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## Reading Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich": Linguistic and Cultural Perspectives

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*A discussion of the difficulties in translation "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" into English. Specific aspects of the original text are compared with the English translation and analyzed. The article is oriented toward the benefits for students of Russian, in terms of both linguistic and cultural knowledge, of reading "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" and closely comparing the Russian text with the English translation.*

*Keywords: translation; Solzhenitsyn; language learning; Russian Language; linguistics.*

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In "One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich," Solzhenitsyn details a world with its own rules. He outlines the complicated social structure and dynamic of Soviet labor camps and the lives of those imprisoned there. The story is emphatically not driven by plot. It is not a story of grand emotions and dramatic events. Rather, Solzhenitsyn focuses on filling in the details of the characters and minutiae of camp life. Though small in physical size and deceptively small even in scope, there are obvious reasons why this novel has become accepted as an important work of modern world literature. In "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," Solzhenitsyn wastes no words or thoughts. The novel is compactly and precisely written, with carefully crafted language. In this article, I will discuss the

various difficulties presented by reading the book in the original Russian for a speaker of Russian as a foreign language, as well as difficulties in translating the book from Russian into English.

I am approaching this problem from the perspective of a student of Russian language and culture. My aim is to highlight what makes the book both difficult and rewarding for a student of Russian. Additionally, I am examining how the difficulties of the novel show the particular expressive strengths and weaknesses of the Russian and English languages, as well as how a close comparison of the Russian and English texts helps a language learner to better understand the particularities of Solzhenitsyn's writing style.

Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere state in the preface to *Translation as social action*:

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*Russian and Bulgarian perspectives*, “the study of the manipulative processes of literature as exemplified by translation can help us toward a greater awareness of the world in which we live.” [Zlateva, 1993, p. vii]. A “greater awareness” of the world is precisely what I am seeking in my comparison of the Russian and English texts of “One Day.” In *Translation as Social Action*, the editor Palma Zlateva discusses the different perspectives found in Western European discussions of translation versus Russian and Bulgarian translation traditions. Namely that, in the West, translation holds a controversial position as both an absolutely necessary and inevitable—in order to communicate and to take in the literature of the world—as well as an inherently impossible exercise. Zlateva discusses how in the West the question of whether or not it is at all possible to translate a work into another language has plagued the discipline for centuries, while in Russian intellectual spheres translation has long been regarded as a creative endeavor in its own right, and so the question of “translatability” has not been so pressing [Zlateva, 1993, p. 1].

In this article I am looking at “One Day” from a more Western perspective—examining how successfully the English translation replicates the Russian original and paying particular attention to linguistic disparities between the two texts in order to better understand the Russian. Because I am discussing the novel from the perspective of a Russian learner, I am concerned with the English translation primarily as a tool to help in understanding the Russian translation, rather than as a work in itself.

### **Narrative peculiarities**

When contemplating the book from the perspective of a Russian learner, it is both approachable and intimidating. It is of much less daunting length than other novels in the Russian canon, but at the same time it contains

a complicated and specialized lexicon, as well as constant, carefully detailed movement that doesn't settle into a broad, easy to follow plot. There are elements within the structure of the novel that make it more difficult for a reader to latch onto a broad narrative understanding that assists in making his or her way through a foreign text.

The narrative has no climax, no central problem, no highs and lows. It is concerned with the small difficulties involved in the hard life of a victim of Stalin's GULAG. There is great emphasis on the mundane qualities Shukhov's situation. At the same time, each element of the story, each small moment Solzhenitsyn describes, uncovers different aspects of the burden that is every day life in the camps. Particular time is spent on detailing the time that prisoners spend milling about, being counted, recounted, and herded from place to place. While nothing is happening in these moments, they represent a time when the prisoners are most obviously at the mercy of their wardens.

