

ON TRANSLATING TITLES IN ARTISTIC DISCOURSE

LYUDMILA BOYKO

*Faculty of Linguistics and Cross-Cultural Communications
Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad
Russia
boyko14@gmail.com*

As a specific type of proper names, the titles of works of art constitute a very important and highly translation-sensitive element of art discourse. This paper aims to demonstrate how specific titling in arts affects the translation process. To that end, a brief overview of the title's role in verbal and non-verbal discourse is given. Further on, it is shown how, due to the involvement of heterogenic semiotic codes, specific functioning of titles results in a different perception strategy, making most routine title translation strategies inapplicable. The paper concludes that the choice of translation strategy is determined by various extra-linguistic factors, such as alternative titling, back-translation situations, and the requirements of the commissioner.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a specialised translation area, art writing appears to be barely explored in Translation Studies. Meanwhile, practicing translators dealing with art matters face numerous challenges. One such challenge is translating the titles of works of art. The title is a particular type of proper name which proves to be a vital and highly translation-sensitive component of a work of art, and therefore requires individual treatment. Its unique nature allows it to function as a crossroads where two semiotic systems meet to create wholeness and coherence in a work of art. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that in dealings with titles, the use of translation techniques is largely determined by a great variety of extra-linguistic factors, such as the requirements of the commissioner, tradition, the availability of the picture, and many others. The article postulates that among the art titles' primary functions are those of integration and interpretation, and the translators' ultimate task is to ensure adequate functioning of the title in the target language (TL). It should be specified that in this paper the field of research is limited to titling in fine arts, such as paintings or graphic works.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1. Art writing in Translation Studies

Having been scarcely researched, the translation of art texts as an area of specialised

Translation Studies is badly in need of closer attention¹. The good news, however, is that the Visual Research Institute (VARIE) in Edinburgh has recently shown a keen interest in the translation of texts dealing with arts matters; within this scope, some of the translator's challenges have come to the public's notice.

With art writing being in neglect as a field of linguistic study, it is small wonder that translation scholars have largely disregarded titles as their subject. The extensively quoted work by Bernard Borsedon (Borsedon 2002), a researcher into the nature of titles in visual arts, remains the only respectable and most reliable source for those who are attracted by the intricacies of titling in arts.

At the same time, as a constituent part of *verbal* texts the title has enjoyed a significant amount of attention in Text Linguistics. Extensive literature exists on titling in different types of verbal discourse; the types and functions of titles have been thoroughly examined and compared in virtually all fictional genres, in learned discourse, and also in the press. Today, Chinese linguists pay much attention to the functioning of titles, predominantly in specialised writing.

As a subject of *translation*, however, the title remains barely explored even in mono-semiotic verbal discourse. Practicing translators would know that translating titles is often extremely difficult and time-consuming, because it involves a great deal of creativity and research. It is especially challenging to deal with the texts² consisting entirely of titles, because, in the absence of any context, they call for extensive explorations and double-checking; for the same reason they often entail a considerable share of guesswork, due to possible multiple interpretations of polysemous words.

Back in 1989 the author of this article devoted a significant part of her PhD thesis to the translation of titles of literary and scholarly texts (Boyko 1989). Since then few steps seem to have been made in this direction. Anyhow, whatever research has been conducted, it has hardly ever gone beyond the titling of *verbal* texts, popular movie titles being the only exception.

2.2. Titles as part of mono-semiotic verbal discourse

In mono-semiotic verbal discourse the title invariably precedes the text and is markedly separated from its body. It is important to emphasise that the title precedes the actual body of the text both physically (graphically) and psychologically—it is the point where the reader starts 'consuming' the text. The weightiest of the three 'strong

1 The author Maria Kasandrinou dealing with specialised translation in the sphere of arts admits that her main concern is training for translation while establishing art translation is a subordinate aim resulting from the research.

