Writer's Change of Language: Nabokov and Others

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This research focuses on a writer's choice of language, primarily on Vladimir Nabokov's choice, but also on Joseph Brodsky and Vasily Aksyonov's. All three writers are prominent in the context of Russian literature; they are recognized as those who possess a great mastery of language, and they have, each in their own right, a wide readership. All three of these Russian-born writers had written and published works in Russian before switching to English, which occurred, in all three cases, late in life. Nabokov, the author of a number of widely acclaimed works in both his primary languages, Russian and English, switched to English determinedly and almost entirely. Nabokov represents a very important figure of a rare highly successful metamorphosis, not only cross-language but also cross-cultural. Joseph Brodsky was somewhat less successful, but he is still a widely acknowledged writer in both English and Russian. And finally Vasily Aksyonov represents a telling "failure" as "an English-writing author project," remaining an important writer in Russian. What was supposed to become his masterpiece in English, a novel "The Yolk of the Egg," was deemed unmarketable by publishers, perhaps not as much in connection with the author's linguistic ability as with his writing strategies.

I suggest that Russian, being the first language for those three authors, influenced their writing in English in terms of sentence structures and even methods of writing. It was not enough to change the language to perform a cultural transition. The writer switching languages should translate themselves into a different kind of writer. They had to perform a transduction, transmitting one range of indexical footing into another kind of indexical footing that would complete a similar but not quite identical work, meaningful within the adopted culture, both in their texts and in their self-representation. I argue that for the named writers the change of language was a politically motivated decision predicated on certain language ideologies. Writing in English entailed a considerable, performed or attempted, change of identity and self-positionality, and required a sociocultural self-transmogrification.

1. Nabokov's Ambidextrous Bilingualism

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Nabokov's first works were in Russian. To list, "Mary," "King, Queen, Knave," "The Defense," "The Eye," "Glory," "Laughter in the Dark," "Despair," "Invitation to a Beheading," "The Gift," "The Enchanter," and others. "The Enchanter" is written in 1939, and since 1941, the year Nabokov writes "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight" in English, all his major works were composed in English. They include "Bend Sinister," "Lolita" (which he self-translated into Russian), "Pnin," "Pale Fire," "Ada of Ardor: A Family Chronicle," "Look at the Harlequins!" and others.

Nabokov is also known for his translation of the masterpiece of the classical Russian literature, a novel in verse "Eugene Onegin" by Alexander Pushkin, which he transformed, through adding ample commentary and a treatise on translation, into a hypertext and arguably a completely different "utterance," to use the word in Bakhtinian sense.

After he decidedly switched to English, Nabokov once wrote to his wife: «On the way a lightning bolt of undefined inspiration ran right through me, a terrible desire to write, and write in Russian—but it's impossible. I don't think anyone who hasn't experienced these feelings can properly appreciate them, the torment, the tragedy. English in this case is an illusion, ersatz.» (Quoted by Boyd, 1991, 52).

The beautiful quality of prose which Nabokov is a long acknowledged master is, of course, evident in every line. Maybe even a little too evident. You are rarely allowed to forget just how beautiful it all is. And what is especially thrilling about Nabokov's English prose, is that it has a rhythm of that old Russian grand literary style which demands to be imitated by every Russian writer, but which is so difficult to imitate. Nabokov does not imitate anything, that's the natural rhythm of his breath.

Nabokov left Russia in 1919, after the defeat of the White Army, in the aftermath of the Russian February Revolution of 1917 and ensued ferocious civil war. At the time he was twenty years old. He lived in England where he attended Cambridge, and then in Germany. When the Nazis came to power, with the increasingly toxic atmosphere, resulting in Nabokov's Jewish wife Vera losing her job, he moved to France. In 1940, Nabokov and his family fled from the advancing German troops to the United States. His brother Sergei stayed, was captured, and died in the Neuengamme concentration camp in 1945. Nabokov seems to be touched by every vicissitude of history, every contemporaneous to him tragedy. Once in America, Nabokov changed the primary language of his writing, decidedly and unequivocally.

Why do writers change languages? How does it happen? Is it always a conscious decision, which language to choose for writing?

Nabokov presents here a special case. He was a trilingual speaker since childhood– Russian, English, and French were spoken at home. He belonged to the circles of Russian nobility where children sometimes did not speak Russian well. His uncle's primary conversational language was French. Nabokov also wrote in French.