The lack of narrative arch leads to an almost predictable lack of conflict. For example, when Shukhov is being searched, he hides a tiny piece of metal from the camp guards. The reader understands that the guard won't find the knife. It would be inconsistent with the narrative for a catastrophe to befall Shukhov at that moment. But one nonetheless understands the stress of the constant threat of further punishment. This is not the story of one disastrous day in the life of Ivan Denisovich, rather the story of one very average day in the life of a very average person, caught in the larger humanitarian disaster of Stalin's camps.

One of the difficulties in reading the novel, both in English and in Russian, is that the actual space of the camp remains abstract. Solzhenitsyn devotes his descriptions to the tiny actions that Shukhov takes to survive—where and how he hides his bread and his spoon, the pleasure he

takes in his work and in eating his meager rations, his acute observations of those around him, and his knowledge of what one needs to do to survive in the camps. While life in the camp is detailed completely, the layout of the camp and descriptions of rooms and pspaces are barely touched on. The distance from one place to another, the appearance of the prisoners' barracks, and the basic physical space they occupy is never completely clear. This leaves the reader scrapping together the world the zeks inhabit through non-visual details, paying close attention to small actions and interactions. The zeks seem to occupy a colorless, shapeless space.

This characteristic comes across both in English and in Russian. However, when the two versions of the novel are compared, it becomes clear what an important role the tone and word choice in Russian plays in Solzhenitsyn's characterization of camp life.

### Comparing the Russian and English texts

Those same characteristics of Solzhenitsyn's prose which make it difficult for a foreign reader to understand are the very elements in his style that give "One Day" its particular tone. A few specific stylistic elements stand out when directly comparing passages in Russian with their English translations. In this study, I've used the original translation by Robert Parker.

Scenes such as those in the camp canteen require particular attention from the reader. Shukhov maneuvers through other zeks and camp guards in order to procure as much food as possible. At the core of the canteen scenes are minute and specific movements. The zeks discretely pass items between each other, they hide dishes, and position themselves in order to receive as much food as possible:

*"Договорились.*

*Донёс тот до места, разгрузил, Шухов схватился за поднос, а и тот набежал, кому*

*обещано, за другой конец подноса тянет. А сам щуплей Шухова. Шухов его туда же подносом двинул, куда тянет, он отлетел к столбу, с подноса руки сорвались. Шухов—поднос под мышку и бегом к раздаче"* [Solzhenitsyn, 2000. С. 192].

*"They came to an understanding.*

*S280 carried his tray to the table and unloaded the bowls. Shukhov immediately grabbed it. At that moment the man it had been promised to ran up and tried to grab it. But he was punier than Shukhov. Shukhov shoved him off with the tray—what the hell are you pulling for?—and threw him against a post. Then putting the tray under his arm, he trotted off to the serving window"* [Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 113].

In this passage, Solzhenitsyn's sentences lack pronouns and sometimes even objects. Where in the original Russian, zek S280's identity is completely left out, in English it is necessary to include his name and repeatedly include a pronoun. The focus of the passage is on movement, and most of the information is found in the verbs and their forms. Solzhenitsyn uses verbs that require several words to replicate in English, such as "схватился" versus "immediately grabbed." A one letter prefix—a property in Russian not shared by English—takes the place of an adverb, conveying the same idea with one word. This economy of words lends a speed and choppiness to the prose that is missing in the English version. Even the simple difference between the word "договорились" and the English equivalent "they came to an understanding" slows down the prose.

Simultaneously, this kind of writing presents particular difficulties for a foreign reader. Leaving out pronouns and objects removes much of what helps a foreign reader understand the action. In the English, prisoner S280 "unloaded the bowls," while in Russian he simply "разгрузил," his identity and the specific object he is unloading are not repeated.

