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Research Article

Writer's Bilingualism and Biculturalism: Nicholas Kotar's Mythopoetic Literary Works

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Abstract. This article examines the matter of bilingualism and biculturalism of bilingual authors analyzing the literary work of Nicholas Kotar, an American bilingual writer who is a descendant of the first-wave of Russian émigrés. The relevance of this topic stems from a growing interest among scholars of bilingual studies in researching the features of bilingual writers who efficiently use two languages and two cultures to create literary images and express their ideas, leading to translanguaging and transculturalism in their work. The article analyzes how bilingualism and biculturalism of Nicholas Kotar, a heritage language speaker of Russian, reflect in his English-language literary works, using research methods of comparative, cultural and translational interpretation. In the novels from the Raven Son series *The Song of the Sirin*, *The Heart of the World*, *The Throne of the Gods*, *The Son of the Deathless*, Nicholas Kotar conveys elements of Russian folklore to English-speaking readers by mythopoesis. The analysis of the literary text provides results, revealing that samples of Nicholas Kotar's English-language creativity emerge in the process of hybridization and syncretism through the mythopoetic transformation of Russian folklore and linguaculture. Nicholas Kotar's novels contain many lexical and cultural borrowings, exotisms (Slavicisms), sayings from Russian fairy tales, as well as allusions pertaining to Russian linguaculture. Thus, incorporating elements of Russian fairy tales and other folklore genres enables the translanguaging and transcultural writer to familiarize English-speaking readers with elements of Slavic linguaculture through the combination and hybridization of English and Russian literary traditions in mythopoetic literature.

Key words: bilingualism, bilingual writer, heritage language speaker of Russian, linguaculture, syncretism, transcultural literature, mythopoetic literature

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Билингвизм и бикультурность писателя в мифопоэтическом творчестве Николая Котара

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Аннотация. Рассматривается вопрос билингвизма и бикультурности двуязычных авторов на примере литературного творчества американского писателя-билингва Николая Котара, потомка первой волны русской иммиграции. Актуальность данной темы обусловливается возросшим интересом современной билингвологии к изучению особенностей писателей-билингвов, которые способны эффективно задействовать два языка и две культуры для создания художественных образов и выражения своих идей, это приводит к транслингвизму и транскультурализму в их творчестве. Показано, как двуязычие и бикультурализм носителя унаследованного русского языка Николая Котара отражены в его англоязычном творчестве, для этого использовались исследовательские методы сопоставления, культурологической и переводческой интерпретации. В своих литературных произведениях из серии «Сын Ворона»: («Песня Сирина» (The Song of the Sirin), «Сердце Мира» (The Heart of the World), «Трон Богов» (The Throne of the Gods), «Сын Бессмертного» (The Son of the Deathless)) Николай Котар передает англоязычному читателю элементы русского фольклора через мифопоэтику. В результате анализа художественного текста было выявлено, что образцы англоязычного творчества Николая Котара возникают в процессе гибридизации и синкретизма через мифопоэтическую трансформацию русского фольклора и лингвокультуры. В художественных произведениях Николая Котара содержится множество лексических и культурных заимствований, экотизмов (славянизмов), поговорок из русских сказок, а также аллюзий, относящихся к русской лингвокультуре. Таким образом, использование русских сказок и других фольклорных жанров позволяет транслингвальному и транскультурному писателю приобщить англоязычных читателей к элементам славянской лингвокультуры через объединение и гибридизацию англоязычных и русских традиций в мифопоэтической литературе.

Ключевые слова: билингвизм, писатель-билингв, наследник русского языка, лингвокультура, синкретизм, транскультурная литература, мифопоэтическая литература

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Introduction

Language and culture are closely interrelated, influencing one another, especially for bicultural bilinguals. Bicultural individuals are characterized as those who participate in varying degrees in the life of two cultures on a regular basis.

Throughout the life of each bilingual, the balance of cultural influence may fluctuate, or one culture may become dominant [1].

Another issue is the question regarding the cultural identity of a bilingual, in particular, a bilingual writer. Usually, monocultural and monolingual individuals often expect bicultural bilinguals, including bicultural authors, to identify themselves with one of the cultures (e.g., culture A or culture B). Bicultural bilinguals can make different decisions regarding their cultural identity, highlighting the following four options: identifying with culture A; identifying with culture B; not fully identifying with cultures A or B (i.e., “cultural marginalization”); identifying with both cultures A and B. The latter option is optimal, since bicultural individuals can effectively live with two cultures, combining and mixing aspects of each, even when one culture dominates to a certain degree over the other [2].

Combining and blending, the two cultures may result in the possibility of forming a “transculture” [3], whereas translanguaging is defined as a free-flowing transition between several linguacultures without complete assimilation to either one, resulting in a mixed discourse [4].

Transcultural Literature

Scholars of bilingual and transcultural studies have been fascinated with how languages and cultures can coexist and blend within an individual, forming transculture and translanguaging. This, in turn, allows one to feel a sense of belonging to several linguacultures. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying the linguistic and cultural intricacies of bilingual and bicultural authors who are able to combine and blend their two languages and cultures in translanguaging and transcultural literary genres [5].

