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THE AGENCY OF TRANSLATION IN POLITICS AND FICTION: TEXTUAL CASES OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Background. *The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has not left unaffected the field of language, ranging from changes in the perception of the Russian and Ukrainian languages and the emergence of new lexemes pertinent to the new realities. While copious amounts of research have already been dedicated to the issues delineated above, relatively little attention has so far been paid to relevant translation issues. Given the complex background of Russia-Ukraine relations, such issues are manifested across different domains, including that of literature and politics – which, it can be argued, sometimes intersect. The paper seeks to fill the gap in the study of the linguistic aspects of the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine through the medium of translation.*

Methods. *Drawing upon previous extensive research of the role of translation in the faithful rendering of political and literary discourses in the wider historical context of Russia-Ukraine relations, the authors employ discourse analysis and case studies to delineate some of the key challenges presenting themselves before a translator in communicating to global English-speaking audiences.*

Results. *It is posited that translation issues regarding the ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia are inextricably related to the historical background of the two countries' relations and is to be taken into consideration in order to produce a faithful rendition from and into English. The ongoing hostilities have also brought to the fore the use of newly emerging lexemes and the issues of their translation for English-speaking audiences.*

Conclusions. *The research invites further discussion of the impact of war on linguistics and translation, including normalisation of the pejorative discourse vis-à-vis the perceived enemy and the concept of 'mockslation', suggested here to describe new lexemes arising from intentional or unintentional deficiencies in translation.*

Keywords: *Russo-Ukrainian war, translation, linguistics, discourse, agency of translation.*

Background

The linguistic domain has not been left unaffected by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022 and, further back, Russian aggression against Ukraine starting from 2014. Numerous studies have demonstrated shifts in linguistic preferences of Ukrainians towards Ukrainian and 'ostracization' of Russian, reflecting the importance attached to the role of language in shaping national identity (Lönngren et al., 2023; Racek et al., 2024; Moskovets, & Trégouët, 2024). Ample research has been done into the changes and innovations of the Ukrainian language itself, resulting from the ongoing hostilities, including the emergence of new lexical units (Hrytsenko, 2022) or, on a more profound level, changes in linguistic discourses, mostly appertaining to the phenomenon of war (Demyanchuk, 2024; Chiluwa, & Ruzaitė, 2024). Interestingly, Hrytsenko (2022) proposes the concept of 'linguistic shield', which in the context of the Ukrainian language has two distinctive meanings and applications: (1) that of a *shibboleth*, that is a word or phrase of exclusive nature, used to distinguish between friend and foe (of which perhaps the most prominent example is *palianytsia*, a type of Ukrainian hearth-baked bread that speakers of the Russian language have difficulty pronouncing); and (2) that of "a psychological protective charm at a time that is difficult for every Ukrainian" (Hrytsenko, 2022, p. 11), intended to boost public morale by virtue of applying appropriate linguistic devices (examples include but are not limited to patriotic songs and poems, or soundbite phrases, often borrowed from military parlance – such as "4.5.0", meaning "Everything is fine").

That having been said, the role of translation in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war has attracted relatively little attention in research available. Of few papers that touch upon the topic, Struk et al. (Struk et al., 2022) examine the

varying interplay of Ukrainian and English military vocabulary, while Rudnytska (Rudnytska, 2022) sheds light on the weaponisation of literary translation by Russia as a tool of undermining Ukrainian nationhood. Of particular note is research presented by Kamyanyets (Kamyanyets, 2024), which makes a point of selective employment of translation in terms of reflecting Western political discourse in Ukrainian news media, although does not focus thereon.

Therefore, a need has arisen for filling the critical gap in linguistic studies related to the Russo-Ukrainian war appertaining to the agency of translation and its application across the domains of politics and culture. Its relevance emanates from the role of English messaging for both Ukrainian and Russian actors in communicating to global audiences, given less limited spread and use of their respective native languages and, conversely, the universal nature of English as a *lingua franca* in international fora. In examining the issue outlined, the authors also seek to elucidate the interplay of the Ukrainian and Russian languages in retrospect, both in politics and literary translation. Therefore, the scope of research will not be limited exclusively to the discourse as from the year 2022; instead, an attempt will be undertaken to paint a more panoramic picture of the linguistic interplay and translation peculiarities arising therefrom.

Methods

The paper seeks to expand upon the issues arising before a translator in the context of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine in terms of the linguistic discourse, drawing upon theoretical approaches to translation, the peculiarities of messaging in the domains of politics and fiction, and relevant case studies. The Skopos theory of translation has been applied to demonstrate the relativity of equivalence, to determine different functions of the target

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text, and to define the role of translation in meaning-making. With regard to case studies, it is believed by the authors that understanding the 'war of words' between Ukraine and Russia cannot be considered exhaustive without putting into perspective the historical background of Russia-Ukraine relations, and therefore an attempt has been made to highlight their episodes that have the most pertinence thereto.