This elimination of all but the absolutely necessary words is evident in many instances throughout the novel:

*“И чтобы брюхо не занывало, есть не просило, перестал он думать о лагере, стал думать, как письмо будет скоро домой писать”*

[Solzhenitsyn, 2000. C. 128]

*«And to prevent it complaining and begging for food, he stopped thinking about the camp and let his mind dwell on the letter he'd soon be writing home [Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 36]»*

In the English, the pronoun appears three times, while in Russian only once. Additionally, Parker has been forced to place the awkward pronoun “it” in the beginning of the passage. No pronoun is necessary in Russian, but what is being referred to is somewhat ambiguous. To maintain this ambiguity Parker chooses the pronoun “it,” rather than “his stomach” or something more specific.

Another example of how Solzhenitsyn's economic language loses much of its character and impact in English comes in the beginning of the novel after Shukhov is unable to be relieved from work due to illness:

*“Шухов ничего не ответил и не кивнул даже, шапку нахлобучил и вышел.*

*Тёплый зяблого разве когда поймёт?”*

[Solzhenitsyn, 2000. C. 118].”

*“Shukhov said nothing. He didn't even nod. Pulling his hat over his eyes, he walked out.*

*How can you expect a man who's warm to understand a man who's cold?[Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 7]”*

“Тёплый” and “зяблого” become “a man who's warm,” and “a man who's cold.”

A part of Solzhenitsyn's careful and economic word choice is the use of specialized camp vocabulary, presenting the greatest difficulty for both a translator and a Russian learner. These words are essential to Solzhenitsyn's

characterization of the camp, and it is impossible to maintain their cultural and linguistic connotations in translation. Without a preexisting knowledge of camp vocabulary or someone with whom to discuss complicated historical words, this novel would be nearly impossible to read for a Russian learner.

In the passage below, one word, “shouted,” is used for two Russian words, while Pavlo's emphatically Ukrainian speech is completely lost in the English translation, replaced with a somewhat characterless phrase:

*“Расвору!—орёт Шухов через стенку.*

*Да—е—мо!—Павла кричит.”*

[Solzhenitsyn, 2000. C. 162]

*“ ‘Mortar!’ Shukhov shouted over the wall.*

*‘Coming up!’ shouted Pavlo.” [Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 79]*

This example points to one of the primary problems in translating “One Day,” both in the case of special camp vocabulary and dialect, and the extra words demanded by the grammatical necessities of English. Solzhenitsyn's word choice, when compared to the English, is in many cases much more specific than the resulting English translation. More general words and sentiments emerge in the English, losing many aspects of the cultural specificity contained in Solzhenitsyn's language. Here is a further example:

*“Бывает, и я им помогу?” Шухов сам у Павла работу просит.*

*“Поможить” Павло кивает [Solzhenitsyn, 2000. C. 143]*

*«Shall I give 'em a hand?» Shukhov volunteered*

*«Yes, help them out,» said Pavlo with a nod. [Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 56]*

Pavlo's accent is lost, and the exchange has an almost forced politeness about it, rather than the comfortable familiarity in the Russian version.

In another instance, the specialized language of the camps is replaced with a common English swear word:

*"Хромой грёбанный... в лоб тебя драть!..."*  
[Solzhenitsyn, 2000. С. 189]

*"You f---ing Limper, we'll fix you"*  
[Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 111]

The cultural specificity of the exchange is completely lost, all that is maintained is the basic roughness of Pavlo's speech.

When examined side-by-side with the original Russian, such examples are easily found throughout the English translation. Much of the camp's characterization and the specificity of the prisoners' individual speech are lost.

Many of the difficulties in maintaining the tone of the translation can be blamed on basic grammatical differences between Russian and English, and the way that Solzhenitsyn takes advantage of certain aspects of Russian grammar. The linguistic necessity in English to include pronouns and objects to be understood removes a layer of force that is present in the original Russian. As demonstrated in previous examples, a greater amount of contextual information is contained in the form of the verb in Russian, while additional helping words are necessary in English. Because of the use of cases, which puts more information into the form of the words, as well as the fact that in past tense the gender and number of the subject is indicated in the verb form, one Russian word in a particular form often requires several English words to be completely translated. Solzhenitsyn's writing and word choice is emphatically precise and spare, and he makes careful use of these grammatical qualities. His carefully constructed sentences often become much more mundane in English.

