

TRANSLATING RUSSIAN LITERATURE INTO ITALIAN: A CASE STUDY BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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*Translation is not a matter
of words only: it is a matter
of making intelligible
a whole culture.
Antony Burgess*

Abstract: The present article focuses on the Italian translation of the Russian fairy tale by Aleksey Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1882-1945) *Zolotoy klyuchik, ili Priklyucheniya Buratino* (*The Little Golden Key, or the Adventures of Burattino*, 1935). Proceeding from the recent trends of international Translation Theory, the paper examines the main ‘difficulties’ or ‘challenges’ of the source text, e.g., anisomorphisms, connotations, neologisms, *realia* and idioms. We will also consider the employment of different stylistic registers in the tale, which are often connected to the characters’ ‘expressive aura’ and to thick intertextual allusions to the Russian Silver Age. Our lexical and stylistic choices in the process of translation will be analyzed with regard to the *dominants* of the original text and to the specifics of Russian (and Soviet) children’s literature of the suggested timeline. Some solutions proposed in the two Italian versions of the ’80s will also be taken into account, questioning the opportunity and the main orientations of a new translation in relation to the kind of ‘implied readers’ expected.

Keywords: twentieth-century Russian literature, literary translation into Italian, children’s literature, cultural *realia*, stylistic peculiarities, expressive registers

1. Introduction

As is widely known, in general terms translation is the process of converting a text from a given ‘source language’ to a ‘target language.’ A great extent of concentration and expertise goes into making the translated text – or ‘metatext’ (see Popovich 2006) – flow as smoothly as the original one. Since ancient times this complex and multifaceted work has been undertaken by a translator. His/her main role is not only to convey the given contents in the arrival language, but also to author a concrete piece of

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare
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Received: 10/04/2023

Revised: 08/06/2023

Accepted: 10/06/2023

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writing. Even though in interlingual translation we often need to render not the exact meaning of the words, but the overall sense, as recent research in translation theory has repeatedly demonstrated (Venuti 2008: 40-45; Salmon 2017: 32-48), nowadays the notion of a unique, general sense is called into question. In fact, there are a lot of different factors which interact to build up the formal and semantic “tissue” of a text¹. If we consider the product of an interlingual translation, it is important to bear in mind that it originates from a geographically – and in some cases even politically – different culture. The space-time coordinates of the speech act, then, become fundamental aspects for the analysis of the original source. As Karamanian observes,

“Translation, involving the transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by one social group into the appropriate expression of another group, entails a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. As cultures are increasingly brought into greater contact with one another, multicultural considerations are brought to bear to an ever-increasing degree. Now, how do all these changes influence us when we are trying to comprehend a text before finally translating it? We are not just dealing with words written in a certain time, space and socio-political situation; we should also consider the crucial role of the ‘cultural’ contents of the text. The process of transfer, i.e., re-coding across cultures, should consequently allocate corresponding attributes *vis-à-vis* the target culture to ensure credibility in the eyes of the target reader.” (Karamanian 2002: online)

Among a wide set of the to-dare translation methods, an “integrated semiotic approach” seems to be one of the most appropriate choices². This *modus operandi* follows the general paradigm, in which aiming at a global vision of the prototext has a primary importance: in fact, it moves from the macro- to the micro level in accordance with the Gestalt-principles, which state that an analysis of parts do not always provide an understanding of the whole. Translation studies are essentially concerned with a web of relationships, and the significance of individual elements is decided by their relevance within the larger context: text, situation and culture. Therefore, the transcoding process should be focused not merely on language transfer, but also – especially in literary translations – on cultural transposition. In other words, today translators should be both bilingual and bicultural, if not indeed *multicultural*: that is why, as Ivancic remarks in her insightful diachronic survey on the topic, ‘Translator

¹ In the last thirty years the necessary and intrinsic interdisciplinary approach of Translation Studies has gradually become a shared vision by scholars, both by translato-logists – traditionally more scientific and linguistic-oriented – and literary translators. The useful dialogue between these two macro-areas of Translation research is giving positive results for what concerns combined methods and strategies for translators. As an example, see the recent contributions in the first number of the International scientific journal *Lezioni di Traduzione (Translation Lessons)*, Bąkowska, Alberti (eds.): 2022 (Bologna University).

² If the adoption of a semiotic interpretive framework for Translation Studies was traditionally privileged by East-European translato-logists (Jakobson, Lotman, Lûdskanov and Torop), today most scholars resort to it, because it focuses more on the process of translation, giving the possibility to consider pragmatic and contextual notions such as the “equivalence of intended effects” (see among the others Bassnett: 1990, Hatim and Mason: 2000). Even Umberto Eco’s key concept of “negotiation” is closely connected to the semiotic interpretation of the source text (Eco 2003: 229).

Studies' are gradually gaining more space and interest in contemporary research (see Ivancic 2022).

Is it our task to concentrate mainly on the source- or the target culture? The answer is not clear-cut. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not, one of the prevailing and most widely agreed criteria of a translation on the publishing market is the communicative function of the target text. Considering in particular literary translation, how is it possible to preserve the complex web of formal and semantic associations of the original work in another language? Which strategies and techniques do translators mostly use? What is necessarily lost or needs negotiation at various levels? Basing on recent research issues in Translation Theory and on a concrete experience of literary translation from Russian into Italian, the aim of this essay is to analyze some of the main “difficulties” or “challenges” for the translator, such as anisomorphisms (i.e., structural differences) between the two languages, linguistic connotation, neologisms, cultural *realia* and phraseologisms. Specific lexical and stylistic choices in the translated text will be examined with regard to the “dominants” of the original work (Jakobson 1981) and to the specific characteristics of Soviet children literature. Some solutions proposed in the two previous Italian versions of the 1980s will also be taken into account, questioning the opportunity of a new translation and its main orientations. Finally, we will reflect about the formal nature and distinctive features of the metatext³ and about the target of “implied readers” (Iser 1974) to whom it would be addressed (children, adults or both).

2. Problematic Aspects, Culture-specific and Stylistic Traits in Translation

Among the most critical elements in translation practice **anisomorphisms** between natural languages occupy a prominent place. In linguistics and lexicography, the term of Greek origin anisomorphism – ‘asymmetry,’ ‘having a different shape’ – refers to the losses and gains that constantly occur in interlinguistic transfer processes. In other words, anisomorphisms are the linguistic, cultural and textual areas in which systematic difference takes place in translation. These structural characteristics must be considered when comparing two different linguistic systems, because they are one of the main explanations for the fact that a translated text can never be exactly the same as the original. This does not imply that a translation is necessarily better or worse than its source text; in fact, anisomorphisms do not question the validity and representation of the translated text in relation to the original, but only its image of identity and reproduction (Osimo 2011: 320). Translation is subject to four basic and systematic anisomorphisms that are intrinsic parts of its process: linguistic, interpretative, pragmatic and cultural. Linguistic anisomorphisms assume that languages are not objective correlates of the real world, and each one structures and divides reality in a different way (Jakobson 1987: 144). Interpretative anisomorphism is connected to the

³ We refer to the deep difference, which has a direct impact on the formal characteristics of the metatext, between a popular, illustrated edition conceived for Italian children and a critical edition intended for adults, with an eventual commentary and a paratextual apparatus that allow to account for cultural and intertextual allusions.

fact that texts do not mean by themselves; rather, meaning is created with the help of the hermeneutic work developed by readers (Eco 2003: 229-239). Pragmatic anisomorphism refers to the concrete analysis of texts structured through rhetoric conventions which differ in different languages. Cultural anisomorphism alludes to the constant presence of culture-specific items in discourse and to the evidence that these items are never the same in translation, whether they are kept or changed (Remonato 2006: 136). As is well known, every language is the 'mirror' of a given culture: it is not simply a vehicle for information, but the semiotic code through which a particular civilization perceives and represents itself. Cultural concepts are often hidden, and implicit; on one hand they escape us for their inner complexity, on the other they are too elusive to be defined, catalogued or illustrated in a fixed way, because they continue to evolve.

