**Russian-English Translation of**

**“The Heir from Calcutta” by Robert Shtilmark**

**Capstone Project**

**by**

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**Abstract**

This creative project encompasses the Russian-English translation of the first chapters of *The Heir from Calcutta* (1950) by Robert Shtilmark, as well as the techniques and methodology of the process. The aims is to make the book available to English speakers, as it was never translated to English before. This adventure novel has long been a beloved book of Russian and Armenian readers and now it can be introduced to English readers as well. The technique of foreignization - prioritizing the original text via challenging the target language was the paramount principle of the translation, thus ensuring the privilege of preserving the maximum originality of the Russian style. The text was translated with special care and attention and hopefully will deliver an enjoyable experience to the readers.

**Introduction**

*The Heir from Calcutta* is an intriguing adventure novel written in 1950 by Robert

Shtilmark. The story revolves around the epic fate of Frederick Ryland – the heir of Chensfield viscount title, who heads to England from Calcutta to receive his fortune, but unfortunately, does not reach his destination, since pirates attack his ship. But this would be only half of the trouble. One of Captain Bernardito’s pirates – insidious Giacomo Grelli nicknamed “Leopard” steals Fredrick’s documents and decides to go to England instead of him and receive the inheritance that was meant for the real heir from Calcutta – Fredrick Ryland. By successfully accomplishing his evil plan, Grelli endeavors to several others… Little does Grelli know that Bernardito and Frederick would escape the island, which saved their lives, and team up to have their revenge on him…

And this is only the main plot, simplified in a sense. There are many other plotlines of

different characters in the book, which make it complex, rich and tremendously exciting for readers of any age group to eagerly read and see what will happen next. *The Heir from Calcutta* in its complexity is compatible with such incredibly fantastic work as the Game of Thrones. Its diversity and intensity guarantee a terrific reading experience.

What makes the book even more unique, however, is that not only the content is original,

but also the book itself has an extraordinary story. The novel was written in 1950–1951 in the gulag camp, on the construction of the east wing of the Salekhard-Igarka railway. Shtilmark began writing it at the request of the camp senior outfitter Vasily Pavlovich Vasilevsky in exchange for an exemption from common work. Vasilevsky hoped to send the novel to Stalin and get amnesty for it. However, his plans failed, since Shtilmark ciphered the phrase “false writer, thief, plagiarist” in the text of the novel, meaning Vasilevsky, and in 1959 he successfully proved in court that he is the only and true author of the book. Thus interestingly, identity theft is not only the major theme of this book, but it is also a challenge that the author himself had experienced in his life.

*The Heir from Calcutta* enjoyed great recognition among Russian and Armenian readers

for a couple of decades, but then the book gradually lost its popularity. For English speaking readers, however, it has remained in complete darkness almost since its creation. The book was never translated into English, thus remaining inaccessible to English speaking readers and also, unknown. By this translation project I intend to illuminate the world of Shtilmark’s *The Heir from Calcutta* and give new readers the unique opportunity of reading the book in their own language and enjoy this intriguing adventures of brave heroes.

**Literature Review**

The quality of a translation largely relies on both *ethical* and *linguistic* choices that a

translator makes. And when talking about literary translation, the ethical aspect becomes twice important. Any decent translator naturally wishes to minimize his/her own presence in a translated text and rather maximize the presence of the author. But how? Over-trying to be fluent will surely minimize translator’s presence, but will it be ethically acceptable? Text distortion is surely a dangerous and risky factor, if the translator prioritizes fluency. It sure is something that one desires to avoid. But if the translator remains too loyal to the text, there is a risk that it will not really make sense in the language of the target readers. To solve the dilemma and create a strong theoretical background for my translation project, I would like to discuss the ideas of several prominent theorists and authors, who will help me figure out applicable solutions and right choices.

In contemporary translation zone, the quality of a translated text is oftentimes

ridiculously measured by its fluency and smooth flow. This seems to be a modern trend among translators, as well as publishers, reviewers and readers, who set this standard of fluency – if the text reads fluently, then it is judged acceptable. This popular tendency however, has been ironically challenged by American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti. In his 1995 revolutionary book *A Translator’s Invisibility,* Venutiilluminates his readers that the illusion of transparency does not necessarily guarantee a high quality translation. The invisibility produced by the seeming transparency can in no way serve as an indicator that a translation is good. Venuti discusses this ‘invisibility’ via analyzing two important tools of a translation process – domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 1995).