2 For the sake of convenience, the term 'text' is used throughout this article to denote any unit of verbal text the translator is given to translate, regardless of its form, content or coherence. Therefore, a list of labels, a document, or an artist's musings on their work, etc., are all covered by the term, because they are 'texts' for the translator.

positions' (Arnold 1978, 25) of the text (the other two being its beginning and end), the title owes its significance to the noticeable place it occupies: it sits apart from the rest of the text thus catching the recipient's eye and thereby making the reader pause before immersing in the text continuum. Indeed, such a position enables the title to fulfill its prospective function in the first place: once the signal expressing 'aboutness' (van Dijk 1977, 132) is received, the very first thing we do is read the title and predict the forthcoming content. According to Christiane Nord, in verbal texts titles may fulfill up to six functions: distinctive, meta-textual, phatic, referential, expressive, and appellative (Nord 1995, 264). However, each of these functions may be viewed as umbrella functions for a more diverse and ramified list of (potential) missions of the title such as those singled out in (Boyko 1989, 45): graphic conspicuousness, text formation, predication, signalling, etc.

The title operates both as an integral and integrating part of the text; it is the very element that binds the text it names into a whole, thus 'sealing' its message. At the same time, it should be regarded as a semi-independent mini-text in its own right (Boyko 1989), no matter whether it consists of just one word, or more resembles a little story, like Daniel Defoe's proverbial *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great river of Oroonogue; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With an Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pirates.*

The title of a verbal text is exactly the point where the recipient's associations are evoked, anticipations formed and predictions about the content to be read are made.

Moreover, the interpretation of the title at this stage of text perception allows the reader to make decisions as to the relevance of a piece of writing to his / her interests; to determine the cognitive space, and ultimately to decide whether to read the text at all or disregard it. By no means are all titles as straightforward in fulfilling their prognostic function as one might expect: on the contrary, many of them (primarily in fiction) are intentionally misleading. However, their highly specific interpretative nature should never be ignored. Therefore, with its hermeneutic potential in view, the title deserves its controversial status of an integrative (therefore, dependent) part of discourse and a relatively autonomous mini-text.

3. FUNCTIONING OF TITLES IN ART WRITING

Works of art did not always have titles. It is generally assumed that in visual arts the need for titles came only when the first collections were formed approximately in the 14th century. Initially, the primary aim of labelling was to keep a record of works of art (Suteau). Bosredon maintains that the title's functions are labelling, maintaining the

status of a proper name and establishing rapport with the image. The latter is of utmost importance in maintaining a relationship between the title and the image creating the integrity of the work of art and thus forming the message:

Nous avons vu plus haut que les titres classiques présentent une sorte d'autonomie par rapport aux toiles, cette autonomie étant sémiotiquement attestée par une répartition traditionnelle en deux zones distinctes du langage et de l'image, le cartel du titre d'une part, le cadre de la toile d'autre part. Cependant, les titres restent toujours dans une relation de dépendance par rapport aux tableaux car s'il existe des peintures sans titres, on ne peut pas concevoir des titres sans peintures (Bosredon 2002).

(‘We have seen above that the classical titles present a kind of autonomy from the paintings, this autonomy being semiotically attested by a traditional division into two separate areas of language and image, as the label with the title on the one hand, and the canvas on the other. However, the titles are still in a relationship of dependency in relation to on paintings because if there are paintings without titles, we can not conceive of paintings without titles.’)

It would be possible to suggest that in both purely verbal and semiotically heterogeneous contexts titles should function similarly. In many ways they do; however, not in every way. While mono-semiotic verbal texts would normally have both the title and the body rendered in verbal signs, in art we deal with the verbal code of the title *vs.* the visual code of the work of art. The reason for the cardinal discrepancy in the functioning of titles lies in the algorithm of perception. A sensible way of reading a verbal text would be: start from the title; make a decision as to the worthiness of reading this text (optional); read through the text and, quite often, finally go back to the title to verify your understanding of the content (the latter is typical primarily of fiction). However, it is contrary in the case of visual arts, the recipient would be expected to proceed from the visual ‘text’ of the painting to the verbal title; the reverse order is more likely to be only an exception. Facing a work of art,—‘*un objet-pour-la-vue*’, according to Bosredon—viewers are naturally attracted by the pictorial representation in the first place, turning to the title only to get confirmation of their assumptions. It is not infrequent that this moment becomes an instance of ‘Eureka!’ for the viewer, because without the title the message would never have got across. On reading the title the viewers either confirm their expectations or make a discovery as to the message of the painting. In either case, the initially intended integrity is presumably established. If the work is untitled, the viewers are free to form their own judgment. One has to admit however, that whimsical titling, so typical of modern and contemporary art, often obfuscates the perception of a work as a whole.