Only writing in English could have given him access to a better social status, and the privileges associated with the life of a writer in America. To evoke Bourdieu's concept of linguistic market, he chose to play a role as his language ability afforded him, which could bring him social and material advantages.

Despite an obvious fact that you should choose a language among those that you have at your disposal, it is not necessarily always a rational choice. Even considering the determination with which Nabokov later, in a collection of interviews "Strong Opinions," took great pains to assure his readers that English might be considered his second native language, and, more importantly, that he is an American writer, these claims met and would meet resistance. Once he professed "I am as American as April in Arizona." Literary scholar Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in her piece "Nabokov as an American Writer" asks: "But just how American *is* the month of April in the state of Arizona?" (Sweeney, 1994, p. 325).

In an interview for *The New York Times* in 1969, Nabokov was asked point blank: "You have called yourself 'an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England' How does this make you an American writer?" To which he had to answer: "An American writer means, in the present case, a writer who has been an American citizen for a quarter of a century. It means, moreover, that all my works appear first in America. It also means that America is the only country where I feel mentally and emotionally at home. Rightly or wrongly, I am not one of those perfectionists who by dint of hypercriticizing America find themselves wallowing in the same muddy camp with indigenous rascals and envious foreign observers. My admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the jolts and flaws that, indeed, are nothing in comparison to the abyss of evil in the history of Russia, not to speak of other, more exotic, countries" (Nabokov, 1969).

Nabokov's professed love for America is very political. He is willing to excuse the unfortunate bloody pages of history of his adopted country and in his rendition of Russia and "other, more exotic, countries," sounds almost like an ideal masculine figure of white supremacy brimming with a feeling of superiority in regard to subaltern subjects.

Despite all the ardor with which Nabokov proclaimed himself an American writer, his English was and is challenged. One critic lamented that she does not know which language it is that Nabokov uses but it is not English. There is still a notion of language purity, which is threatened by all kinds of non-English agents writing and speaking in English. One could surmise that a century ago the idea of language purity was stronger. Now we are somewhat more open to the idea that there is no "right" English, and many kinds of writing are possible, none is inherently better than another. And yet, it is a "standard English" which has prerogative over other Englishes in terms of what is English and what is not.

There is little doubt that were it not for the forced emigration, Nabokov's writing would remain Russian. However, in emigration he knew that if he is going to write in Russian, he would not have a better circle of readers than that of the post-revolutionary emigrants. There was no hope to reach a big audience. Therefore, if he chose to continue writing in Russian, he could remain one of those essentially unsuccessful Russian writers who were not widely read during their life time despite being profound artists.

Nabokov's decision to change languages was pragmatic and strategic. It was not an easy decision, nor was it an easy change.

Nabokov's most profound biographer Brian Boyd attests that "A Forgotten Poet," the poem written as late as 1944, "was decidedly Russian in subject and milieu," "like every

one of Nabokov's English works since his arrival in America." (Boyd, 1991, p. 70). What it means, is that to change language is not everything for a writer, far from it. Changing of language requires and brings change of identity; but if change of identity is something unavoidable, it is also unattainable. For Nabokov, the challenge was, to transform himself from an émigré writer with a difficult fate and perverse fame into a world intellectual who felt at home in America and anywhere else.

Nabokov never forgot his Russianness, but what he did is—he inherently rejected his status of an immigrant. In one of his interviews he says, "we adopted each other" [he and America].

Contradictorily to the image of a Nabokov-native-speaker and a master of English which Nabokov tries to construct, Nabokov's English was not free of mistakes. Thus, he once used the expression "My needles have teased out its horny sex," speaking of a butterfly. The *New Yorker*'s editors explained to him why it won't work; reflecting on this episode, Nabokov wrote: "This has somewhat subdued me—I was getting rather pleased with my English."

Nabokov was acclaimed before his first novel in America was published. Apart from being known in the emigrant circles in Europe, he also published short stories and chapters of his memoir in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. And yet, despite the fact that he had been publishing works in these prominent magazines, he still struggled—with editors, who inserted unneeded and unnecessary corrections into his texts, and—for years—with finding a stable job in American academia.

2. Other Writers

Nabokov is one of the best-known bilingual writers. But those are plenty. Among other famous bilingual writers was Rilke, who wrote in German and French, Samuel Beckett (English and French), Milan Kundera (Czech and French), and Joseph Conrad (Polish and English).