As regards Russian and Italian, structural differences occur at several levels: to mention just a few, let us consider that being a highly inflectional language Russian does not have articles or articulated prepositions. It is regarded as a synthetic language, which tends to express syntactical relations through morphological elements inside words as endings or affixes. Italian is more analytical: in fact, its syntactical connotations are mainly expressed through specific morphemes separated from words, such as articles, prepositions and auxiliary verbs. The aspectual category of Russian verbs is not present in Italian, and even particles, an invariable part of speech thickly recurrent in the Russian spoken language, do not exist as such⁴. An evident difference also characterizes the phonological systems of the two languages, as well as the amount and usage of interjections, more abundant and more frequently employed in Russian. These underlying asymmetries require the adoption of a series of strategies by translators, aimed at reproducing the effect, i.e. the semantic nuances of the original. In Nida's words, we can talk of a 'dynamic equivalence':

"Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content [...]. One is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language [...]. In contrast, a translation which attempts to produce a dynamic equivalence is based up on the principle of equivalent effect. In such a translation one is concerned that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message." (Nida 1964: 159)

Another tricky and controversial topic in the translation process is represented by **connotations**. With this term we refer to the non-literal framing of a word that adds an association beyond its literal meaning. We allude to a set of secondary attributes of subjective, affective and variable nature which, joining the denotative level of a word, form its whole meaning (Diadori 2012: 27). The connotative values of an utterance may vary depending on the context, the issuer, the cultural domain and the communicative situation. One can distinguish between general socio-cultural connotations, typical of common language, and individual or idiosyncratic

⁴ About the main characteristics and possible Italian translations of Russian emphatic particles see Remonato 2005.

implications, that express different emotional reactions of a single person. In advertising, for example, to play with denotative and connotative semantic levels may lead to light a broader framework of possibilities in order to create a successful commercial. In literary works and films connotative undertones are frequently employed to identify a character in relation to the stereotypes to which a certain quality is associated in the original culture. Foreign pronunciations and **substandard idiolects** (dialects, regionalisms) are effective examples of connotative traits, which may mark an author's style or some characters' way of speaking (Osimo 2011: 198-201). In these cases the translator may decide not to reproduce this type of connotation by adopting the standard language in the metatext (*neutralization* or "*domestication*" strategy), or he/she can use a substandard variety, that allows him to convey a connotation similar to the one present in the original work (*alienation* or "*foreignization*" strategy⁵, see Venuti: 1998; Eco 2003: 172-178). When translating a literary text, it is important to grasp these semantic and stylistic nuances, looking in each case for the most suitable methods and techniques. Let us think, for example, about Isaak Babel's (1894-1940) Odessite anti-heroes and their colourful spoken language, connoted in the diastratic and diatopic dimensions (Auer, Schmidt 2010; Diadori 2012: 8): to "correct" them with the usage of a standard register in translation would definitely result in a flattening effect and therefore in a global impoverishment of the original.

The presence of **neologisms** belonging to different domains (scientific or technical language, youth slang, medical research, etc.) and examples of **linguistic deviation** represent other real challenges for translators. As is known, neologisms are relatively recent or isolated terms, words, or phrases that may be in the process of entering common use, but that have not been fully accepted into mainstream language; nowadays they are often driven by changes in culture and technology. They are introduced when a specific notion is lacking a term, or when the existing lexicon is short of details; they may be also used when a speaker is unaware of the existing vocabulary. Popular examples of neologisms can be found in science, fiction (notably science fiction), films and television, branding, literature, jargon, cant, linguistics, the visual arts, and popular culture. In many cases they are formed by combining existing words or, especially in Russian, by adding to words new suffixes or prefixes. Neologisms can also be coined: a) by blending words or parts of them (for example, 'brunch' is a blend of the words 'breakfast' and 'lunch'); b) through abbreviations or acronyms; c) by intentionally rhyming with existing words; d) simply through playing with sounds. The expression '**linguistic deviation**' designates an incorrect, out of standard use of language; it occurs when a poet or writer does not choose to abide by the rules of his/her language, or when he/she transcends its norms and exceeds the limits of the linguistic protocols that characterize it⁶. If employed deliberately and with

⁵ The technique of bringing readers closer to the original represents what is called by some theorists "foreignization," that consists in carrying over in the target text the elements of cultural "otherness" that characterize the prototext.

⁶ In linguistics, a 'deviation' is the breaking of grammatical, phonetical, logical or syntactical rules of a certain semiotic system. Poetry as a genre may be considered as a deviation from ordinary language, though, despite poetic deviation, poetry skill has its own rules and norms which separate it from standard language, and therefore create its own pattern. In the literary context, deviation is taken as a

comic purposes, linguistic deviation may raise readers' linguistic awareness of literary texts and their stylistic variations. Thus, the deviation is seen as an effective means to enrich a given text, and a translator should make his/her best to recreate similar effects in the metatext, especially if such element is recognized as one of the dominants in the original work, the visual arts, and popular culture.

Among the lexical peculiarities which distinguish different types of prototexts, also *realia* play an important role. As has been pointed out by several scholars⁷, in Translation Theory this Latin term refers to culture-specific words related to everyday items, concepts and phenomena which distinguish the cultural, social, historical, anthropological, ethnographical and geographical environment of a certain country or people (Vlahov and Florin: 2020, Osimo 2011: 111-116). For their nature, *realia* have no direct or precise matches in another language; they are often proper names, or words which allude to specific historical periods, to culturally connoted everyday items or local popular traditions, which often require a re-modulation to be properly translated (Dobrovolskaya 2016: 107-119). In literary works these terms are usually bearers of a series of relevant semantic nuances⁸ for the understanding of the whole text:

“Незнакомой чаще всего является *чужая* реалья. Автор вводит ее в текст художественного произведения главным образом при описании новой для носителя данного языка действительности, например, в романе из жизни такого-то народа, в такой-то стране, повествуя о чужом для читателя быте в том или ином эпизоде. Эти малознакомые или вовсе незнакомые читателю подлинника слова требуют такой подачи, которая позволила бы воспринять, не затрудняясь, описываемое, ощутив вместе с тем тот специфический ‘аромат чуждости,’ характерный местный или национальный и исторический колорит, ради которого и допущены в текст эти инородные элементы.”

“Most of the times it is *someone else's realia* that turn out to be unfamiliar. An author introduces them in the text of a literary work mainly when he describes a new reality for native speakers of that language, for example in a novel from the life of a certain people, in a certain country, when he is telling about everyday life alien to readers in this or that episode. These words, little or completely unknown to readers of the original text, require such a rendering in translation that would allow to understand without difficulty what is described, perceiving at the same time that particular ‘aroma of otherness,’ i. e.,

writer's license and can occur at various levels; in fact, we distinguish grammatical, lexical, phonological, semantic and textual deviation (see Leech 1969 and <http://realenglish3.blogspot.com/-2015/03/linguistic-deviation.html>; last accessed: 14/06/2023).

⁷ As Osimo remarks, Eastern-European translatoologists were the first to use and adapt the Latin term *realia*, which in their languages is considered a feminine singular noun (Osimo 2011: 111-112); in Italian, due to more familiarity with Latin, the term is used only in the plural. East-European scholars have studied in particular this type of culture-specific words from a semiotic and linguo-culturological point of view: see among the others Vlahov and Florin 2020, Lûdskanov 2008, Lotman 1984 and Torop 1995.

⁸ It is no coincidence that *realia*, among other culture-specific linguistic phenomena, are a central topic of the Post-Soviet research field of studies called *Russkaya Jazykovaya Kartina Mira (Russian Linguistic View of the World)*: see in particular Caramitti: 2014, the works by A. Wierzbicka and the Moscow Semantic School.

the distinctive local, national or historical flavour, for which these foreign elements have been included in the text.”] (Vlahov and Florin 1980: 80-81⁹; italics in the original).