Common to both verbal and poly-semiotic discourses, the unique capacity of the title to entirely reshape your conception of the content justifies the ‘strong’ position it occupies in the text (for more detail on this in literary discourse see Boyko 1989).

Similar to the title-text relationship in verbal discourse, titles in visual arts perform their functions to the full only if they are perceived together with the image they refer to. If they are not, the viewer’s expectations have as much chance to be met, as they have none at all. However, the prospective / predictive capacity of the title, therefore, is of little use in artistic context. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic and integrating functions are especially prominent in art titling.

4. TRANSLATION OF TITLES IN ART WRITING

4.1. Translating alternative titles

One of the basic requirements in translating artistic discourse is to observe consistency when dealing with the titles of works of art. This aim is not always easily achievable. Consistency in translation is hard to maintain when different titles of the same painting exist in the source language (SL) culture. There may be numerous reasons for this: the painting may have been renamed before one title sticks forever; the original title may not be written on the work; the title may be abandoned; the title the work of art once had is changed due to later discoveries (such was the case of Lucas Cranach’s *The Close of The Silver Age* earlier known as *The Fruits of Jealousy*), etc.

Of course, most world-famous paintings have well-established correspondences in other languages. If a legendary work of art is widely known under more than one ‘legitimate’ title, it is usually common knowledge, as in the case of the *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo* generally referred to as *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci). However, it is the rule of ‘traditional’ usage that may interfere: thus in Russian culture we also refer to the portrait as *Джоконда (Gioconda)*—a name which is never used in Anglophone art criticism. The translator is obviously expected to be aware of this cultural tradition in order not to make a mistake when translating between Russian and English. A translators’ cultural background is called for in another ‘traditional’ case, when an established translation variant has to be used, although the titles in two languages do not quite carry identical messages. A case in point is the world-famous *The Rape of Europa* by Titian, known in Russia as *Похищение Европы* (lit. ‘The Abduction of Europa’).

The proverbial examples as above, however, seldom cause any problems for the translator, due to the fact that they just require sufficient background knowledge. On the other hand, there are cases like the few strikingly contrasting titles Boris Grigoriev, the early 20th century Russian painter, gave at various times to one of his self-portraits: *Иностранец (A Foreigner)*; *Русский (A Russian)*; *Автопортрет (Self-Portrait)*;

Контрабандист (*Smuggler*). Such versatility in titling is most likely to become subject to research and often agitated debate in critical circles, as was the case with the portrait by Grigoriev. With sufficient information available, the translator is fortunate to be well-equipped for finding a solution in such situations.

Whatever the reasons, the ‘disease’ of alternative titling persists in arts. The discrepancies in labelling may stem from different critical sources. The titles of several paintings by the celebrated Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin serve to illustrate the case. The artist’s huge canvas depicting the crucifixion is known in English under the title *Crucifixion by the Romans*. Facing the task of working from English, the translator will have to decide between the registered title *Распятие на кресте во время владычества римлян* (lit. ‘Crucifixion under Roman Rule’) or its shorter version *Распятие на кресте у римлян* (lit. ‘Crucifixion by the Romans’), according to different sources (Volodarsky and Lebedev respectively). Semantically, the difference between the two is not crucial; however, for maintaining consistency the necessity to stick to one variant is essential. More disparity is found in Vereshchagin’s *Blowing from Guns in British India*, its two Russian versions being (a) *Взрывание из пушек в Британской Индии* and (b) *Подавление индийского восстания англичанами* (lit. ‘Suppression of Indian Uprising by the English’). The English language title is a semantically precise translation of variant (a). One more confusing case: the title translated into English as *Hanging in Russia* is known as: (c) *Казнь через повешение в России* and (d) *Казнь заговорщиков в России* (lit. ‘Hanging of Conspirators in Russia’). The underlined lexemes demonstrate that the more informative Russian titles (b) and (d) variants give a deeper insight into the stories behind the paintings, thus broadening the interpretative functions of the titles. Apparently all the English language versions are translations from Russian, but which of the Russian equivalents were the original titles the artist gave to his works?