Another important Russian writer who achieved prominence in both Russian and English was Joseph (Iosif) Brodsky, who referred to himself as "a Russian poet and an English essayist."

Now, when English has become something of the mediaeval Latin for science, many scholars from all over the world are writing in English. English is heavily promoted as a ticket to the future for students. Although people are encouraged to study English and for many disciplines it is nearly the only way to participate in the global scientific discourse, writers, even having achieved great fluency and expressivity of their English, are persistently reminded that English is not their native language. Pointing it out is used as a piece of information supposedly undermining their arguments.

Brodsky left Russia in 1972, when he was 32, after a long story of persecutions from the Soviet government. Unlike Nabokov, he was not a speaker of English since childhood. He was a self-taught scholar of English, his first fascination with the language occurred while he was still living in Russia and read John Donne in original. A former student of Brodsky and a scholar William Wadsworth gave following attestation to Brodsky's English—which no doubt would have enraged the master, were he not spared from it by

his death: “Yet, at the same time, he was terribly insecure about his English, acutely aware that his Russian accent often made it difficult to understand what he was saying, especially when his mind went into overdrive and he began to speak very rapidly. <…> Nothing is more difficult to do well in English poetry, especially when the lines are short, say a rhymed dimeter or trimeter. The ear must be pitch-perfect, and Joseph's ear for English was, naturally enough, not.” (Polukhina, 2008).

Brodsky’s friends recall in their memoirs how Brodsky read to them English poetry and they could not understand a word, while he was very pleased with himself.

A long-time Brodsky’s friend Ellendea Proffer Teasley, the author of the memoir *Brodsky Among Us*, wrote: “He perfected his English at fantastic speed and started studying rhyming dictionaries and dictionaries of slang. However, and this is in no way odd, he could not feel the appropriateness of a word, given its normal and historical usage, he was limited to what a dictionary gave as examples.” “Moreover,” reviewer Cynthia Haven adds, “he continued to hear the Russian intonations in his head, and so he wrote in English with his Russian accent and stresses intact.” (Haven, 2016). Nevertheless, Brodsky wrote in English. He was a prominent writer expelled from the Soviet Union, won a Nobel Prize in literature “for an all-embracing authorship, imbued with clarity of thought and poetic intensity” in 1987, and he was also a Poet Laureate of the United States (1991).

Another case of switching to English of a Russian writer was less of a success but no less fascinating. Vasily Aksyonov was a dissident writer who nevertheless was published and acclaimed in the USSR. His mother, Yevgenia Ginsburg, despite being a communist, was arrested and spent 18 years in the Gulag. Aksyonov moved to the USA in 1980, accepting the offer made by the U.S. government. At the time he was 48. As writer Yevgeny Popov says, “Vasily Aksyonov had a limited U.S. readership. None of his books - with the exception of *The Burn* - was a bestseller or commercial success. Aksyonov tried to write in English, but his first and only effort, *Egg Yolk*, was a flop. When Random House refused to publish his books, Aksyonov left America for France.” Aksyonov moved to France in 2004. Random House indeed rejected *The Yolk of the Egg*, as well as several other publishing houses; French publishers were more interested. Probably though, it was not only rejections of the novel that defined this move, since he lived in Washington D.C. and Virginia for 24 years. This word, “flop,” in regard to the novel, was then repeated in other writings (Riley, 2009), granted by people who have not read the book.

With great difficulty I obtained the text of this novel, *The Yolk of the Egg*, written in Washington D.C. in 1986-88, from the only source I could detect, the archive of the writer stashed in Special Collections and Archives of George Mason University. The novel was completed eight years after Aksyonov left Russia for the U.S. The language with which it is written, seems to possess the plasticity and rich vocabulary one would expect from the writer. But the milieu described in the novel is largely Soviet; the landscapes, environments, and characters require comments to be understood by someone who is not familiar with Soviet realities. The plot consists of the fight between KGB and CIA who try to lay their hands on Dostoevsky’s memoir about his meeting with Karl Marx. This meeting happens at a roulette table, and Dostoevsky is not alone but with his 25-year-old lover, for whom Marx also falls. As playful as it sounds, this was not compelling for the American publisher. In Aksyonov’s attestation, they expected something more serious.