Due to their dense semantic and cultural contents, contemporary Translation Studies propose different strategies and techniques to transfer and ‘re-locate’ *realia* in the target text: a) transcription character by character/phonetic transcription (or transliteration if, as in Russian, the original word is written in an alphabet different from the receiving culture one). This strategy is usually adopted when for several reasons it is difficult to translate the concept/item providing an adequate equivalent, or when the translator, consistently with his/her general approach to the given prototext, aims first of all to preserve its ‘otherness’ (Vlahov and Florin 2020: 29). B) Translation of the term by substitution in the target language, which can be obtained through calques or semi-calques of the original, by appropriation or creating a semantic neologism. C) Approximate translation, which is still very often employed through *generalization* technique¹⁰, through the proposal of a functional analogue, or by the choice of a descriptive translation which explains and interprets the foreign term. D) Contextual translation: in this case we do not take into account the actual meaning of the *realia* word, but the overall sense of the phrase in the given context (Triberio 2021). Considering the wide range of possibilities, how do we decide which strategy is best suited case by case? As Osimo observes:

“Occorre tenere conto di alcuni elementi. Uno è il tipo di testo. Per quanto riguarda la scelta fra traslitterazione e traduzione, i traduttori tendono a preferire sempre più spesso la prima. L’elemento esotico, che nella fiction è spesso fondamentale, anche nella non-fiction è spesso preferibile per la sua chiarezza e non confondibilità. Nel testo divulgativo, dove un tempo prevaleva la traduzione adattata e appropriante, ultimamente si preferisce la traslitterazione con nota. Altro aspetto da prendere in considerazione è quanto sia importante l’elemento di *realia* in quel contesto. Se tale elemento è estraneo anche alla cultura emittente, spesso l’alone esotico è voluto, perciò occorre preservarlo in qualche modo. Se invece l’elemento è proprio della cultura emittente, la sua preservazione nella cultura ricevente crea un esotismo prima inesistente.”

[“Some elements must be taken into account. One is the type of text. For what concerns the choice between transliteration and translation, translators increasingly tend to prefer the former. The exotic element, which in fiction is often fundamental, even in non-fiction is in many cases preferable for its clarity and distinctiveness. In popular texts, where adapted and appropriating translations once prevailed, recently note transliteration is preferred. Another aspect to consider is how important the *realia* element is in that context. If the element is also foreign to the source culture, often the exotic halo is intentional, so somehow it must be preserved. If, on the other hand, the *realia* element is proper to the source culture, its preservation in the target culture creates a previously non-existent exoticism.”] (Osimo 2011: 113)

⁹ My translation (*I. R.*). Unless otherwise specified, all the English translations in the present work are mine.

¹⁰ For example, a *balalaika* in a Russian text can remain “*balalaika*” in Italian translation (transliteration), or it can be rendered as a “mandolin” (Italian functional analogue), but if it is not considered important to convey its “Russian cultural flavour” it can also become “a musical instrument” (generalization strategy).

For example, a typically Russian soup like *borshch* in English translation can remain “borsch” (*calque*), or it can be rendered as “mulligatawny soup” (*domestication* strategy); anyway, losing a lot of its semantic and culture-specific undertones, it can even become a simple ‘stew’ (*standardization* or *homologation* strategy). Coming to Italian, some Russian *realia* have entered our language and culture in different epochs, and today their transliterated calques have acquired an established meaning well known by readers: let us think, among the others, about words like *samovar*, *dacha* and *GULag*, or the historicisms *perestrojka*, *glasnot’* and *apparatchik* (Malinin 2012: 43-45). A different case is represented by the *Primus*, the kerosene stove protagonist of Russian *byt* (everyday life) and of many prominent literary works of the 1920s (Bulgakov, Zoshchenko, Mandel’shtam): some Italian translators keep it unchanged by transliteration, but without any historical or culturological explanations. On other occasions it is translated generically as “*il fornello a gas*” (“the oil stove”). In our view, both choices do not fully transmit the complex network of concrete and symbolic meanings of the item into the receiving culture (see Remonato: 2015).

No less difficult to be reproduced in translation are **phraseologisms**, which express the inner web of semantic and culturological references stratified in the use and history of a given language. As is known, in linguistics phraseological units are stable word-groups with partially or fully transferred semantic content; they include phrases that, taken as a whole, have a meaning one wouldn’t be able to deduce from the single meanings of the individual words (Zykova 2016). Like *realia*, phraseologisms reflect the mentality, the sense of humour, the double senses, the habits and customs of a people. Among them we can find proverbs, riddles, idiomatic expressions, tongue twisters and aphorisms of literary or folkloric origins. In Vinogradov’s classification (Vinogradov 2004), they can be mainly divided into three groups: a) lexical phraseological units; b) predicative phraseological units; c) comparative phraseologisms (see also Malinin 2012: 52-54). Scholars and translators agree that the best way to translate them is not through literal reproduction, which would sound foreign and unfamiliar to target readers, but through the choice of some equivalents habitually employed with the same (or similar) effects in the receiving culture (Zykova 2016: 145). For example, what in Russian is expressed through the idiom ‘*zdorovyj kak byk*’ (‘as healthy as a bull’) corresponds to the Italian ‘*sano come un pesce*’ (‘as healthy as a fish’), and to the English formulations ‘*healthy as a horse*’ and ‘*fit as a fiddle*.’ The basic idea is to activate the popular and folkloric cultural heritage of the target language; that is why a non-phraseological translation of an idiom or proverb is much less common. It may be useful when an appropriate equivalent is lacking, or when the aphorism in the source language is polysemic. In these cases, the solution usually consists of a descriptive translation with eventual explicatory notes. In the Russian linguo-culturological context, ‘*krylatye slova*’ – or ‘*krylatye vyrazheniya*,’ literally ‘winged’ words or expressions – are also part of this category: they are famous quotes originally coming from literary works so deeply rooted in the written, and especially in the spoken language, that often one does not remember their authors¹¹

¹¹ The phenomenon of literary quotations entered into everyday language is common to a lot of languages and cultures, including Italian. Anyway, given the well-known central role of literature in the Russian context, the difference is that Russian people recur to such expressions at all levels and in

(Dobrovolskaya 2016: 120-128). It frequently happens, besides, that the aphorism is not used in full, but only mentioned: think about the expression ‘*Dem’yanova ucha,*’ (‘*Dem’yanov’s ear*’)¹², coming from the homonymous fable-anecdote (1813) by Ivan A. Krylov (1769-1844).

As we already observed, phraseological units are mainly composed of fixed or partially variable lexical blocks; most of them are distinguished by their own stylistic value and expressive nuances (Malinin 2012: 52), which have to be maintained (or, better, ‘re-created’) in translation. In fact, in a literary work repeated stylistic changes produced by the mixture with spoken language or other interpolations represent an important element for translators (Briffa: 2012). In some cases, **specific stylistic traits** such as formal experimentalism, the alternation of different expressive registers or linguistic hybridization may be recognized as dominant elements in the prototext (let us think, for example, about the funambulist linguistic innovations in the novel *Petersburg* by A. Belyj, 1914). The translator’s cultural competence, fantasy and creativity also come in the way (Alessandra: 2018); as Eco writes, one should accept to lose certain undertones if he/she has resorted to adequate compensation strategies, and if the peculiar “flavour” of the original text emerges at any rate:

“Tradurre significa sempre ‘limare via’ alcune delle conseguenze che il termine originale implicava. In questo senso, traducendo, *non si dice mai la stessa cosa*. L’interpretazione che precede ogni traduzione deve stabilire quante e quali delle possibili conseguenze illative che il termine suggerisce possano essere limate via. Senza mai essere del tutto certi di non aver perduto un riverbero ultravioletto, un’allusione infrarossa.”

[“Translating always means ‘filing away’ some of the consequences that the original term implied. In this sense, translating *you never say the same thing*. The interpretation preceding each translation must determine how many and which of the possible illative consequences that the term suggests may be filed away. Without ever being completely sure that you have not lost an ultraviolet reverb, or an infrared allusion.”] (Eco 2003: 93-94; italics in the original)

An experienced translator will be able to assess different texts on the basis of their types and functions, in order to adopt the most adequate translation techniques (Hatim and Mason 2000, Salmon 2017: 212-220). Through the analysis of the case study, we aim to provide some concrete examples of the general problematic elements in the translation process mentioned above, reflecting on possible strategies and equivalent solutions in relation to the specific characteristics of the prototext.

any circumstances, so that there are dictionaries and repertoires of these special types of phraseologisms increasingly refined and exhaustive (Zykova 2016: 148).