### **A deeper understanding through comparison**

The purpose of this article, however, is not simply to criticize the English translation, or to

say that it is impossible to translate "One Day" effectively. A work in translation is necessarily a different piece of writing from the original. Translation always presents numerous difficulties, particularly when translating specialized speech. It is impossible to replicated Russian GULAG slang in English.

Rather, by looking at the Russian side-by-side with the English, the comparison allows a student of Russian to better appreciate Solzhenitsyn's style and tone, and come closer to a complete understanding of the book as it is written in the original, and how it might sound to a native speaker.

An instance of how this comparison can help lead to a deeper understanding of the text is the use of the word "Воля," which has a multiplicity of meanings in Russian that lead to its translation into English as one of several words, depending on context.

In the example below, the translator has chose two different English words for the one word "воля":

*"Своими ногами—да на волю, а?"*  
*«To step out to freedom, just walk out on your own two feet.»* [Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 57]

*«хотя на воле...»* [Solzhenitsyn, 2000. С. 185]

*"Although when he had been at liberty..."*  
[Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 106]

The first dictionary definition of the word воля is usually "will," but in the context of "One Day," it more frequently means "freedom," or "liberty." Though these three words (will, freedom, and liberty) are closely connected in meaning in English, they have slightly different meanings. "Will," in particular, is concerned with an individual's internal ability to make choices. The English concept of "will" is not something that one loses due to physical confinement. A prisoner is still, to a degree, able to make choices for himself. A prisoner decides to be alive, decides

to eat, and exercises "will power" in numerous ways.

The phrase "на волю," frequently used throughout "One Day" to refer to living in freedom as opposed to in captivity, is interesting and somewhat surprising for an English speaker. The expected phrase would be "на свободе." The use of *воля* in this way deepens a Russian learner's understanding of the specificities of the word and the complex of meanings it contains. Because it can be translated as both "freedom" and "will" it implies both internal and external freedom. The concept of "will" in Russian differs from its English equivalent. Specifically concerning "One Day," looking closely at the use of this word and the words that the translator has chosen to replace it with in English helps an English speaker to understand the concept of freedom for a GULAG prisoner.

Anna Wierzbicka writes in her essay "Russian 'national character' and Russian language":

*"...common Russian words, such as, for example судьба, душа, or тоска, reflect and suggest certain values and attitudes; and that so do certain aspects of Russian grammar, such as the rich system of expressive derivation."* [Wierzbicka, 1998, p. 51]

*Воля* can be added to this list as a word that represents a basic and important cultural concept, present in virtually all cultures, but simultaneously has different and potentially broader cultural connotations in Russian than its English equivalents. Wierzbicka also sites the expressive qualities of Russian grammar, which Solzhenitsyn in particular makes ample use of in "One Day." The basic structure of a language reveals important truths about culture, and through carefully analysing the use of different words, a student can gain insight into the culture he or she is studying.

For example, the Russian language has no word for "privacy," a difference made famous during an exchange between former U.S. President Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev in 1959. The exchange took place at an exhibit on U.S. consumerism in Sokolniki Park in Moscow. Nixon asserted that the ideas that made the U.S. powerful could be seen in the privacy of homes, in the private lives of citizens. Nixon's argument rested on the idea of the home, and he specifically emphasized the kitchen, as a private, non-political site. But the very word on which he was relying was impossible to translate, and the kitchen in Soviet Russia, the common space in a communal apartment, had a very different cultural connotation [Baldwin, 2004]. The exchange highlights how the walls between languages, if carefully examined, can be used to increase cross-cultural understanding. It is precisely these places where languages do not match up, rather where they conflict with each other, that help us most in using language to intimately understand another culture.