It should be borne in mind that when dealing with titles, translators do not always translate from the original language, but, on the contrary, have to back-translate from a foreign language. This explains why such cases are especially treacherous, given the commissioner’s expectations of consistency. Even thorough research into the only original title does not always yield a satisfactory result; therefore it is the translator who is left to decide which of the titles to use the SL original variant, bearing in mind that the integrity of the painting is to be maintained.

4.2. The translator’s responsibility

Due to its specific nature, the title lends itself to complete substitution in the TL. This technique is not infrequent in fiction, the reasons being far too numerous to dwell upon within one article (for more on such cases see Boyko 1989). The translator is fully authorised to give a new name to a work, provided its integrity remains intact. Given

such license, translators more than anybody else realise the importance of having a record of titles in different languages to avoid confusion in case of back-translation.

At the same time, titles may have a history of multiple translations into foreign languages. The case of the differently translated titles of Nicholas Roerich's works is widely known in art circles. The authorised list of works (1917–1924) by the artist's hand is now held in the Nicholas Roerich Museum in New York.³ When in the 1970s the publication of the artist's *oeuvre* was made possible, most picture names had to be translated back from English because the English language list was the only source available at that time. The outstanding and most reliable publication by V. V. Sokolovsky (1974) was based on that list back-translated from *Roerich. Himalaya*.

The examples below are but a few of several hundreds. The first three are semantically precise translations; stylistically, however, the back-translations in column III are totally inconsistent with their originals.

	I	II	III
	Original title	From <i>Roerich. Himalaya</i>	Sokolovsky's list
(1)	<i>Град умерший</i>	<i>The Dead City</i>	<i>Мертвый город</i>
(2)	<i>Ярилины зовы</i>	<i>Call of the Sun</i>	<i>Призыв солнца</i>
(3)	<i>И узрим</i>	<i>And We See</i>	<i>И мы видим</i>
(4)	<i>Белокаменная палата</i> (lit. 'White Stone Chamber')	<i>White Stone</i>	<i>Белый камень</i>
(5)	<i>Синее утро</i>	<i>The Blue Morning</i>	<i>Голубое утро</i>
(6)	<i>Синяя туча</i>	<i>The Blue Cloud</i>	<i>Голубое облако</i>
(7)	<i>Перевал</i> (lit. 'Mountain Crossing')	<i>Crossing</i>	<i>Перекресток</i> (lit. 'Crossroads')
(8)	<i>Столпник</i> ('Stylite')	<i>Ecstasy</i>	<i>Экстаз</i>
(9)	<i>Погост</i> (lit. 'Churchyard')	<i>White Monastery</i>	<i>Белый монастырь</i>
(10)	<i>Туман до солнца</i>	<i>Mist before Dawn</i>	<i>Туман перед закатом</i> (lit. 'Mist before Sunset')

Apart from the obvious error in the last line, all other translations are either

³ <<http://www.roerich.org/research/list1917-1924.html#tableWrap>> [accessed 11-11-2011]. The list was translated into English for the edition *Roerich. Himalaya* (Paintings by Nicholas Roerich: Complete List of the Works of Nicholas Roerich, Arranged in Chronological Order, with the Names of Owners. 1926. *Roerich. Himalaya*, a monograph / articles by Grant F., Siegrist M., Grebenstchikoff G., Narodny I., and 'Banners of the East' by Nicholas Roerich. New York: Brentano's Publishers, 185–200.)

misinterpretations of semantic ambiguities, unjustified renamings, or yet obvious cultural mismatches. The latter are especially striking for Russian recipients in (5) and (6) because of the huge differences between the concepts *‘золубой’* (‘sky blue’) carrying positive associations and *‘синий’* (‘dark blue’), nearly always negatively coloured. Thus, in (6) the original *Синья туча* suggests a dark stormy rain cloud while the back-translation depicts a quite unthreatening light blue one.