¹² The expression ‘*Dem’yanova ucha*’ (‘*Dem’yanov’s ear*’), directly connected to the fable- anecdote’s plot, refers to something intrusive and persistently offered, while the one who is being treated no longer wants any more. It is still used to allude to an immoderate and obsessive treat, the imposition of something, and in some cases it is mentioned simply as ‘*dem’yanov.*’ See *Slovar’ russkogo jazyka*, v 4-ch t., RAN, Int. Lingvističeskich issledovanij. Pod red. A. P. Evgen’evoj. 4-e izd., ster., Moskva: Russkij Yazyk, Poligrafresursy 1999 and <https://kartaslov.ru/значение-слова/демьянова+уха>.

3. Translating into Italian Aleksey Tolstoy's *Zolotoy kljuchik* (1935): a Case Study



Figure 1. Original cover of the 1936 volume edition of *Zolotoj klyuchik, ili Priklyucheniya Buratino*

As is widely known, the Soviet writer Aleksey Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1882-1945) composed the fairy-tale *Zolotoy kljuchik, ili Priklyucheniya Buratino* (*The Little Golden Key, or the Adventures of Burattino*) in 1935, while recovering from a heart attack¹³. He already knew Collodi's (1826-1890) *Le avventure di Pinocchio. Storia di un Burattino* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio. The Story of a Puppet*, 1883), and he was deeply fascinated by it (Bezrukova: 2007). The work on the Italian children's novel was part of an earlier project (Varlamov 2008: 304-305): in the 1920s, while he was in emigration, Tolstoy collaborated in the Russian translation of the Italian book by Nina Petrovna (1878-1928), which was published in a Russian émigré magazine in Berlin with the title *Priklyucheniya Pinokkio* (1924). *Zolotoy kljuchik*, then, was initially conceived as an adaptation of *Pinocchio*¹⁴: indeed, its first sixteen chapters retrace

¹³ On 13th February 1835 A. Tolstoy wrote in a letter to Gorky: "I'm working on *Pinocchio*. At the beginning I only wanted to rewrite in Russian Collodi's content. But then I gave up on it, it was coming out a bit boring and bland. With Marshak's approval, now I'm writing on the same subject in my own way" (Kryukova 1989: 202). The publication of the fairy tale on the children's magazine *Pionerskaya Pravda* (*The Pioneer's Truth*) began on 7th November 1935, anniversary of the October Revolution according to the Gregorian calendar adopted in 1918. The first volume edition dates back to a few months later (1936), with the significant subtitle "A new novel for children and adults".

¹⁴ Sverdlov observes that *Zolotoj kljuchik* is at the same time a parody of the pedagogic and moralistic framework of *Pinocchio* and an utopian narrative about "new Soviet children's happiness." In the scholar's view, in order to avoid problems and suspects Tolstoy tried to concile his personal predilection and inclination towards children's literature with the propaganda demands of the moment (Sverdlov 2004: 58-59).

quite faithfully Collodi's plot. The story is set in an Italian context, "a small town by the Mediterranean Sea," and since the beginning we can notice some references that, although in a bit stereotypical and artificial way, allude to the inner intertextual dialogue between the two works¹⁵. Anyway, introducing the pivotal magical element of the little golden key¹⁶, Aleksej Tolstoj inserts something radically new, which gives him the possibility to develop differently the second part of the story and the protagonist's psychological traits. In fact, at the end of his rocambolesque adventures Burattino does not turn into a real child, but he (proudly) remains a puppet (Kosman 2020: 73). The Soviet writer concentrates his own narrative on six days, adding some characters and thematic parallelisms with motifs from fairy tales of the Russian popular tradition. The little golden key hides a secret: it opens a small door beyond which happiness lies. This concrete and symbolic threshold is located behind the painted pot in father Carlo's shabby little room, which echoes Collodi's illusionist image, with the difference that in the Russian the fireplace and the pot are not painted on the wall, but on a piece of old canvas.



Figure 2. The newly created Burattino and the painted pot in Carlo's little room

¹⁵ As is known, the Russian form of the name 'Burattino' represents an allusion to Italian Comedy of Art, while the puppet's creator and "putative father" is called Carlo as a tribute to Carlo Lorenzini (1826-1890), the real name of the Tuscan writer and journalist Collodi. Besides, it is worth reminding that in some of the first Russian versions of *Pinocchio* the Italian word 'burattino' had been translated as 'Petrushka,' which is the name of a popular character of Russian puppet theatre, and it has also become the technical term to define a puppet, or, more precisely, a wooden marionette (Remonato 2022b: 168, Giovannoli 2013:160-161).

¹⁶ The image of the little golden key is a recurrent mythologem in Russian symbolist poetry that Tolstoy well knew, as he had probably read *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by L. Carroll (1832-1898), in which a little golden key similarly opens a mysterious door hidden behind a curtain (Aleshina: 2006). Some critics have also underlined that it may represent a secret reference to the Counts Tolstoy's heraldic coat of arms, in which the object is present (Petrovskij 2006: 237-238, Tolstaya 2013: 426-431, Poddubnaya 2020: 50). Among the *krylatye vyrazheniya* of literary origins, the little golden key recalls one of the brilliant jokes by Ostap Bender in the picaresque novel *Twelve Chairs* (1928): "– Может быть, тебе дать еще ключ от квартиры, где деньги лежат?," "Perhaps you would like me to give you the key of the flat where I keep the money, too?"

The golden key gives access to a magic marionette theatre, through which puppets can entertain the audience and organize their own shows without the menacing presence of an authoritarian ‘master’ like Karabas Barabas. The happy ending is achieved thanks to the sincere friendship and common efforts¹⁷ of the characters – mainly puppets and animals –, among which the wooden Burattino gradually transforms from a sort of street brat into a positive, brave and selfless hero¹⁸. As Cerrai underlines, his route is far from a linear one; in fact, during the narrative he constantly rebels, at first against poverty, then against fixed pedagogical and educational schemes:

“Burattino, dunque, si ribella e fugge alla ricerca di una felicità concreta che troverà poi, effettivamente, con il recupero della chiave d’oro, premio meritato ai tanti patimenti e peripezie: egli arriva alla felicità perché scopre in sé stesso lo scopo da dare alla propria vita.”

[“Burattino, therefore, rebels and flees in search of a concrete happiness, which he will later find, effectively, with the recovery of the little golden key, the deserved reward to many sufferings and vicissitudes. He reaches happiness because he discovers within himself the purpose to be given to his life.”] (Cerrai 1985: 136)

Without dwelling further on the dynamic plot and the symbolic undertones of the fable, let us consider it as a prototext. In the wake of the critical in-depth analyses of Collodi’s novel connected to the centenary of its first publication, *Zolotoj klyuchik* has been translated into Italian twice in the same decade (1980s; see De Florio 2023). As far as we could determine, the first version consists of an indirect translation from German by Luigi Garzone (Tolstoy 1981). This Italian reworking was published in three editions – in 1981, 1986 and 1992 – as a paperback annex of the periodical “Stampa Alternativa,” with the showy and misleading title *Il compagno Pinocchio. La piccola chiave d’oro o le avventure di Burattino* (The Comrade Pinocchio. The Little

¹⁷ We prefer to talk about ‘friendship’, ‘shared goals’ and ‘common efforts’ because, in our view, the emphasis on the collective, positive and egalitarian values of Soviet communism which several critics have seen in the text (see Cerrai: 1985, Risaliti: 1984, Urnov: 1985 and Kosman: 2020) appear quite dated today, even though there certainly were some ideological elements. These interpretations were mainly connected to the propagandistic nature of the 1936 theatrical adaptation of A. Tolstoy’s work, and of the theatre staging realized in 1938 by V. M. Baljunas and A. M. Fedorov on the play written by the same author: A. N. Tolstoy, *Zolotoj klyuchik: pesa v 3 dejstviyakh dlya samodeyatelnogo detskogo teatra* (The Little Golden Key: Play in three acts for the Amateurs’ Children’s Theatre), Moscow: Detgiz, 1939. Also some other productions staged in the early 1950s shared this politicized key of reading, with even the Soviet national anthem played at the end. As Risaliti underlines, however, Aleksey Tolstoy’s opportunistic position can be understood in the context of the terrible years of great Stalinist repressions (see Risaliti 1990: 158).