In addition, the authors draw upon comparative and historical methods, which allow for presenting the varying interplay of the Russian and Ukrainian languages in terms of the two countries' complex relations, with the occasional medium of the English language. Finally, discourse analysis is employed with a view to explicating the issues arising in the course of translation of lexemes pertaining to the Russo-Ukrainian war, both the common and newly emerging ones. The said analysis encompasses both literary and political discourses, seeking to paint a comprehensive picture of issues faced by the translator in the context of the ongoing hostilities.

Results

The immediacy of the current scholarly focus on linguistic and translational aspects in international relations has been predicated on the interconnection between linguopolitics and the impact of politics on translation. This interdependence has a rich historical background. It gives grounds for identifying a function of the cross-lingual transformations as the agency of translation, a situation where translation *per se* functions as a historical, cultural, and political construct to generate new meanings.

The history of translation as agency spans the period of 24 centuries, from the 3rd cent. BCE (the Septuagint) to the present. The Christian feast of Candlemas celebrating the encounter of the elder Simeon, one of the Septuagint translators, with the Holy family, provides the most graphic example of a translatorial act governed by an intended result that is at marked variance with the source text. As the legend has it, a God-commissioned angel told Simeon to translate the Hebrew word for young woman, *almah* (עלמה) in Isaiah 7:14, as 'virgin'. The ensuing consequence for the uncooperative translator was that he would live as long as it took to see for himself what would become one of the staples of a new religion, the miracle of the immaculate conception. Jaroslav Pelikan's account of Matthew 1:21–23 offers a perspicacious reading of relations between the source and target texts in translational taxonomy of generalization and specification: "Where the Hebrew has 'Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel,' without specifying the status of the young woman any more precisely, the Septuagint uses the word *parthenos*, 'virgin,' which the Gospel quotes in Greek, with the formula 'All this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord declared through the prophet,' for the virginal conception of Jesus from his mother, Mary" (Pelikan, 2006, p. 59). That the agency of translation is wrought with institutionally unpalatable ideological and cultural controversies is ironically evident in the Ukrainian version of Pelikan's study. In it, the above-quoted passage is preceded by the discussion of the Psalmist's 'angels' in Christian liturgies, and the English-language qualification "even though that is not what the Hebrew original is saying" (Pelikan, 2006, p. 59) has been expunged from the Ukrainian text (Pelikan, 2011, p. 96).

The story of Simeon and its translation-centered concatenation of events leading from the Old to New Testament, demonstrates a proleptic aspect of the agency of translation. Its opposite side, the recycling and reinterpretation of the original message as a rhetorical vehicle to push for a partisan agenda, is displayed in

Volodymyr Zelensky's inaugural address on May 20, 2019. Challenging the sitting government to send in their resignations, he "quote[s] one American actor who has become a great American president: 'The government does not solve our problems. The government is our problem'" ('Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Inaugural Address', 2019). The relativity and performative rationale of such a "quote" will be examined in more detail later when analyzing Joe Biden's remarks to the Ukrainian parliament. Here, it will suffice to note that the intentionally distorted reference to Ronald Reagan's proverbial "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem" seeks to appeal to the authoritative political pronouncements, the urgency of which are explicated through the *verbatim* rendering, where 'government' is equivalent to the sitting Cabinet of Ministers. Both Reagan's dictum "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'" and the recently established in the USA Department of Government Efficiency (Doge) conclusively suggest that in American political discourse, the linguistic meaning of government is not equivalent to the notion of the current administration and implies red tape and overregulation. Thus, Zelensky's postulated translation from Reagan's first Inaugural address privileges the target-side in the interlingual equation to highlight the intended purposes at the expense of faithful translation.

Well before Roman Jakobson introduced a concept of interlingual translation in late 1950s, in his 1946 essay, *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell used this procedure as an interpretational technique to demonstrate the political implications of discourse through rephrasing a verse from the book of Ecclesiastes (Orwell, 2000, p. 353). The identical umbrella titles *Translation and power* (Tymoczko, & Gentzler, 2002; Harmon, & Osuchowska, 2020), or *Language of War* (Mykhed, 2024; Shehadeh, 2015) seem to underscore the relevance of interdisciplinary perspective on international politics and language. As Christina Schäffner emphasizes, "[a]lthough modern Translation Studies has increasingly focused on investigating the factors that systematically govern the production, dissemination, and reception of texts, the translational practices in the fields of politics have not yet been sufficiently investigated" (Schäffner, 2014, 149).

In his 1852 work, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx suggested that seemingly new-fangled sociopolitical developments function "like the beginner who has learned a new language [and] always translates it back into his mother tongue" (Marx, 1963, 15). Just as Marx employs the agency of translation to explicate the linguistic iterations in the historic march of times, Max Weber painstakingly scrutinizes Martin Luther's translation of the Bible in terms of untranslatable nature of and a defining concept behind the German word *Beruf* for *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930). The remarks that "in its modern meaning the word comes from the Bible translations, through the spirit of the translator, not that of the original," or the word *Beruf* "does not occur in any of the languages which now contain it in its present worldly (secular) sense before Luther's translation of the Bible" (Weber, 1992, 39–40, 158) problematize the very notion of translation and challenge the equivalence theory thereof.

