we can come to the conclusion that they form the relation "action" - condition".

Undoubtedly, the method of translation of lexical meaning is the most convenient when it comes to non-equivalent Russian phraseological units. This method is more of a use in cases with a translation of some constructions specific to the Russian language. In the Russian language phraseological unit "*в сердцах*" means "in a huff" and is colloquial (Ozhegov, 1994). It is interesting that this phraseological unit has been translated into English by means of the lexical method: Engl. *wrathfully* (Nabokov, 2000). The state of anger is also translated into Spanish as "*con furia*" (with rage) ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)). From the examples above it can be

seen that expression and emotionality were added in order to somehow compensate the lack of equivalence.

The Russian phraseological unit “*на скорую руку*” means “to do something quickly and carelessly” (Ozhegov, 1994), and “*на барскую ногу*” means “richly” (Ozhegov, 1994). When translating these phraseological units with the help of translation of lexical meaning, the original text (“*квартиру на барскую ногу, снятую на скорую руку*” (Nabokov, 2009)) loses its metaphorical meaning:

Engl. *rented with a long view but a short notice* (Nabokov, 2000)

Esp. *alquilado con vistas a un largo futuro, pero con un corto plazo de aviso*  
([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com))

It is also worth mentioning that the English version of the translation of the novel was created in collaboration with the author. It explains the fact that often the English and the Spanish versions have many similarities. It can be assumed that the translator, in some cases, preferred to translate from English than from Russian, hence the English version is kind of the author's edition.

In the process of analysis, we found only one example of omission: Rus. *По-моему, если уж хочешь знать мое мнение, - следует **скрепя сердце** принять неизбежное* (Nabokov, 2009), Esp. *Me parece que deberíamos resignarnos an aceptar lo inevitable.* ([www.librodot.com](http://www.librodot.com)), Engl. *In my opinion we should brace ourselves and accept the inevitable.* [eight]. In this example, the Russian phraseological unit “*скрепя сердце*” is used to convey a feeling of anxiety. In the English and Spanish versions, the hero's emotional state is different, although the verbs “brace” and “resignar” (to succumb) (Seco et al., 2004) have some additional meaning.

When translating from Russian into English and Spanish the problem of lacunarity arises. In some cases, the absence of an equivalent in the target language can be compensated for by literal translation, that is calque, while maintaining the denotative meaning, component composition, stylistic connotation and grammatical organization of phraseological units.

The perfect solution of the problem of translation of phraseological units is the translation with an equivalent phraseological unit in the target language, provided that the final result is understandable to a native speaker. However, we must not forget that the ideal result cannot always be achieved.

## 4. Conclusions

Having analyzed the phraseological units of the novel "The Luzhin Defense" by V. Nabokov, we found out that when translating non-equivalent phraseological units from Russian into English, as well as from Russian into Spanish, the predominant translation method is lexical. Lexical translation involves translation with one word or phrase or search for lexical correspondence in the target language. This method of translation helps to preserve the semantic and pragmatic components of phraseological units.

Consequently, the complexity of phraseological units causes numerous difficulties in the process of translation. Therefore, it is necessary to study all possible ways of translating phraseological units and find the patterns to achieve absolute equivalence of texts.

Many scholars consider the translation of phraseological units in their works on translation, phraseology, and comparative linguistics. However, the problems of idiomatic translation are solved in different ways. Quite often there are completely different points of view regarding the same phenomenon. However, it must be remembered that even if the translation correspondence of one or another phraseological unit is presented in the phraseological dictionary, practice shows that sometimes the context can very strongly influence the phraseological unit. The meaning of the phraseological unit is bound to be context *dependent*. Therefore, it is always necessary to correlate the vocabulary meaning of phraseological units with the context, and only then translate it applying the most adequate translation method.

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