¹⁸ In Sverdlov’s words, creating Burattino Tolstoy “brought together in one figure the street thug and the Soviet pioneer” (Sverdlov 2004: 58). Anyway, today a totally pro-Soviet reading of the work is not very convincing also for the fact that at a careful analysis of the text we can glimpse some dark allusions to Stalinist terror of the time: let us think to the mastiff dogs, which closely recall the appearance and brutal manners of KGB agents, or the (baseless) accusations moved to Burattino, which sadly echo well-known formulas: “– Ты совершил три преступления, негодяй: ты – беспризорный, беспаспортный и безработный. Отвести его за город и утопить в пруду.” (Tolstoy 1948: 83), “– You committed three crimes, scoundrel: you are homeless, passportless and unemployed. Take him out of town and drown him in the pond.”

Golden Key or the Adventures of Burattino)¹⁹. The volume does not have an introduction, any comments, or other forms of paratextual elements; anyway, it has had a certain diffusion.

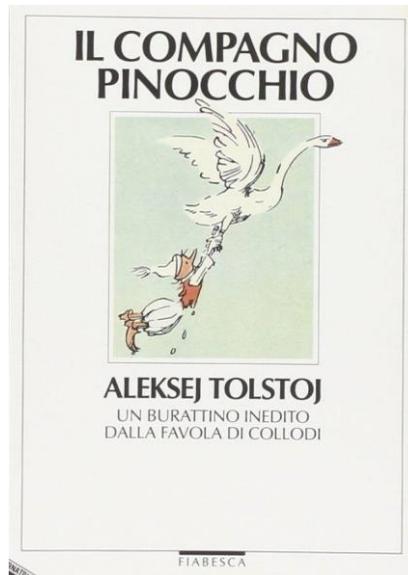


Figure 3. Frontpage of the Italian translation by Luigi Garzone (1981)

In general terms, the translation from Russian by Giorgio Cerrai (Tolstoj 1986: 17-84) is distinguished by a greater fidelity to the original tale, rich in idioms and expressions typical of the spoken language, but it was only published in the Slavistic literary journal *Rassegna sovietica* (Soviet review), therefore it has had a quite limited circulation among common readers. A thematic introduction to the work came out in the previous number of the journal (see Cerrai: 1985), while some explanatory footnotes and observations on the translation process are included in the Italian text (Cerrai 1986: 85-90)²⁰. In addition to the considerable temporal distance from their publication, which inevitably affects the freshness and linguistic up-to-dateness of the metatexts, today both versions are almost impossible to find. That is why, enjoying the

¹⁹ It was not possible for us to ascertain it, but considering the same illustrations by A. Kaniewskij present in both editions, it seems probable that the Germanist Garzone made reference to the following translation: Alexej Tolstoj, *Das goldene Schlüsselchen oder die Abenteuer des Burattino*. Illustr. von A. Kanewskij. Übers. aus dem Russischen von Robert von Radetzky. Berlin: Alfred Holz Verlag, 1954. Apart from the direct reference to *Pinocchio* aimed to attract target readers, the politicized undertone in the Italian title, which “says something more” and misleads from the original (Remonato 2022a: 51), may have been added for ‘marketing’ reasons related to the orientations of the publishing house Stampa Alternativa. In fact, the headline of the German version is literal.

²⁰ For a detailed comparison between these two Italian translations and Tolstoj’s original work see Giovannoli 2013: 300–328.

brightness and the lively rhythm of this beloved Russian fairy-tale, we think that a new Italian translation easily available on the market would be desirable²¹.

Analyzing the original text, first of all we focused on its **title**, a co-validating headline (Remonato 2022a: 46) in which the first element, *Zolotoj klyuchik* (*The Little Golden Key*), is balanced and in some ways “explained” by the more “classical” subtitle (or co-title string) *ili Priklyucheniya Buratino* (*or the Adventures of Burattino*). So, how to translate it in Italian maintaining the formal structure and the subtle web of references to the Comedy of Art? Differently from English²², in our language there are some diminutive forms of the term ‘key,’ which give us the possibility to propose as a title *La chiavetta d’oro, o le avventure di Burattino*²³. Another important aspect regards the **dominant** of Tolstoy’s *povest*, that will affect the general approach and basic choices in the translation process (Chironova 2016). In our view, the prevailing motif is related to the friendship and mutual aid among the puppets and the animals of the wood, that allow them to obtain together the little golden key and the wonderful marionette theatre. A meaningful sub-dominant element is represented by the stylistic traits of the source text: in fact, *The Little Golden Key* is characterized by simple, agile and often paratactic constructions²⁴, with quite short and linear sentences aimed to the receptive possibilities of children. As Cerrai remarks,

“il continuo evolversi dell’azione trova una precisa rispondenza nel susseguirsi costante di forme verbali che esprimono tale evoluzione; mentre l’insistente ricorso a onomatopoeie, allitterazioni (sia lessicali che foniche) conferisce alla fiaba una vivacità e immediatezza quasi uniche.”

[“the continuous evolution of the action finds a precise correspondence in the constant succession of verbal forms which express this development, while the insistent recourse to onomatopoeias and alliterations (both lexical and phonic) gives the fairy tale an almost unique liveliness and immediacy.”] (Cerrai 1985: 133)

²¹ As we already said, our translation of Tolstoy’s fairy-tale has not been published yet, because it is still in progress.

²² In our view, for its concrete and symbolic meanings the coveted golden object plays a central role in the plot; to convey the fact that it is little has, therefore, a certain relevance. Lacking a proper diminutive form of the noun, in English we have to recur to the adjective: cf. Alexei Tolstoy, *The Little Gold Key or the Adventures of Burattino*, English transl. by K. Cook-Horujy. Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1990. In some other versions and websites the details get lost, and the work is referred to simply as “The Golden Key.”

²³ Even the solution “La piccola chiave d’oro” proposed by Garzone may be a valid alternative, because it evokes Italian favolistic tradition, and it also avoids any possible misleading allusions to usb keys, which today in Italian are often identified with the diminutive “chiavette.” Instead, Cerrai’s choice “*La chiavina d’oro, ovvero...*” is a rather outdated variant today.

²⁴ Let us examine some examples of paratactic constructions from the text: “Он закрыл глаза и вдруг увидел жареную курицу на тарелке. Живо открыл глаза, – курица на тарелке исчезла” (Tolstoy 1948: 68), “Chiuse gli occhi, e vide all’improvviso un pollo arrosto su un piatto. Aprì subito gli occhi, ma il pollo sul piatto sparì.” Given the perfective aspect of the verbs in the original, we chose to translate them with the remote past tense in Italian, which has similar “compact” and resultative effects.

The “expressive aura” of the characters, i.e., their peculiar ways of moving and talking, also contribute to the immediacy, freshness and formal ingenuity of the work. The attention to the fairy-tale’s stylistic features and to its cultural dialogue with *Pinocchio* on the background of Italian children’s literature tradition (De Florio 2021) are the challenging aspirations of this translation project still in progress.