Weber's study not only provides an indispensable precursor of and a graphic illustration for Hans Vermeer's principle of the Skopos with its emphasis on the pragmatic side of the translatorial equation, but it also contributes to appreciation of the dynamics of the so-called relay translation where languages and cultures adapt new

functional-semantic elements through a translated culturally representative text. The said dynamics has been observed in both political and literary discourse of Russo-Ukrainian relations.

A case in point is the photograph capturing Dmytro Manuiliyskiy, the head of a delegation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, signing the UN Charter on 26 June 1945 in San Francisco (Fig. 1), which graphically (in both expressive and philological meanings of the word) portrays the linguistic and cultural interface between the Ukrainian and Russian languages in modern history.



Fig. 1. Dmytro Manuiliyskiy is signing the UN Charter

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2015)

The palimpsestic guise of the desk plaque suggests that the original Russian *ukrainskaya* (Ukrainian) had been superimposed with the Ukrainian equivalent *ukrayinska*. Given that in both languages the adjective for Ukraine consists of 10 characters, the letter "і" and the soft sign ("ь") are clearly visible as effacing earlier Russian writing with the former pasted on against a thick background and the latter being the only italicized sign in the name plate. The perceptible traces of the textual palimpsest look all the more prominent and poignant when followed by the Russian abbreviation "ССР", Soviet Socialist Republic, whereas in Ukrainian the shortening should read "РСР" (*radianska sotsialistychna respublika*). Such historic translational inconsistencies are wrought with far-reaching political and ideological ramifications. They symbolically echo and tragically embody the claims of the Russian World doctrine of its cultural dominance and hegemony over as well as the justification for a full-scale war against Ukraine and its identity. As a translated text, the photo in Fig. 1 offers a way to conceptualize the politics of translation.

In 1948, UNESCO initiated the publication of *Collection of Representative Works*. Inspired by the assertion in the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO "that since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed", the concept and half-century's worth of the undertaking aspired to use translations to 'construct defences' as a means of promoting mutual understanding among peoples ("UNESCO Collection of Representative Works", 2000, 13). In addition to the institutional, literary, and critical evaluations, the selection criteria for meriting the representative work status include "reflection of a specific community or civilization" so that the selected artistic product "should be known and acknowledged in the community in which it was created, and enjoy full visibility and credibility in its original region" ("UNESCO Collection of Representative Works", 2000, 15).

Such an unmistakable recognizability and the authority of the original text offers a thought-provoking perspective on the pragmatic functionalities and political implications of the translated representative texts.

For example, in his keynote address to the Ukrainian Parliament on December 09, 2015, then Vice President of the United States Joe Biden recited a passage from poetic legacy of Taras Shevchenko. His poem *Testament*, combining the features of a poetic will and anthem, has become a symbol of the struggle of the Ukrainian people for liberation in the past and present, and has wielded a formative influence on and has shaped Ukrainian national culture. As George Grabowicz puts it, Shevchenko enjoys iconic status of the Ukrainian national poet who "articulates a millenarian vision of national emancipation that is still broadly perceived as prophetic, i.e., fulfilling the teleology of national identity (Grabowicz, n.d.). The transcript of the Vice-Presidential remarks appropriately and graphically demonstrates what Katharina Reiß and Hans Vermeer have defined as translational action (Reiß, & Vermeer, 2014, 98).

According to the transcript, "[a] great poet Taras Shevchenko wrote verse after verse declaiming the spirit of Ukraine, urging his fellow Ukrainians rise up and claim their liberty. His poem *The Testament* ends with this reflection. And I quote: Then, in the mighty family / Of all men that are free, / May be sometimes, very softly / You will speak of me? May be sometimes very softly you will speak of me. (Applause.)" ("Remarks by Vice President", 2015). The textual tag "applause" in a printed presentation of a speech in a foreign language originally delivered through the oral medium of communication, exemplifies Reiß and Vermeer's perception of 'understanding' in a dual relation to the situation and the background knowledge it implies. The Ukrainian MPs clapping their hands to show approval of an English-language rendering of a Ukrainian canonical poetic text enacts the situation when "understanding is confirmed by feedback". In turn, they argue, the feedback indicates that the producer and the recipient are communicating and are engaged in a process of interaction. In translation, the translator has to seek communication (Reiß, & Vermeer, 2014, 98).