Out-of-context translations resulting in such inconsistencies as those in columns II and III are obviously counterproductive. The translated titles are incapable of carrying their initially intended messages. The column III variants will never stand the simplest test of back-translation. The hermeneutic potential of the title is therefore destroyed.

Evidently, with lesser-known works of art it is crucial to adhere to one version to avoid confusion. The translator’s responsibility is not a factor to be ignored. It is especially challenging when we translate for the first time, which often happens with the works of contemporary artists.

4.3. To translate or not to translate?

Another challenge to deal with in translating the titles of art works is whether to translate them at all. Here is a notice from one of the British museums at a Watteau exhibition explaining why the authorities decided not to translate:

The French titles of the paintings in this exhibition are taken from early engravings of the works. There are no accurate English equivalents for most of them. The titles are discussed in the gallery sheets.

However, with the titles in that display like *‘Pour nous prouver que cette belle...’*, or *‘Les charmes de la vie’* untranslatability is hardly the case.

There is a deep-rooted tradition in English language artistic discourse to retain the French titles (Italian too; but rarely ones outside these two languages). Here are some examples⁴:

(11) ‘Impressionism, for instance Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s *Le Moulin de la Galette* of 1876—the year after *A Parisian Café* had been shown at the Salon—as well as his *Déjeuner des canotiers* (fig. 2) of 1881 or Manet’s own *Un bar aux Folies Bergères* (fig. 3) from the following year.’

(12) ‘... it was the year that Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* was rejected from the official Salon in the French capital...’

What may be the reason for keeping the original titles? It apparently remains at the authorities’ discretion whether to provide the foreign language title with its English

⁴ Examples (11)–(14) and Vereshchagin’s titles are borrowed from *Russian Art* Christie’s catalogues of 2010–2011; the rest were collected at various exhibitions.

translation or not. The translation variants of titles are more likely to appear in an exposition designed for the general public; meanwhile, it is assumed that for a semi-professional and professional audience there is no need to translate. In Russian culture, however, one would expect to see all titles translated or at least foreign language ones accompanied by their Russian counterparts. Another possibility is to provide lesser-known titles with their Russian counterparts, while world-famous ones would remain untranslated. Translators ought to be aware of these requirements.

The above said, however, does not resolve the issue to the full. Problems emerge when translators have to deal with Russian artists' works originally titled in a foreign language (usually French; especially in the 19th–early 20th centuries). Here are some typical cases:

- (13) 'In *Aoua, Femme Banda*, Iacovleff uses this artistic heritage to lend his subject status and symbolic importance.'
- (14) 'The finished work, exhibited in April–May 1875 under the title *Un café du boulevard*, caused a heated exchange with his prime mentors later titled *A Parisian Café*'. [Literally translated from the Russian version *Парижское кафе*.]

The painters are Russian; their creations bear French language titles kept in the SL text,—so, is the translator expected to translate them into Russian? Recent publications in Russian art writing demonstrate a strong tendency to do both: keeping the (French) one accompanied by its translation counterpart.

There are also the rather rare cases when the translation is not needed at all: we definitely do not translate when the cultural allusion used as a title has no chance of ringing a bell for the SL recipient. In the example below the title is a line from a little-known poem.

... *Сидела сводня тут с известною красоткой...* (Иллюстрация к поэме В. А. Пушкина «Опасный сосед»). 1918 (не издано). Бумага, графитный карандаш.

Illustration to Vasily Pushkin's *A Dangerous Neighbour* poem. 1918 (not published). Graphic pencil on paper. Russian Museum.

The examples above demonstrate that titles may be left in the original not because they are untranslatable, but it is rather because such considerations as the convention, the commissioner's conditions, and often the translator's decision are brought to the fore.