As we already underlined, for their historical origins and structural characteristics Russian and Italian are particularly rich in anisomorphisms; in the case of *Zolotoj ključik*, some of these relate to the different grammatical categorization of time in verbs (Russian aspectual pairs), to the choice of determinative or indeterminate articles in Italian and to the abundant presence of **diminutives** and **childhood pet names** in Russian. As is known, in this language their usage may express a character’s state of mind, his/her point of view or an emotional/affective hue; the most common subset of such suffixes conveys the idea of smallness, delicateness, etc. In our view, dealing with a children’s work it is important to reproduce these stylistic endearments as much as possible. In the sentence “чей-то необыкновенно *тоненький* голосок” (Tolstoj 1948: 61), “una vocina straordinariamente *sottile*,” the noun ‘voice’ has been translated with a corresponding diminutive form, which was not possible to maintain for the adjective ‘thin’²⁵. In the phrase “Не нужно забывать, что Буратино шел всего первый день от рождения. *Мысли* у него были *маленькие-маленькие, коротенькие-коротенькие, пустяковые-пустяковые*” (Tolstoj 1948: 64), we tried to recreate the formulaic and alliterative effects of the repetitions, but we could not keep the diminutive suffix in the adjective ‘*koroten’kie*.’ So, we decided to retrieve and relocate it in the word ‘*pensierini*’ (‘little thoughts’): “Non bisogna dimenticare che Burattino aveva solo un giorno di vita. I suoi *pensierini* erano piccoli piccoli, corti corti, leggeri leggeri.” While in Russian we can easily duplicate diminutive-endearing connotations in the same sentence (“*malen’kij domik*”), Italian does not normally admit this possibility (see Fedorova and Bolognani 2015: 72):

“Вдруг сквозь ветки орешника он увидел красивую лужайку и посреди ее *маленький*, освещенный луной *домик* в четыре *окошка*. На ставнях нарисованы солнце, луна и звезды. Вокруг росли большие лазоревые цветы. Дорожки посыпаны чистым *песочком*. Из фонтана била *тоненькая* струя воды, в ней подплясывал полосатый *мячик*.” (Tolstoj 1948: 83)

[“All’improvviso attraverso i rami del nocciolo vide un bel prato, e in mezzo ad esso una *casetta* con quattro *finestrelle* illuminata dalla luna. Sulle imposte erano disegnati il sole, la luna e le stelle. Grandi fiori azzurri crescevano tutt’intorno. I *violetti* erano cosparsi di *sabbiolina* candida. Da una fontana zampillava un *sottile* getto d’acqua, in cui saltellava una *pallina* a strisce.”] (Italics mine, I. R.)

As is not surprising given the genre of the work, Tolstoj’s fable is quite rich in linguistic **connotations**; a good example is represented by turtle Tortilla’s formulaic

²⁵ In our view, a good solution to this asymmetry is the one proposed by Cerrai, who doubled the adjective ‘thin’; even if this strategy makes the target text longer, it gives to the epithet a childish and diminutive effect in Italian: “Ma aveva appena cominciato, che *una vocina sottile sottile* piagnucolò” (Tolstoj 1986: 17).

way of speaking, characterized by repetitions and syntactic inversions which create a circular, recursive effect connected to the animal's old age, wisdom and authority:

“– Ах ты, безмозглый, доверчивый *мальчишка с коротенькими мыслями!* – сказала Тортила. – Сидеть бы тебе дома да прилежно учиться! Занесло тебя в Страну Дураков!

– Так я же хотел же добыть побольше золотых монет для папы Карло... Я оччень хороший и благоразумный мальчик...

– *Деньги твои украли* кот и лиса, – сказала черепаха. – Они пробежали мимо пруда, остановились попить, и я слышала, как они хвастались, что выкопали твои деньги, и как подрались из-за них... Ох ты, безмозглый, доверчивый *дурачок с коротенькими мыслями!*..” (Tolstoj 1948: 96)

[“– Ah, tu, sventato, ingenuo *ragazzino col cervellino corto* che non sei altro! – disse Tortilla. – Avresti dovuto stare a casa e studiare sodo. E invece sei finito nel Paese degli Sciocchi!

– Ma io volevo solo procurarmi più monete d'oro per papà Carlo... Sono un ragazzo mooolto buono e ragionevole...

– *I tuoi soldi li hanno rubati* il Gatto e la Volpe, – disse la tartaruga. – Sono passati di corsa vicino allo stagno, si sono fermati a bere e li ho sentiti che si vantavano di aver dissotterrato i tuoi soldi e litigavano per spartirseli... Oh tu, sventato, ingenuo *scioccherello col cervellino corto...*”] (Italics mine, *I. R.*)

Mutatis mutandis, Pierrot's expressive mode may be considered a kind of **idiolect**: in fact, in the course of the story the puppet is repeatedly mocked for his eternally dreamy air, for his inconclusiveness and for the “meaningless verses” through which he constantly speaks. As some scholars remarked (Petrovskij: 2006, Tolstaya: 1997), the dazed poet's bizarre verses interpolated in the narrative contain parodic references to symbolist poetry, and, more specifically, to the figure of Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921)²⁶:

“– Боюсь, боюсь! – повторяла Мальвина и листочком лопуха в отчаянии закрывала мокрое лицо.

Пьеро пытался утешать ее стихами:

²⁶ Several studies have evidenced the presence of a secondary, satirical subtext in the work, which alludes in a parodical way to events and well-known personalities in the literary and theatrical *milieu* of the *Serebryanyj vek* (*Silver Age*); besides Pierrot-Blok, in the figure of Burattino would be ironically depicted Maksim Gorky (1868-1936), Karabas Barabas would be a dispotical and caricatural portrait of the theatre director E. V. Meyerkhol'd (1874-1940), while in Malvina one could see either Lyubov' Mendeleeva, Ol'ga Knipper or Mariya Andreeva (Petrovskij 2006: 218-324, Tolstaja 2013: 417-426, Varlamov 2008: 455-461). As is known, Lyubov' Mendeleyeva (1881-1939), daughter of the famous chemist Dmitriy I. Mendeleyev, was A. A. Blok's (1880-1921) wife, Ol'ga Knipper (1868-1959), famous stage actress of the Moscow Art Theatre, became also A. P. Chekhov's wife, while Mariya Andreyeva (1868-1953), stage actress in Moscow as well, later left acting for a career in theatrical administration. In 1903, besides, she became Maxim Gorky's (1868-1936) common-law wife. All these female figures have in common with Mal'vina a high level of education and refinement, that in the tale is satirically downplayed through the marionette's obsession for personal hygiene and good manners.

[“– Ah Burattino, Burattino – disse il grillo – smettila con le monellerie, dai retta a Carlo, non scappare di casa senza motivo e domani comincia ad andare a scuola. Ecco il mio consiglio. Altrimenti ti aspettano pericoli terribili e avventure spaventose. Sulla tua vita non scommetterei neanche una mosca morta e rinsecchita.

– Perrrrché? – chiese Burattino.

– Adesso lo vedrai, perrrrché – rispose il Grillo Parlante.

– Accidenti a te, *decrepito insettaccio-schifosaccio!* – gridò Burattino. – Più di tutto al mondo amo le avventure spaventose. Domani all'alba scapperò di casa: mi arrampicherò sugli steccati, saccheggerò i nidi degli uccelli, prenderò in giro i bambini, tirerò la coda ai cani e ai gatti... E me ne inventerò ancora delle belle!”] (Italics mine, *I. R.*)

For what concerns the several *realia* that dot the pages of the fairy-tale, we adopted different strategies related to their respective degree of assimilation or penetration in the target culture²⁸. In some cases we recurred to sheer transliterations, in some others to concize descriptive translations, and very often to Italian equivalents. For example, we decided to translate the idiomatic expression “*Sizyj Nos*,” i. e. the exhilarating nickname given to the carpenter Giuseppe that opens the narrative, as “*Naso Paonazzo*” (literally ‘Purple Nose’)²⁹. Even though the Russian adjective *sizyj* properly alludes to a bluish-greyish hue associated with drunkenness³⁰, the most fitting contextual Italian equivalent is a hyperbolic and livid version of “reddish tending to dark purple”³¹. This solution is also the one present in Collodi’s work, and therefore its employment adds a meaningful intertextual reference (Poddubnaya 2020). Despite the fact that the phrases are generally short and linear, in *Zolotoj ključik* the descriptions of animals, insects and plants are quite detailed. Almost all the numerous talking animals of the wood who play an active role in the plot are mentioned in the narrative with proper names, and sometimes even with some personality traits. This choice highlights the deep links of Tolstoy’s work with Krylov’s fables and Russian folkloric tradition³², and requires the research of creative and effective Italian equivalents:

²⁸ For example, with much reluctance for what gets lost the Russian *kasha* has become “*semolino*,” and *blyn* – “*frittella*”: “На занавесе были нарисованы танцующие человечки, девочки в черных масках, страшные бородатые люди в колпаках со звездами, солнце, похожее на блин с носом и глазами, и другие занимательные картинки” (Tolstoy 1948: 68), “Sul sipario erano dipinti piccoli ballerini, bambine con maschere nere, spaventosi uomini barbati in berretti con stelle, un sole simile a una frittella con naso e occhi, e altre immagini interessanti.”