Most of Venuti’s ideas link back to German Jewish philosopher Walter Bendix

Schönflies Benjamin, who is famous for his unique philosophical theory of translation – *The Task of the Translator* written in 1923 as an introduction to a Baudelaire translation. The text was translated in 1968 by Harry Zohn and since then has influenced many translators, being a classic among philosophical theories on translation. Walter Benjamin believed that consideration of the receiver, that is the reader is wrong. According to Benjamin, the act of translation should never be intended to serve the reader. Instead, translation should be viewed as a demonstration of kinship of languages, via the totality of their intentions supplementing one another – reaching the ‘pure language’. To Benjamin, this is only possible via word-for-word translation (Benjamin, 1923).

Benjamin was skeptical about consideration of the readers. Venuti on his turn, seems to

bring legitimate reasons (which apparently support Benjamin’s claim) why it is dangerous to think too much about the readers: when a translator is over-worried about the convenience of the readers, he or she risks to create overly fluent text for the best experience of the readers, which in its turn distorts the text, thus creating a good paraphrasing, but not a good translation. This happens when a translator sets invisibility as a primary goal – invisibility which is seemingly so desired by the readers, publishers and reviewers, that instead of staying loyal to the original, the translator starts to serve the ‘consumers’.

This seeming fluency or ‘transparency’ is achieved via three central tools closely

interrelated to one another: paraphrase, imitation and domestication. In mention of these three factors, it is essential to refer to German theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, whose 1813 essay *On the Different Methods of Translating* is considered one of the most crucial and influential works in translation studies. Schleiermacher makes many interesting and valid points, which are still relevant today. But more specifically, he concentrates on these two inventions – paraphrase and imitation, and explores their consequences. Paraphrase, as Schleiermacher accurately describes, ‘seeks to overcome the irrationality of languages’. “It can perhaps render the content with limited precision, but it completely abandons the impression made by the original” (Schleiermacher, 1813). Concerning imitation, Schleiermacher explains that no replica can reproduce the same effects of the original. “Such a recreation is no longer the work itself” (Schleiermacher, 1813). It is interesting that Walter Benjamin had exactly the same attitude toward imitation: “If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through a vague alikeness between adaption and original. It stands to reason that kinship does not necessarily involve likeness” (Benjamin, 1923).

Schleiermacher reflects on how it is possible to assist the reader to understand and enjoy

the text, without forcing him or her out of the sphere of his or her mother tongue and suggest two paths. “Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader” (Schleiermacher, 1813).

Most of the translations to German in the 18th century largely used domestication, which

although communicated the story, however, killed the stylistic characteristics of the original text. The ultimately complex task that Schleiermacher brought forward was how one could give the reader through translation the impression he would have received ‘as a German’ reading the work in the original, and yet do not ‘naturalize’ it (Schleiermacher, 1813).

Talking about naturalization and the tricky ways of avoiding it, we must remember

French translation theorist Antoine Berman. In his 1985 essay *Translation and the Trials of the*

*Foreign,* Berman stresses the importance and necessity of reflecting on the ethical aim of translation – “receiving the Foreign as Foreign”, and condemns the tendencies of negating the foreign in translations by the strategy of ‘naturalization’ (domestication). What, however, often prevents the foreign from arriving to the target audience as ‘foreign’ is a ‘system of

textual deformation’ (Berman, 1985). Berman defines twelve of these deforming tendencies:

1. Rationalization
2. Clarification
3. Expansion
4. Ennoblement and popularization
5. Qualitative impoverishment
6. Quantitative impoverishment
7. The destruction of rhythms
8. The destruction of underlying networks of signification
9. The destruction of linguistic patternings
10. The destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization
11. The destruction of expressions and idioms
12. The effacement of the superimposition of languages (Berman, 1985).

But, of course, apart from the problems of textual deformations, there are also potential

issues concerning specifically Russian language. Some of these grammatical and lexical difficulties have been discussed in Naumova’s 2017 article “On Russian-English Translation of Ambiguous Lexical Units (Russian Fairy Tale “Morozko” as a Case-Study)”. In this article (2017), author analyses the potential lexical, semantic and structural ambiguity in Russian-English translations, and even though the subject of this study is Russian Folklore, its findings of translation difficulties are useful and applicable in any genre.