### **Understanding the cultural context**

It is important to understand all texts within their historical context, and the impact of "One Day" at the time of its publishing is particularly important. Such a historically specific work is bound to have a different cultural meaning for Russian readers and for foreign readers. There are many reasons why the novel is a part of curriculums in both Russia and the United States, and its historical importance is not a small one. In studying a language, the importance of understanding the history and culture of the people who speak that language should not be overlooked.

Upon the publication of the first English translations, the American press reacted with enthusiasm to the book and praised its literary

merit. Reviewers approached it as a book that was important to read in its revelation of the humanitarian tragedies of the Stalin era. Philip Rahv wrote in the New York Review of Books "the more readers this book has the better" [Rahv, 1963].

But ultimately, readers continue to come back to "One Day" not because of its social-historical importance, but because it has all of the qualities of great fiction. It isn't simply a historical document, and one doesn't need to be a student of Soviet history to enjoy it (although some background knowledge will certainly help in understanding it). Solzhenitsyn carefully avoids didacticism, and yet presents ideological and philosophical problems through his characters' dialogues, as in Tsezar's discussion of Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible with another zek [Solzhenitsyn, 2000. C. 153]. The thread of human triumph and the power of the simple goodness of the Russian peasant is traceable throughout the book. In one scene, as Shukov eats, Solzhenitsyn outlines his mood:

*"Сейчас ни на что Шухов не в обиде: ни что срок долгий, ни что день долгий, ни что воскресенье опять не будет. Сейчас он думает: переживём! переживём всё, даст Бог кончится."*[Solzhenitsyn, 2000. C. 193]"

The fact that in his detailing of a dark and at the time somewhat taboo topic in Russian history, Solzhenitsyn maintains threads of classic Russian literary themes has helped the book maintain its place in the contemporary literary canon, and undoubtedly helped it to be published at the time.

In studying this novel, a Russian learner must understand the complex of history and politics, and also literary history that surrounds the book. "One Day" can be an extremely effective lens through which a student can learn much more about Russian culture and history.

## Conclusion

In English, the final sentence of the novel is "*We'll survive. We'll stick it out, God willing, till it's over*" [Solzhenitsyn, 1972. p. 115]. It's the kind of simple strength and determination that cannot help but uplift a reader.

"One Day" is a small and deceptively simple book that presents a multitude of ideas and perspectives. As such, it is particularly rewarding for those studying Russian to read. A Russian learner can use the difficulty of the text to his or her advantage by analyzing what is particularly complicated about Solzhenitsyn's style, as well as looking closely at how the tone in Russian differs from the tone in English. The reader is left with a stronger ability to confront difficult texts in Russian, and a working knowledge of the colorful vocabulary of Soviet zeks as a bonus. Such analysis will lead to a deeper understanding of the novel and the Russian language.

Beyond the specific needs of a student of Russian language and the specific task of reading and understanding "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," this novel provides a particularly good study of broader differences between Russian and English. The language of the book is inextricably tied with the ideas it contains. As I have discussed, the particularities of Russian vocabulary and grammar have meanings that differ from their counter parts in English. In order to fully comprehend and produce Russian, a student must understand these particularities. Examining the complexes of meanings associated with particular words and the way that certain grammatical forms are transformed in English significantly helps a learner in achieving a greater facility in Russian. Comparing the Russian text with the English translation helps a learner to better understand the particular expressive strengths of both languages, as well as the specificities of Solzhenitsyn's writing.

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## **Читая Солженицына:**

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*В статье анализируется перевод повести А.И. Солженицына «Один день Ивана Денисовича» на английский язык. Обсуждаются некоторые особенности языка Солженицына, вызывающие затруднения при переводе, а также то, как процесс перевода помогает иноязычному читателю глубже понять известное произведение.*

*Ключевые слова: перевод; Солженицын; русский язык; изучение языков; лингвистика*

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