²⁹ After its first occurrence in the beginning of the text, the icastic nickname is repeated for three times (chapter two): one by the talking log from which Burattino would be moulded, the second one by an enraged Carlo and the third one referred to its denotative meaning during the fight (i. e., Giuseppe’s actual nose). The repetition of “*Sizyj Nos*” by the other characters create a comical effect, an internal play of references.

³⁰ On the expression and its meanings see https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/dic_synonims/161900/сизый (last accessed: 14/06/2023).

³¹ On the origins and different chromatic and semantic nuances of the adjective “*paonazzo*” see <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/paonazzo/> (last accessed: 14/06/2023).

³² Among the others, we refer to the well-known collection of Russian folk tales edited by A. N. Afanas’ev (1826–1971), published in eight volumes between 1855 and 1863. Many themes and images are common to different fairy tales, especially if we consider those with animals and magical elements. In particular, the grey hare to which Pierrot clings during his escape reminds, in our view, the grey wolf in the fairy tale of *Prince Ivan, the Firebird and the Grey Wolf*, while the symbolic

“– Снимите ваши лохмотья, вам дадут приличную куртку и штанишки, – сказала девочка.

Четверо портных – мастер-одиночка, *угрюмый рак Шепталло*, *серый Дятел* с хохолком, *большой жук Рогач* и *мышь Лизетта* – шили из старых девочкиных платьев красивый мальчишеский костюм. Шепталло кроил, Дятел клювом протыкал дырки и шил. Рогач задними ногами сучил нитки, Лизетта их перегрызала.” (Tolstoj 1948: 70)

[“– Si tolga i suoi stracci, le verranno dati una giacchetta e pantaloni decenti, – disse la bambina.

Quattro sarti – lo *scontroso Gámbero Pierángelo*³³, mastro-artigiano, il *Picchio grigio* con il ciuffo, il *grosso cervo-volante Scarabello* e la *topolina Lisetta* – cucirono da dei vestiti vecchi della bambina un bel completo da ragazzo. Pierángelo tagliava, Picchio faceva i fori col becco e cuciva. Scarabello annodava i fili con le zampette posteriori e Lisetta li tagliava coi denti.] (Italics mine, I. R.)

In our view, for proper names in this context it is preferable to rely on fantasy, on Italian equivalents from children’s memories or, eventually, on some examples taken from Italian children’s literature (Viezzi 2010); in such cases, a transliteration would make no sense. For other *realia* coming from Italian that the author inserted to recreate the setting (*‘sin’or,’ ‘sol’do,’* ecc.), the “foreignizing” effect gets obviously lost, even though through their graphic forms one can catch some archaism in their usage.

As it happened with other popular literary works, some jokes and expressions from *Zolotoy klyuhcik* have entered Russian everyday language as *‘krylatye vyrazheniya’*: among the others, we mention the aphorism *‘работать как папа Карло,’* ‘work like dad Carlo,’ which has become proverbial in Russian and alludes to a person who constantly works hard, without any rest (Kosman 2020: 74). We already pointed out that **stylistic traits** are of major importance in the text, and reflect the specific qualities of Aleksey Tolstoy’s polymorphic way of writing (Shcherbina 203-220). The prevailing linguistic register in the tale is the oral one, with the employment of rhymes, alliterations and onomatopoeia which create puns and word-games really difficult to reproduce in translation:

“Ему оставалось только броситься в воду. В это время он увидел белого лебедя, спавшего близ берега, засунув голову под крыло. Буратино кинулся в озеро, нырнул и схватил лебедя за лапы. – *Го-го,* – *гоготнул* лебедь, пробуждаясь, – что за неприличные шутки! Оставьте мои лапы в покое!” (Tolstoy 1948: 74)

[“Non gli restava che gettarsi nell’acqua. In quel momento vide un cigno bianco che dormiva vicino alla riva, con la testa infilata sotto l’ala. Burattino corse nel laghetto, si

connotations of the key and its being made of gold recall some *leitmotives* present in *Vasilisa the Beautiful and Koschei the Immortal*: see A. N. Afanas’ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki (Russian Popular Fairy-Tales)*, 3 vol., Moskva: Nauka, 1984, v. 1, 331-343.

³³ In a similar way, for the “sullen crab Shapello” Garzone proposes a contextual equivalent (or re-location) which plays with the zoological name of a related animal in Italian: “il brontolone bernardo l’eremita” (Tolstoy 1981: 51): in fact, “Bernardo l’eremita” corresponds to the hermit crab, but “Bernardo” is also a common masculine name in Italian.

tuffò e afferrò il cigno per le zampe. – *Go-go, – gorgheggiò il cigno, svegliandosi di soprassalto, – che scherzi del cavolo! Lascia stare le mie zampe!*”] (Italics mine, *I. R.*)

To reproduce the assonance with the onomatopoeic cry of the swan, we translated the specific Russian verb *gogotnul* – from ‘*gogotat*,’ which defines the typical cries of geese and swans – as ‘*gorgheggiò*’ (lit. ‘he warbled’), giving priority to the phonetic effect.

“Козы с драной шерстью на боках щипали пыльную траву у тротуара, трясли огрызками хвостов.

– *Б-э-э-э-э-да...*

Повесив голову, стояла корова; у нее кости торчали сквозь кожу.

– Мууучение... – повторяла она задумчиво.” (Tolstoy 1948: 81)

[“Delle capre col pelo strappato sui fianchi brucavano erba polverosa dal marciapiede e scuotevano le code mozzate, *belando*:

– *B-e-e-e-e-ffa...*

Una mucca se ne stava a testa bassa; le ossa sembravano uscirle fuori dalla pelle.

– *Muuuioio...* – ripeteva *muggendo* pensierosa.”] (Italics mine, *I. R.*)

Also in this case, being impossible to maintain the precise meanings of the Russian words *beda* (lit. ‘misfortune,’ ‘calamity’) and *muchenie* (lit. ‘torment,’ ‘anguish’), as well as their assonance with the animals’ onomatopoeic noises, we chose to provide formal phonetic equivalents that let Italian readers understand the onomatopoeic puns present in the original text. Besides, both solutions try to convey the gloomy atmosphere of the “Country of Fools” (*beffa* literally means ‘mockery,’ ‘insult,’ while the verb *muoio* corresponds to ‘I’m dying’).

Burattino’s cheeky and light-hearted way of talking enhances the lively rhythm of the dialogues, which, as we already observed, often hide a series of parodic and satirical allusions to Moscow cultural and theatrical life of the 1930’s (Uvarova-Daniel’ 220). The linguistic dynamism of Tolstoy’s *povest’* is by no means easy to reproduce: in fact, the two Italian translations published so far do not always succeed in recreating the stylistic and onomatopoeic effects of the original, which are closely intertwined with cultural references to specific *realia* of the time. Though different, their Italian language appears “redundant” from the stylistic point of view if compared to the Russian original, as if the translators aimed at saying “more” than the prototext, or, better, in a more formal or refined way. We realized the same shortcoming while reviewing the first drafts of our translation, so we started “removing” superfluous words, too standard constructions and connectors, in order to re-create as much as possible the formal simplicity and the spoken language fluency of the source text. To overshadow the habitual and “cultured” usage of one’s own mother tongue is a challenge, but sometimes it is necessary to obtain a better result. In fact, as Diadori writes while translating each of us inevitably reflects to a certain extent the linguistic and cultural “climate” of his/her time:

“Implicitamente e indipendentemente dal genere testuale, il traduttore rispecchia anche la *temperies* culturale del suo tempo e le sue strategie traduttive risentiranno del modo in

cui i suoi destinatari considerano ciò che è diverso, visto come interessante e prestigioso oppure minaccioso e potenzialmente sovversivo. Le strategie traduttive a disposizione del traduttore sono dunque il mezzo che permette di risolvere le questioni più pratiche del processo traduttivo, negoziando il trattamento di ciò che è culturalmente estraneo ai destinatari, tra omologazione, straniamento e una serie di opzioni intermedie.”