Another similar interesting article is Stoianova’s “Translation of English Children’s

Literature: "Winnie-The-Pooh" by Alan Milne and its Russian Variants” (2016), which again analyses a translation in children’s literature, but this time the original is English and target language Russian. However, it is still very useful and interesting to notice and compare how Russian translations work and the changes the text experiences between these two languages and how they relate to each other and how differ from each other. Their relationship is closely analyzed and this study will definitely help me broaden my views of Russian-English translation and interrelation.

Last, but not least, Kazakova’s 2006 book *Literary Translation: In Search of Truth,* which

analyses the theoretical and practical aspects of specifically literary translation will enable me to further study the relationship between national tradition and intercultural adaptation, in general.

Connecting Venuti, Benjamin, Schleiermacher and Berman was not a hard task, since

they all share some same beliefs on translation, which I myself share as well. I am more inclined to prioritizing the original text, rather than readers and will stay maximum loyal to the author. However, of course, I will be careful to assure a certain level of fluency, but never at the cost of text distortion. The 12 deforming tendencies, lexical ambiguities and other linguistic problems specific to Russian-English translation will also play their role in helping me to understand what I should expect, so that when I face it, I can handle it.

Concluding, with this strong literary and theoretical background, I intend to produce a

high quality translation, strong in both ethical fidelity and linguistic accuracy.

**Creative Goals**

I believe *The Heir from Calcutta* is a unique and great literary treasure that deserves

to be known to the entire world. This of course, must be done through translating the book to English. My goal is to make the book accessible to English speaking readers, thus serving not only the target audience, but also the book. By this translation project I intend to give a “second birth’ to the book and create a completely new opportunity for it to gain the recognition, status and popularity that it deserves.

My ultimate goal, in terms of the literary aspect, is to recreate the same impression this

book would give in English. And of course this can be done only through fidelity, high devotion and attention to details.

**Methodology**

Foreignization - the technique of preserving the originality and style of the text on the

cost of breaking the conventions of the target language, will be the central strategy of my translation project, since it ensures ethical fidelity and enables to present ‘the foreign as foreign’. Unlike domestication, which somewhat distorts the original/omits information for the sake of target culture’s convenience, foreignization challenges the target language for the sake of preserving the originality of the text. Creating artificial naturalization may guarantee a fluent text and a good paraphrase, but not a good translation, for sure. Foreignization, on the other hand enables to preserve the original style and actually produce a good translation, even with periodical ‘flaws’ and influency. Nevertheless, I am very confident with the idea that occasionally there might be natural ‘flaws’ that will remind the reader that (s)he is reading a translation. To me this idea is even beautiful, because it will show the Russian style and also challenge the English language to adapt to the new ‘rules’. But of course, this must be controlled and not overused, otherwise there is a risk of disintegrating the reader.

My target is translating the first two chapters the of the book. I will do only those within

the scope of the capstone and hope to complete the rest of the manuscript for a possible publication later on.

In terms of American or British English spellings, my choice will predominantly be

British English, since it will perfectly match with the general British theme of the book, as the events happen in XVIII century England and most of the characters themselves are Brits. British English spellings will add more of a British aura to the overall atmosphere.

In terms of idioms, the priority again will be given to British idioms, although I sincerely

hope there will be an alternative way of translating the idioms in the Russian way and sense, if applicable. It would be an interesting experiment – and twice successful if it works, as idioms are strictly cultural components and creating a universal, intercultural understanding of idioms is not easy.

During the translation process, what I felt most often was that English language lacks

words. It happened multiple times - I encountered a word and couldn’t find the exact equivalent of the word in English. Instead, I had to rely on synonyms. This was one of the hardest challenges. In the beginning, I thought foreignization will enable me to preserve the original Russian style. It really did, but I discovered that foreignization also limits. It creates blocks where blocks could have disappeared, if the word or phrase were treated flexibly. I felt like almost hurting the text when I did it. It was bleeding. But I realized that it is part of the journey. It cannot be perfectly translated the way it is, when languages are different; one language sometimes lacks words in a specific case and the other time has so many synonyms for a single word in the original that you are confused which one to choose. And that’s the point in the end - to create harmony. It is hard sometimes, but when after several efforts it eventually succeeds - you feel the beauty, the total beauty of it. The goal was to exhibit this beauty and that goal, I think, is attainable.

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