When read through the prism of translational action, Biden "quoting" Shevchenko in English and cheered on by the Ukrainian audience reinforces Reiß and Vermeer's insight that the reception context of a translated text is privileged over its intratextual coherence in that while "understanding implies a message coherent in itself and 'sufficiently' coherent with the situation in which it is received, the latter aspect [is] the crucial one" (Reiß, & Vermeer, 2014, 98). The enthusiastic feedback of the receiving audience is quite ironic given that presumably Ukrainian MPs are aware of the original text of the 1845 *Testament* ending with a resounding versified last will, a genre that can hardly climax with a question mark. The problematic nature of Ethel Lilian Voynych's translation ("Poem "The Testament" – T. Shevchenko", n.d.) recited in the speech becomes readily visible in the context of the testament as a literary genre. Just as poem 30 in Horace's Ode Book III *Exegi monumentum* ends with the invocation of Melpomene, Shevchenko's text culminates in a passionate supplication, the discursive pattern of which is not likely to suggest the feeling of doubt or uncertainty implied by expressive modality of doubt and intensified by interrogative syntax in Voynych's rendering. A celebrated example of (mis)use of question-like rhetoric in an artistic testamentary disposition is employed in the 1462 *Le Testament* by François Villon. His proverbial refrain, "Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?", translated by Dante Gabriel

Rossetti as "But where are the snows of yester-year?", transgresses explicit conventions of poetic testament. The bitter irony of allusion to *fuga temporum* ("passing of time") from Horace's *Exegi monumentum* represented through a questioning formula seems to be one of the artistic strategies Villon employs to break the compositional patterns of the genre in an effort to create what Melek Karataş has called "the mock testamentary form" and "the mock will form" (Karataş, n.d.).

English translations of Shevchenko's oeuvre feature other versions of *Testament* including that by John Weir. Against the backdrop of the identical rhyme (free – me) in the target texts analyzed here, his rendering of the final stanza showcases semantic accuracy and isomorphic stylistic equivalents such as anadiplosis of the Ukrainian original: "And in the great new family, / The family of the free, / With softly spoken, kindly word / Remember also me" (Weir, 1961). With regard to aesthetic and translational merits, Weir's rendering is superior to that by Voynych to enjoy the status of a culturally representative text as invoking the "full visibility and credibility in its original region". But the choice of reference in Biden's remarks seems to be accounted for by the fact that less faithful translation allows for sublimating it into a broader and implicitly politicized context. As a particular variety of target text, or the translation result, dubbed by Hans Vermeer as *translatum* (Vermeer, 2000, 221, 224), it undermines the central role of the source text and the notion of equivalence to highlight culturally oriented and contextually targeted pragmatics of translation and its Skopos.

In terms of speech act theory, it is the performative property of the ostensible "quote" that locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary functions of utterance have been generated by exploiting the stylistic and genre-specific infelicities of Voynych's interpretation. The proposition asserted in the verbatim repetition that might be called a "rhetorical doppelgänger" when interrogative syntax in the translated text is immediately followed by its declarative counterpart ("May be sometimes, very softly / You will speak of me? May be sometimes very softly you will speak of me") combines a locutionary and illocutionary acts through, respectively, presenting literal sense and the endorsing assessment. The policymaking connotations, the perlocutionary Skopos of the *translatum*, whose authority is sanctioned by a larger-than-life cultural and historical icon, is to convince the Ukrainian audience of the utmost urgency of "a battle, a historic battle against corruption" in addition to challenges of "Russia's attempted annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula" ("Remarks by Vice President", 2015). Indeed, in their strategizing for and structuring of the Vice-presidential address, his speechwriters must have been aware of pragmatic and spatio-temporal aspects of translational action and contextually dependent references as well as of Juliane House's contention that "[a]s texts travel across time, space and different orders of indexicality in translation, they must be re-contextualised" (House, 2014, 5).

So, Biden's speech underscores the agency of translation in its own right. Its modality of possibility coupled with interrogative formula in Voynych's translation of Shevchenko's "Testament", which are conspicuously absent in the original and transgress the artistic stereotypes of the genre of poetic will, serve the rhetorical purpose of expository allusion to project the message of exigencies of sustained fight against endemic corruption in the country, a crusade that is still as existential as a fight for Ukraine's sovereignty and independence against the ongoing all-out Russian aggression.

As in political discourse, the agency of translation into or from Ukrainian is used in fiction. A recent underlining trend in Translation Studies towards interdisciplinarity and focusing on the individual qualities of translators, in addition to the production of target content and identification of the universal procedures of translation process, warrants a closer investigation of agency of translation in fiction. Among *loci classici* for students of translation, including 'Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*' by Jorge Luis Borges with its "ideological critiques that expose their investment in various cultural values and political interests, Orientalist and anti-Semitic, masculinist and puritanical, middle-class and academic" (Venuti, 2000, 14), the less known fiction representing Ukrainian-Russian sociopolitical dynamics as narrated through the vehicle of translation is Anton Chekhov's 1898 short story *The man in a case*.

In her textual study of lexical, syntactic, and stylistic differences between the earlier translations and the later retranlations into Ukrainian of the works of the Russian and Western literatures, Lada Kolomyiets focuses on the institutionalized drive towards Russification of the Ukrainian language in the Soviet Union. Among the Russian-language writers of Ukrainian origin, Mykola Gogol and Mykola Lieskov, she mentions, *en passant*, Chekhov, to identify the artistic texts "focused to a large extent on Ukrainian topics and reflected lexical and stylistic peculiarities of the Ukrainian language" (Kolomyiets, 2020, 31). Such a cursory glance invites a more meticulous examination of Chekhov's writings where linguo-cultural discrepancies between the Russian and Ukrainian languages mark an inseparable constituent of the narrative.