Journalist David Streitfeld provides the following insight: “A surprising number of fictional characters in current American fiction are authors,” he [Aksyonov—V.O.] wrote in 1987. "The temptation is great. I know from experience. Every morning I sit down at my desk, look out over the rooftops of Washington, and yearn to write: ‘V. Axolotl, writer in exile, sat down at his desk and looked out over the rooftops of Washington.’ But I restrain my narcissism: Mustn't set a bad example for the young” (Streitfeld, 1991)!

The novel which American publishers did not want to publish, was not the only unsuccess contradicting the previous feel of fame and mass funbase that Aksyonov had in Russia. A collection of short stories *The Destruction of Pompeii and Other Stories*, old Aksyonov stories translated into English, which came out in Ardis Contemporary Russian Prose Publishing House in 1991, has gotten little attention. As of today, it is still on the market and one could buy it. Ironically, *The Yolk of the Egg* is found on Amazon.com and other book-selling websites in Russian. There is not even a mention that the text was first produced by the writer in English and that the Russian text is the author’s translation. There is little surprise that his next books Aksyonov wrote in Russian.

Still other writers never tried their non-native languages for their creative work, even after years of living in a foreign country. Thus, W.G. Sebald knew English very well and closely collaborated with his English translator, but wrote all four of his amazing books in German despite living and teaching in England since 1966, and in 1966 he was only 22 years old.

3. How English is Nabokov’s English?

To answer the question “How English is Nabokov’s English?” one must pose next to it another question: “How Russian is Nabokov’s Russian?” Perhaps Nabokov’s English and Nabokov’s Russian are just two of Nabokov’s languages, indicative not so much of Englishness or Russianness but rather of Nabokovianness.

Does Nabokov’s English sound like a native English for a native English speaker? An overwhelming number of evidence that I have, suggests, yes, Nabokov’s English sounds perfectly natural for an American ear. Yet for me, since I am a native speaker of Russian, his English also sounds very Russian. He uses constructions of phrases that have recognizable clauses. Nabokov’s English has Russian skeleton with muscles of English words. Same holds true in regard to Brodsky and Aksyonov, who dressed Russian phrases in English attire. The structures of their English sentences are shaped by their primary language, Russian. For instance, you would not meet in Nabokov’s prose a phrase with a dangling participle. The classic in the Russian literature example of such phrase is Chekhov’s “Approaching the station and admiring the scenery, my hat blew off.” Chekhov specifically constructed this phrase in order to mock the absurdity of this grammatical construction: *my hat* is admiring the scenery; *my hat* is approaching the station. The hat is the subject of the sentence. This is, arguably, an acceptable grammar form in contemporary English, although it has been argued that it is an example of bad writing (Pereltsvaig, 2011). In Russian the construction of this type is a rude stylistic mistake, and so there is no way Nabokov would commit it—in Russian, nor even in English. It would not be found in Brodsky’s or Aksyonov’s writing. I venture to suggest that in the whole oeuvres of Russian writers who first became professional in Russian, and then started writing in English, one would not find a single dangling participle.

Even after Nabokov wrote his greatest books in English, he regretted the language that went unused: "I still feel pangs of that substitution, they have not been allayed by the Russian poems (my best) that I wrote in New York", he said in an interview (Nabokov, 1990). For some of his works, he used two languages. His memoir is one such example. When he translated "Conclusive Evidence" into Russian – the work received the title "Drugie Berega" ("Other Shores") – he added pages in Russian that he later translated into English for the revised edition of "Speak, Memory." But the majority of his main works were written directly in English. He used a sharp pencil on cards that were then collected in shoeboxes, where he rearranged the episodes coming to him not in a chronological or other sequential order.

The fact that English was not Nabokov's native language is curiously evident in one of the most famous passages in the world literature, the one with which "Lolita" starts: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta."

One does not exactly pronounce in English "lo lee ta" with three steps of the tongue, as described by Nabokov. These steps are not following an imaginary staircase, the tongue does not descend from the palate to the teeth; rather, these steps form a pattern of "forth—back—forth," so that the tip of the tongue finishes a little closer than the point in which it has started. Nor do the movements form the three supposed steps in Russian, where "lee" is significantly softer and "т" is not as dry as English "t." This Nabokovian passage beautifully shows the narrator's obsession with the object of his desire through the bodily connection to the name and the way it is pronounced but betrays Nabokov as a fantastic speaker of reinvented by him English.