4.4. Disambiguation: Mission impossible?

Without any exaggeration, it is the translator's curse to receive only verbal material from the commissioner, without receiving any pictures or visuals. Daily practice proves, however, that it is the rule rather than the exception. Commissioners hardly ever realise that it is the 'visual part' which may turn out to be crucial for adequate translation. The verbal part alone may appear insufficient for resolving cases of polysemy or ambiguities of expression. Once again recalling Borsedon's words about the possibility of a painting without a title but not a title with a painting, let us admit that more often than not, it is the title that imbues the painting with its message. It is especially true with contemporary art, where artists tend to give vague names to their creations, to say the least, and to make the matters worse, what there is in the image can be anyone's guess. For example, if you were dealing with a title like *Characters II (Reality)* or *Characters IV (Time)* (graphic works by Guntars Sietiņš), you would face making a choice among more than twenty words to convey the multiple meanings of the lexeme *character* in Russian. In the absence of the 'context'—the image—translation would be simply guesswork. The instances of *Dragging, Impact* (Loit Jõekalda, Estonia), and suchlike one-word titles illustrate the situation where the translator is badly in need of the picture to make a decision as to which of the meanings to choose. Not even the iconic context may help when the image in question is brought to such a level of abstraction that it hardly makes the message any clearer. The task becomes even more complicated if the SL 'text' consists entirely of titles (the so-called lists of labels). In extreme situations contacting the artist seems to be the only way out for the translator (not always possible). In fact, in such cases the translator is challenged with the extremely exacting task of name-giving.

Translators of contemporary artistic discourse often face situations in which works of art are titled in English by a non-Anglophone artist who either intended to be unclear, or simply overestimated his / her command of English. Such exercises result in titles like *Concise Bubble* (by Lembe Ruben, Tallinn), making little sense, if any at all, and giving quite a bit of a headache to the translator. Therefore, decision-making appears to be the translators' obligation and their key responsibility. If a title is translated for the first time, it is the translator who may be making history: one can never tell which contemporary artists will become the next Picasso or Dali.

5. CONCLUSION

In dealings with art titles, most translation techniques that work for other proper names prove useful, among them: semantic translation, translation by tradition, transcription, reproduction in the original spelling, etc. However, translators should be aware that, due to the involvement of heterogenic semiotic codes, specific functioning of titles results in a different perception strategy; therefore, routine title translation strategies

often prove inapplicable. The translators' concern is to preserve the integrity of a work of art and consistency in titling when they face dealing with alternative titles, matching titles to images, or giving new names to works of art. Decision-making happens under multiple constraints, the commissioner's requirements and lack of relevant information among them.

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MENO KŪRINIŲ PAVADINIMŲ VERTIMAS

LYUDMILA BOYKO

Santrauka

Meno tema, ir ypač meno kūrinų pavadinimai kaip tikriniai vardai vertimo studijų kontekste praktiškai nenagrinėti. Pavadinimas yra labai svarbus meno kūrinio elementas. Išversti pavadinimą tinkamai, kad į kūrinį žvelgiančiam asmeniui būtų perduodama jame užkoduota informacija, – labai atsakingas, kūrybiškų pastangų reikalaujantis uždavinys. Straipsnyje aptariami vaizduojamojo meno kūrinų pavadinimai suprantami kaip dviejų semiotinių kodų sandūra: ar meno kūrinio pavadinimas patvirtins tai, ką mato žiūrovas, ar paneigs išankstines nuostatas, priklauso nuo meno kūrinį vertinančio žiūrovo „algoritmo“. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami veiksniai, galintys sutrukdyti tinkamai išversti meno kūrinų pavadinimus. Vertėjo pastangas pasiūlyti tinkamiausią pavadinimo vertimą dažnai paverčia niekais jau egzistuojantys kūrinio pavadinimo vertimo variantai. Siekdami nuoseklumo, vertėjai turi įsigilinti į pavadinimo istoriją, kad pasirinktų geriausią jo vertimo strategiją.