The short story *The man in a case* problematizes the inherently translational issues, including *faux ami*, the word pairings that look and sound similar, but actually have exclusively different meanings. These lexical differences, represented through the lens of interlingual metaphrasing, signify the opposing cultures of the main protagonist Bielikov, a Greek language teacher and an intimidating stickler for order and discipline, with the Kovalenkos when "[a] new teacher of history and geography, Mikhail Savvich Kovalenko, a Little Russian, was appointed. He came, not alone, but with his sister Varinka" (Kulka, 2000, 298). Implicitly alluded to in the morphological structure of their surnames, the Russian *-ov* and the Ukrainian *-enko*, the family names take on the resonance of a charactonym to suggest antagonistic identity politics in the narrative with its recurring reference to the Little Russians, a long-standing derogatory exonym for the Ukrainians in the imperialistic discourse. In the narrative, the Ukrainian Kovalenko represents the outlandish Other opposing the groupthink culture, as witnessed by Bielikov: "her brother and she have a strange way of thinking" (Kulka, 2000, 303). Kovalenko's diatribe against his school colleagues as "paltry government clerks" who "keep, not a temple of science, but a department for red tape and loyal behaviour, and it smells as sour as a police-station" concludes with his decision to quit this job and "go to my farm and there catch crabs and teach the Little Russians" (Kulka, 2000, 304).

The episode narrated by the omniscient narrator about the "first thorough acquaintance with the Kovalenkos at the headmaster's name-day party" (Kulka, 2000, 299) implicitly portrays the group and national identities through the agency of translation when Varinka, "a new Aphrodite risen from the waves," explains to "the glum and intensely bored teachers" the false cognates in the Ukrainian and Russian languages: "The Little Russians call pumpkins *kabaks* (i.e., pothouses), while their pothouses they call *shinki*" (Kulka,

2000, 299). This lesson in *faux ami* reinforces the artistic unity of the elements of the chain of causation in *The man in a case* and its vicissitudes of the narrative that culminate in Bielikov's death after brother Kovalenko kicks him downstairs in a defiant act to preserve his and his sister's right to bicycling in the public spaces. Therefore, Chekhov's narrative, in addition to onomastics, represents translation as part of the *Fronde* that the Kovalenkos, with their unique language and culture serving as the Ukrainian Other in the artistic plot, put up against the nitpicking, officious, and dreaded Bielikov leading to a transformation of 'the man in a case' into 'the man in a casket'.

The above extensive analysis delineates the linguistic constraints of expressing notions appertaining to Ukrainian identity through the prism of both sociopolitical and literary translation. Nevertheless, the said challenge needs to be overcome and faithful translation of Ukrainian notions into English to be found if an act of communicating to global audiences is to prove successful. Of particular interest in this regard are neologisms that have arisen directly from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and are designed to bear both linguistic and extralinguistic relevance.

A case in point is *bavovna*, a word that has come to denote a concept that is markedly distinct from its literal meaning. While originally, the word *bavovna* is the Ukrainian equivalent of the English word 'cotton', in its newly emerged usage it relates to *khlopok* (stressed on the second syllable), a Russian word that means 'pop' or 'clap'. The origin of *bavovna* exhibits a peculiar transgression between the linguistic and extralinguistic worlds, as well as the importance of sociopolitical context in interpreting similar lexemes. Its roots emerged as far back as the 2010s, amidst a crackdown on Russian news media outlets and the ensuing censorship which dictated the usage of words in public discourse, a type of 'newspeak' characteristic of dictatorial political systems, with a heavy reliance of euphemisms designed to "pacify the population, reducing incentives for collective action" (Libman et al., 2024, p. 4). As per the aforementioned *khlopok*, it appears to have started to substitute *vzryv* ('explosion') in Russian news media outlets in the late 2010s, seemingly denoting an accident of a less grave nature.

Therefore, by 2022, *khlopok* can be said to have been normalized in Russian public discourse in reports or descriptions of an explosion the importance of which the Russian authorities intended to play down. That was the case in point in media reporting of explosions at a military base and an oil depot in the Russian city of Bryansk on April 25, 2022. However, the translation of Russian reports into the Ukrainian language incorrectly carried with it the word *bavovna* instead of *hurkit* or *liask* (some of the closest equivalents in Ukrainian in the given context), apparently due to deficiency of a machine translator used. The mistake occurred in view of fact that the Russian words *khlopok* (stress on the first syllable, 'cotton') and *khlopok* (stress on the second syllable, 'pop' or 'clap') are homographs and, therefore, are distinguished in written mediums only by means of textual context.