[“Implicitly and independently of textual gender, a translator also reflects the cultural climate of his/her time, and his translation strategies will be affected by the way in which the recipients consider what is different, whether it is seen as interesting and prestigious or threatening and potentially subversive. The translation strategies available to the translator are therefore the means that allow to solve the most difficult questions of the translation process, negotiating the treatment of what is culturally alien to the recipients, between homologation, estrangement and several intermediate options.”] (Diadori 2012: 3)

4. Conclusion

Through the illustration of the selected case study, we provided concrete examples of problematic aspects in the process of literary translation from Russian into Italian and their possible solutions. After having outlined the compositional circumstances of Tolstoy’s fairy tale, its main characters, plot and contents compared to *Pinocchio*, the two Italian translations of the ’80s were taken into account. In fact, we reflected on the opportunity and general orientations of a new version. Then we analyzed the title of the *povest’* and the dominants of the original text, which play an important role in determining both translation strategies and actual translantants. For what concerns specific problematic elements, we examined how to translate the abundant quantity of diminutives and childhood pet names present in the work and some examples of linguistic connotations or idiolects, which display with a caricatural halo the “expressive aura” (Torop: 2010) of certain characters. Due to the magical and fantastic features associated with the textual genre, in some passages the recourse to neologisms that “expand” the possibilities of the target language appears well founded. The rendering of certain cultural *realia* in the Russian tale represent another meaningful test bench for our critical analysis: in these cases, the translation strategies adopted are directly related to the respective degree of assimilation of the terms in Italian language and culture (i.e., functional equivalence). Finally, we also proposed some attempts to reproduce onomatopoeic words connected to animal sounds.

It is important to underline that the single examples and choices have to be considered on the background of the general intent of the translation project, which aims at recreating as much as possible the typically oral stylistic traits and the different registers in Tolstoy’s fable. If we intend to obtain an effective translation, the Italian metatext has to be fluent and readable, but above all consistent and coherent to the eyes of target readers. Given the deep relations between *The Little Golden Key* and *Pinocchio*, in this case study the intercultural dimension inherent to each translation process (Steiner 1992; Buhrig, House, Ten Thije Jan 2009) is particularly relevant. In fact, there is a subtle interplay of cultural elements, a sort of “network” of intertextual references and echoes between the two works that at times culminates in a clear

intercultural perspective. Another prominent factor regards the peculiar literary genre of *Zolotoy klyuchik*: as Diadori observes, children's texts act as a real "generational bond" and require specific translation techniques. They often combine written parts with images, and are thought to be read aloud; dialogues are widely present between the lines, with interpolations imitating *baby talk* that gives a certain rhythm to the narratives:

“Le rime e le espressioni fisse sono un ulteriore tratto peculiare che conferisce un particolare ritmo alla narrazione, oltre a facilitare la memorizzazione e il riconoscimento delle fasi della storia. Specialmente nelle fiabe tradizionali si nota una tipica fissità degli schemi ricorrenti, che rende simili fiabe nate in tempi e luoghi lontani fra loro. [...] Nata nell'oralità, la fiaba risente in tutte le culture dei modelli della lingua orale, adottando però *routines* e formule culturali specifiche di questo genere letterario. In italiano, per esempio, troviamo 'le formule di apertura e chiusura' (*c'era una volta, e vissero felici e contenti*), le strutture iterative (*cammina cammina*), la ricorrenza di alcuni connettivi narrativi (*ed ecco, a un tratto*), la diffusione di alcune tipiche forme verbali (*il presente storico, l'infinito narrativo*), i deittici, gli appelli al lettore.”

[“Fixed rhymes and expressions are a further peculiar feature which gives a particular rhythm to the narrative, as well as facilitating the memorization and recognition of the stages of the story. In traditional fairy tales we especially notice a typical fixity of recurring patterns, that make similar fairy tales born in distant times and places. [...] Generated in the oral context, in all cultures fairy tales are influenced by the models of the oral language, but at the same time they adopted *routines* and cultural formulas specific to this literary genre. In Italian, for example, we find 'opening and closing formulas' (*once upon a time, and they lived happily ever after*), iterative structures (*walk and walk*), the recurrence of some narrative connectives (*and fere is, suddenly / all of a sudden*), the abundance of some typical verbal forms (*the historical present, the narrative infinitive*), deictics, the appeals to readers.”] (Diadori 2012: 121; italics in the original)

However, some relevant questions remain open. Which is our basic aim? In other terms: what type of Italian edition of Tolstoy's work shall we propose, in the end? An illustrated book for children, or a critical edition that would allow, through a paratext, to make emerge and account for the numerous subtexts and intertextual allusions? Who shall be our main addressees, Italian children or adults? The ideal answer would be both, providing catchy illustrations for the first³⁴, and a concise introduction or a translator's annotation with the most significant contextual and intertextual references for the second.

³⁴ The illustrations could be inspired to the famous ones included in the Soviet 1956 edition of *Zolotoj ključik* by Aminadav Moiseevich Kanevskiy's (1898-1976; see V. Kanevskiy, O. Bigovchiy, Aminadav Kanevskiy. *Materialy k biografii chudozhnika*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo 1900, 2022), or we could propose something new, highlighting on one hand some specific elements of the Russian text (the little golden key, the animals of the wood, the wonderful marionette theatre, etc.) and on the other the intertextual dialogue with Collodi's *Pinocchio*, still known and loved by Italian children. Due to its popularity in the whole country, in our view also some visual references to the successful musical realized for Soviet television in 1975 by Leonid Nechaev (1939-2010) would be of interest (see *Prikljucheniya Buratino*, https://youtu.be/DQ_OHZVNHZA, last accessed: 12/06/2023).



Figure 4. Frontpage of the popular Soviet 1956 edition of *Zolotoy klyuchik* illustrated by A. Kanevskiy

We would certainly like that target readers could perceive some echoes of Russian-Soviet cultural specificities, but without hindering or weighing down the smoothness of the reading. So, how is it possible to find a compromise, a good balance between “foreignization” and “domestication” strategies? As Eco remarks,

“il lettore sente la stranezza quando la scelta del traduttore appare incomprensibile, come se si trattasse di un errore, e sente invece l'*estraneo* quando si trova di fronte a un modo poco familiare di presentargli qualcosa che potrebbe riconoscere, ma che ha l'impressione di vedere veramente per la prima volta.”

[“readers feel strangeness when the translator’s choice appears incomprehensible, as if it were a mistake, and feel instead the *foreign element* when faced with an unfamiliar way of presenting them with something that they might recognize, but that they have the impression of really seeing for the first time.”] (Eco 2003: 173; italics in the original)

Some translations have obliged a certain language and cultural context to confront new expressive possibilities, and even new terminologies; for this reason it is important to study the functions and the influence of a translated text on a specific target culture. In the case of *Zolotoy klyuchik* this aspect is particularly significant, considering that we are dealing with a unique example of intertextual (and intercultural) dialogue. In fact, as we already observed Tolstoy’s *povest’* can be read as the creative expression of a literary “round trip,” from late Nineteenth century Italy to Soviet Russia (see Giovannoli 2013; Remonato 2022b). By providing a fresher, updated version of

Burattino's funny and picaresque adventures, we hope that the cheeky wooden puppet will still travel the skies of Italian readers' imagination on the footsteps of his literary *alter ego* Pinocchio.

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