Nabokov was challenged in regard to this charming mystery not once. At one point he was forced to provide a (somewhat angry) clarification: "'Lolita' should not be pronounced in the English or Russian fashion (as he thinks it should), but with a trill of Latin 'l's and a delicate toothy 't'" (Nabokov, 1990).

As linguist Morgan Siewert once observed in our conversation, "With all apologies to his genius, I pronounce it 'LowLEEduh'."[1]

Nabokov finished *Lolita* in 1953, at the age of 54, and wrote in his diary: "Finished *Lolita* which was begun exactly 5 years ago." She was about to bring him worldwide fame.

In her essay "For The Record, Lolita Was Not Sexually Precocious — She Was Raped," Koa Beck shares her own experience of reading Lolita as an adolescent girl, and proceeds: "It wasn't until I reread the book as an adult that I realized Lolita had been raped. She had been raped repeatedly, from the time she was 12 to when she was 15 years old" (Beck, 2011). Nabokov appears to be oblivious to this fact, like generations of readers, critics, and admirers.

4. Language Game

[1] Curiously, Umberto Eco presented Italian version of this passage in his "Nonita," where three steps are finally made as described: "Tre sillabe, come una negazione fatta di dolcezza: No. Ni. Ta. Nonita che io possa ricordarti sinché la tua immagine non sarà tenebra e il tuo luogo sepolcro."

Ludwig Wittgenstein once observed: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein, 2007). Perhaps the reversed is interesting to consider as well: the limits of my world are the limits of my language. When you are expanding, switching, changing worlds, it is difficult, maybe next to impossible, not to change the language.

But perhaps the most surprising discovery is that with the language change very little actually changes. The search of the intonation was and is the most difficult search. No beauty of the language would amend for the wrong intonation, as well as for our shortcomings—and Nabokov’s metaphysical fail, his inexorable narcissism, is equally present in both his incarnations.

In theorizing language game, Wittgenstein puts a stress on mutual assuredness of the players that the game is to be played. Momentary but important agreements, dozens of assertions we make while we converse, allow us to understand each other. The change of language, one could surmise, is a great change of all assumptions. While the vast field of references is blank for the speaker, language game is still possible. Some social games are easily reconstructed—the situation in a market, at the doctor’s, office at a restaurant, in an airport—and some require additional agility—a seminar, a presentation, a lecture—and finally some are very difficult—ironically, to this type the situation of an ordinary conversation belongs, inasmuch as it requires understanding of jokes and references by native speakers to their favorite TV shows that they used to know by heart when they were children. But all these situations depend on the mutual agreement that the game should be or might be played. The personal linguistic ability to converse—what is called “language competence” (Chomsky, 1965)—is, paradoxically, only one condition of a successful language game. Communicative competence might be present in the absence of full language competence. To communicate, you have to be in certain situations, which would require to communicate.

5. Concluding Remarks

What does it tell us that so many prominent writers are willing to deprive their native languages of their language-changing work, for the sake of an unsure swim in the oceanic realm of English, in terms of language ideologies?

For the Russian-speaking writers considered here, the reason and the process for why and how they switched languages were in each case relatively clear. The “why” is a forced emigration. The circumstances are different in each case, ranging from a threat to life to an unbearable atmosphere, but the factor of not a wholly deliberate choice of moving to an English-speaking country, is present. At the twentieth century, it was not rare for Russian-born writers to make this choice. In fact, the move of Nabokov, Brodsky, and Aksyonov loosely correspond with three waves of Russian emigration: the post-Revolutionary (1917), the high Soviet years, and the late Soviet, pre-Gorbachev periods. Other examples of Russian-born writers who published their first works in Russian and later switched or added English, include Nina Berberova and Ayn Rand. In each case it was the case of linguistic exile as it was an instance of emigration. Still others migrated into French culture and language, like Ukrainian-born—Kiev back then being a part of Russian Empire—Irene Nemirovsky and Elsa Triolet. Nevertheless, it was more common for writers to stick to their mother tongue while living abroad, than venturing into the wastelands of other languages.

The question "how" is answered by clarification of reasons: since the writers were displaced, they were under the conditions of immersion into another language.

Writing in another language means that the writer does not write in her own language. The subsequent translations deal with original, and text is shaped by the language it is written in, because language is not just the medium for pure writer's thought, but the very body of the writing itself, its flesh and blood.

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