The first mention of *bavovna* seems to have been registered with *Operatyvnyi ZSU* ('Operative AFU [Armed Forces of Ukraine]'), a Telegram channel that had by April 2022 become one of the popular sources of up-to-the-minute information about the course of Russia's onslaught against Ukraine with Ukrainian-speaking audiences. In its reporting of the explosions (or 'pops') at the oil depot in Bryansk, *Operatyvnyi ZSU* wrote that "powerful *bavovna* ['cotton'] was heard before the fire started" ('What "bavovna"

means', 2022). The phrase, which in its literal interpretation bears no logical meaning whatsoever, drew mockery from the Russian side but was quickly reclaimed and redefined by Ukrainian users of the then Twitter social media platform (presently known as X), which pointed out Russian censorship and flooded social media feeds with memetic pictures of multiple launch rocket systems with elements of cotton photoshopped over them ('Expect "bavovna"! Ukrainian Twitter army', 2022).

Since then, *bavovna* has acquired currency in Ukrainian public discourse as a denotatum for explosions on Russian-held territory of Ukraine as well as Russia itself. It can be argued that the use of *bavovna* highlights both the absurdity of Russian censorship altogether and its more specific goal of euphemizing coverage of Russia's war against Ukraine, presenting it as a minor incursion rather than a full-scale invasion, which it is. The memetic nature of *bavovna* was epitomized in *Bavovniatko* ('Cottonlet', a diminutive form of 'Cotton'), a virtual character in the form of a "fluffy and restless" ghost animal that "quietly comes to the occupiers' bases, depots, airfields, oil refineries and other places full of flammable items and starts playing with fire there", per the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (Defence of Ukraine, 2022); and in a Twitter exchange between then Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Ukraine Dame Melinda Simmons, which posted a sprig of cotton, and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky (Dame Melinda Simmons, 2022).

Deficiencies of machine translation from Russian into Ukrainian and *vice versa* appear to be a recurring theme in the linguistic alterations that take place in parallel to military action on the battlefield in Ukraine, a phenomenon that, for the sake of convenience, will hereinafter be called mockslation, a portmanteau of 'mockery' and 'translation'.

Another prominent example of mockslation from Ukrainian news media relates to the translation of the Russian phrase *Mochi nyet tyerpet' eti adskiye muki* (whose rough equivalent in English is 'I cannot bear this hellish agony any longer'), which in its Ukrainian version appears as *Nema sechi terpity tsi pekel'ni boroshna* ('There is no urine to tolerate those hellish flours'), a sentence that makes no sense whatsoever to a Ukrainian speaker and therefore produces a humorous reaction, which the speaker of the source (Russian) language hardly intended. As is the case in the transformation from *khlopok* into *bavovna*, the factor of homonymy and paronymy comes into play: the Russian *mochi* is the genitive case of two distinct nouns *moch'* ('strength') and *mocha* ('urine', stress on the second syllable), which are differentiated by stress; likewise, the Russian *muki* is both the nominative case of the plural form of *muka* ('agony', stress on the first syllable) and the genitive case of the Singulare Tantum noun *muka* ('flour', stress on the second syllable). Adding to the humorous impression of the given case of mockslation is the fact that the rendering of the Russian *muki* into Ukrainian, *boroshna*, the 'plural' form of *boroshno* ('flour'), is a non-existent word, since the Ukrainian *boroshno* is a Singulare Tantum as well and, consequently, does not have a grammatically correct plural form.

Without expanding upon further explanation, note should be taken that the Russian phrase in question, *Mochi nyet tyerpet' eti adskiye muki*, is in fact the second part of the sentence *Pol strany uzhe byez elyektropitaniya* ('Half the country already had electricity cut off'), which was again 'mockslated' into Ukrainian as *Pidloha krainy vzhe bez electroharchuvannia* ('The floor of the country is already without power nutrition'). The Russian phrase was spread on social media in the autumn of 2022, when Russian attacks on the Ukrainian energy grid intensified, as part of a

Russian influence operation designed to stoke public discontentment in Ukraine with the situation at hand ("Technologies of spreading Russian psyops", 2023).

Since mockslations under discussion are intrinsically rooted in situational peculiarities of the Ukrainian and Russian languages, their rendering in English is a tall order. In most cases, a descriptive approach can be argued to be the most optimal, since it both provides clarity to target audiences and renders the underlying play on words. Therefore, in the case of *bavovna*, the translator from Ukrainian into English might quote *verbatim* the phrase containing the said word and provide additional context for English-speaking audiences – as is the case in a news report by the English edition of *Ukrainska Pravda*, a Ukrainian news media outlet, that quotes a Ukrainian military commander as saying that "[*b*]avovna ('cotton') is blooming on the Tavriia front and Russians are burning" ("Armed Forces of Ukraine destroy eight ammunition storage points", 2023).

In some contexts, however, the translator might attempt to render the play on words exclusively by means of the target language – including during oral interpretation or the dubbing of a video message, when temporal constraints have to be taken into account. For instance, the following rendering could be suggested for the above quote: "It's been *poping* on the Tavriia front and Russians are burning." Here, a play is attempted on the words 'to pop' ('to make a light explosive sound'), a rendering of Russian *khlopok*, and 'poppy', a red flower. Another suggested way of rendering the quote might be "Russians have *cottoned on* to their fate on the Tavriia front", which employs a play on the phrasal verb 'to cotton on to' (meaning 'understand'), a direct reference to the Ukrainian mockslation.

Admittedly, and understandably, the suggested translation lacks the emotional appeal of the Ukrainian original. Moreover, it remains to be seen if such effort need be exerted in the first place, given that the *bavovna* meme does not appear to have caught on in English-speaking media discourse and was instead limited to social media use. On a more general level, plays on words, or puns, are a stylistic device that is often employed in political discourse (Tsakona, 2013; Vasko, & Aleksievets, 2021) and necessitate resort to extralinguistic as well as intratextual contexts for a faithful rendering into the target language. Therefore, such translation, performed on a case-by-case basis, will require extensive background research by a translator.

Equally challenging is translation of invectives, or swear words, which have only recently emerged as part of the political discourse surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian war. Existing research into the pragmatics of translation of invectives from and into the Ukrainian language (Trachivska, 2015; Turyshcheva, & Matiushenko, 2020; Tulupov, & Kirichenko, 2022) makes a point of a variety of translation devices that might be employed in order to strike a delicate balance between rendering an appropriate emotional appeal and keeping in alignment with the communicative purpose of the expletive in question.

In Russian and Ukrainian political discourses, pejoratives have been employed in varying degrees, the most famous examples including Vladimir Putin's *mochit' v sortire* ('wiping out in the outhouse') comment with respect to the First Chechen War; *Putin – khuilo!* ('Putin is a dickhead'), a chant devised by Ukrainian football fans to mock the Russian *tzar* following his decision to invade Ukraine in 2014; and *Russkiy voiennyi korabl', idi nakhyi* ('Russian military ship, go fuck yourself'), a phrase coined by a Ukrainian defender in response to a Russian officer's offer to surrender in the early days of the full-scale

invasion. As Sevastiuk (2021) rightly notes, "[s]ince applying invectives by political leaders in communication is aimed primarily at provoking a certain reaction from political opponents and the public, the translator cannot focus exclusively on the language component. One of the main tasks is to create a translation that would carry the same communicative load and seek to achieve the impact on the recipient intended by the initial addresser" (Sevastiuk, 2021, pp. 2–3).

The use of an invective by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky *vis-à-vis* Vladimir Putin in December 2024 has, for some time, rekindled the salience of faithful rendering of expletives from Ukrainian into English. Responding to Putin's proposal of a 'technological duel', whereby a Ukrainian city protected by a Western air defence system would be targeted by a Russian missile, Zelensky posted on X: "People are dying, and he thinks it's 'interesting'... Dumbass" (Volodymyr Zelenskyy / Володимир Зеленський, 2024). Here, however, the English and Ukrainian versions of the post were published separately, the Ukrainian one using the word *dovboyob*, which arguably is a stronger expletive than 'dumbass'. Dictionary definitions of 'dumbass' suggest that it refers, in an offensive way, to a stupid person (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This is not exactly the case with *dovboyob*, which – while not registered with classical Ukrainian dictionaries – carries an additional meaning of annoyance, or perhaps even obnoxiousness, imparted by the speaker ('A Dictionary of Modern Ukrainian Slang', n.d.). Therefore, the words *dovboyob* and 'dumbass' cannot be considered to be translation equivalents; 'fucktard', 'dumbfuck', or 'motherfucker' (such as in 'a fabulous motherfucker' – *kazkovyi dovboyob*) could be suggested instead.

Such highly unusual public use of a pejorative by the Ukrainian President in relation to his nominal counterpart of the aggressor State warrants closer examination in terms of the communicative intention that might have been behind it. Since invectives, as has already been mentioned, are employed by politicians with a view to provoking a particular response, they are the linguistic 'attention-seekers'; therefrom springs the logical conclusion that the posting of separate messages in both the English and Ukrainian languages on X implies that the invective should have attracted coverage in both Ukrainian- and English-speaking news media. Conversely, there appears to have been little media attention to the 'dumbass' remark; *CNN* cited what it called 'a tart remark' ("Zelensky calls Putin a 'dumbass' for challenging a missile 'duel'", 2024), while *Politico* reported that Zelensky had "some choice words" for Putin ("Zelenskyy calls Putin a 'dumbass'", 2024). In social media, discussions revolved around apparent differences in connotation and register between *dovboyob* and 'dumbass' and not around the message that the President of Ukraine appeared to intend to communicate. The given case, therefore, illustrates the importance of adequate translation in political communication in terms of both semantic and pragmatic aspects. One might only wonder as to what effect the more adequate rendering of *dovboyob* might have had on English-speaking audiences and whether the instance of an invective employed by the president of a country that suffered an unjustifiable act of aggression against the perceived leader of the aggressor State would have hijacked more airtime than it did. And while there remains no way of confirming this, the ongoing currency of the phrases *Putin – khuilo* and *Russkiy voiennyi korabl', idi nakhyi*, dating back to several years ago, only reinforce the assumption that the effect would have been more visible.

Discussion and conclusions

It has been argued that translation pertaining to international relations and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war in particular is subject to considerations of the tumultuous historical background of the countries' bilateral relations and consequent implications that they have had on the Russian and Ukrainian language. Never since the Second World War has the impact of a 'hot' war been as profound on the international system as is the case with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, spilling over to the domain of linguistics as well; hence, for instance, the derogatory expression 'Little Russians' (*malorosy*) or intentional attachment of inferiority through linguistic devices. As has been demonstrated by the example of a speech by then Vice President of the United States Joe Biden, in communicating to Ukrainian-speaking audiences, an illocutionary and perlocutionary act – the communicational intent behind a translation into the English language – might carry with it an extralinguistic sense that relates to the existing sociopolitical realities of a certain point in time ("battle against corruption") and might have otherwise been omitted. The agency of translation as part of a culturally, historically, socially, and politically stipulated praxis points to the function of translation *per se* as a proleptic and retrospective rhetorical vehicle to push for a religious or partisan agenda.

Wars present an additional challenge to a translator, faced with the need to ensure that a message in the target language is rendered in the English (or other target) language as adequately as practicable, with both linguistic and extralinguistic factors accounted for. In the paper presented, such challenges have been exemplified in mockslation, a portmanteau of 'mockery' and 'translation', and the use of invectives in political discourse. Mockslation, which appears to have originated from deficiencies of machine translation from Russian into Ukrainian and *vice versa*, can be argued to function as a *shibboleth*, a marker of Ukrainian identity based upon knowledge of the Ukrainian language, and, in the words of Svitlana Hrytsenko, a "psychological protective charm" a recompense in the form of humour and sarcasm for the psychological wrongs inflicted upon Ukrainians by Russia. In the case of *bavovna*, for instance, a machine translation error has been reclaimed by Ukrainian speakers and has acquired the status of a running joke. As per invectives, their use in political discourse, albeit not non-existent, remains scarce and limited predominantly to the non-public domain. All the more demonstrative is reference to Vladimir Putin as *dovboyob* by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky and the seemingly ineffective rendition of the invective into English, 'dumbass', which failed to elicit the emotional response equivalent to that in the Ukrainian language.

The paper invites further discussion as to the role of translation in the context of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, the authors argue that further development of the concept of mockslation warrants a more extensive examination and might be expanded to include translations into and from the English language as well. Other prospective fields of study include translation manipulations employed by Russian propaganda and the interplay of visual communication and translation in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which have not been dealt with in the present paper.

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АГЕНТНІСТЬ ПЕРЕКЛАДУ В ПОЛІТИЧНОМУ ТА ЛІТЕРАТУРНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ (НА ТЕКСТОВОМУ МАТЕРІАЛІ ПОВНОМАСШТАБНОГО ВТОРГНЕННЯ РОСІЇ В УКРАЇНУ)

Вступ. Повномасштабне вторгнення Росії в Україну не оминуло сферу лінгвістики – починаючи від змін у сприйнятті російської та української мов і закінчуючи появою нових лексем, пов'язаних із новими реаліями. Хоча окресленим вище питанням вже присвячено чимало досліджень, порівняно мало уваги досі приділялося перекладацьким проблемам, які стосуються нинішньої війни. З огляду на комплексне тло російсько-українських відносин, такі проблеми проявляються в різних сферах, зокрема в літературі та політиці, які, можна стверджувати, часом перетинаються. Стаття має на меті заповнити прогалину у вивченні лінгвістичних аспектів нинішнього повномасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну через призму перекладу.

Методи. Спираючись на попередні ґрунтовні дослідження ролі перекладу у достовірному відтворенні політичного й літературного дискурсу в ширшому історичному контексті російсько-українських відносин, автори застосовують дискурс-аналіз і кейс-стаді, щоб окреслити деякі з ключових викликів, які постають перед перекладачем у спілкуванні з глобальною англомовною аудиторією.

Результати. З'ясовано, що перекладацькі проблеми, пов'язані з повномасштабним вторгненням Росії в Україну, нерозривно пов'язані з історичними передумовами відносин між двома країнами, і їх необхідно враховувати для забезпечення адекватного перекладу з англійської мови та англійською мовою. Восні дні, що тривають, також актуалізували використання нових словотворів та проблеми їхнього перекладу для англомовної аудиторії.

Висновки. Дослідження запрошує до подальшого обговорення впливу війни на лінгвістику та переклад, зокрема нормалізації пейоративного дискурсу щодо уявного ворога та поняття 'mockslation' ("сміхоперекладу"), запропонованого тут для опису нових лексем, що виникають у результаті навмисних чи ненавмисних недоліків перекладу.

Ключові слова: російсько-українська війна, переклад, лінгвістика, дискурс, агентність перекладу.

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