By way of illustration, there are transcultural literary works of classic Russian émigré writers such as Joseph Brodsky and Vladimir Nabokov, as well as a number of contemporary Russian-American authors such as Olga Grushin and Lara Vapnyar [6].

Discussion

Russian Heritage Language Speakers

It is fascinating to note the unique phenomena of Russian heritage speakers from the San-Francisco Bay Area community of first-, second- and third-generation Russian-Americans. Their ancestors immigrated to America after 1917 over the course of 100 years, yet many of their descendants remained remarkably bilingual and bicultural to varying degrees because of a supporting linguistic and cultural environment [7]. One of these heritage speakers is an American author Nicholas Kotar, born and raised in San Francisco, California.

Nicholas Kotar's Mythopoetic Literary Works

Nicholas Kotar is a bilingual and bicultural American writer of Russian heritage. His novels are written in the English language and are inspired by Russian and Eastern Slavic fairy tales. The author's literary works portray motifs of medieval Russian folklore retold and reimagined in a contemporary mythopoetic style for English-speaking readers.

The balanced bilingualism and biculturalism of Nicholas Kotar permeates his literary works. The novels emerge as translanguing and transcultural literature that incorporates both Russian and American literary traditions, forming a blend of linguistic and cultural hybridity. Nicholas Kotar elaborately portrays Russian linguaculture, cultivating interest, and sharing with the English-speaking readers elements of Russian culture and language. Notably, Nicholas Kotar uses *internal translation* [3; 8] in his literary works. The term was coined by Doctor of Philology Victor V. Kabakchi [8] to characterize language operations used in intercultural communication to describe a culture-bound concept from a different linguaculture [8; 3].

In Nicholas Kotar's mythopoetic English-language novels from the Raven Son series *The Song of the Sirin*¹, *The Heart of the World*², *The Throne of the Gods*³, *The Son of the Deathless*⁴ there are numerous lexical and cultural borrowings, exotisms (slavicisms), and allusions from Russian linguaculture. Consider the following few examples from each of the aforementioned novels with translation in Russian:

Linguacultural Allusions

The Waystone (*придорожный камень, камень на распутье*) is a culture-bound word from Russian fairy and folk tales that describes a rock which serves as a direction sign at crossroads [9]. In the novel *The Song of the Sirin*, Nicholas Kotar's explanatory translation provides English-speaking readers, unfamiliar with this borrowing, a distinct clarification of a "waystone" by introducing this culturonym as a "ragged plinth". Nicholas Kotar adapts and generalizes the Russian lexical unit "придорожный камень" (at the crossroads + stone) to English as "waystone", i.e., a stone that shows the way.

"He has missed the ragged plinth ... The scratches on the waystone were legible, though barely, after what seemed many centuries of erosion"⁵. «Он не заметил неровный постамент ... Начертания на дорожном камне были разборчивы, хотя и с трудом, как казалось, после многих столетий эрозии».

¹ Kotar N. *The Song of the Sirin*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2017. 420 p.

² Kotar N. *The Heart of the World*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2018. 436 p.

³ Kotar N. *The Throne of the Gods*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2020. 354 p.

⁴ Kotar N. *The Son of the Deathless*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2022. 120 p.

⁵ Kotar N. *The Song of the Sirin*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2017. 420 p. P. 136.

The waystone reappears in various interpretations in Nicholas Kotar's novels, e.g. *The Song of the Sirin* and *The Throne of the Gods*, where the bilingual writer, by using internal translation, calques the Russian structure of the phrases engraved on the waystone [9; 10]. For English-speaking readers the following mystic inscriptions may be seen as ominous and fatalistic.

"If left you go, there love awaits. If right you go, there gold awaits. If straight you go, there death awaits"⁶. «Налево пойдешь — там любовь ждет. Направо пойдешь — там золото ждет. Если прямо пойдешь — там смерть ждет».

"If straight you go, cold and hunger await. If left you go, you will die, but your horse will live. If right you go, your horse will die, but you will live"⁷. «Прямо пойдешь — холод и голод ждут. Налево пойдешь — умрешь, но конь будет жив. Направо пойдешь — твой конь умрет, но ты останешься жив».

In the novel *The Song of the Sirin*, Nicholas Kotar frequently alludes to pre-stories (приказки) from Russian folk tales [9]. In the non-fiction novel *How to Survive a Russian Fairy Tale*⁸, Nicholas Kotar provides linguacultural samples of Russian pre-stories as a genre of literary nonsense, serving as a story hook. In *The Song of the Sirin*, Nicholas Kotar calques one of these pre-stories from Alexander Afanasyev's collection of *Russian Folk Tales* [9] and incorporates it into his mythopoetic fiction. The following example of the Russian pre-story, translated by Nicholas Kotar to English for his literary work, is broken down into several fragments for a detailed analysis.

"*The story begins from the grey, from the brown, from the chestnut-colored horse*"⁹. The quote is an allusion and a calque of a popular Russian pre-story [9. P. 684]. The writer opts for the generalization strategy when translating the archaic Russian culture-bound folk phrase:

"sivka" «сивка», i.e., of grey color.

"burka" «бурка», i.e., of chestnut color.

"veshaya kaurka" «вещая каурка», i.e., a prophetic steed from Afanasyev's source text: «Начинается сказка от сивки, от бурки, от вещей каурки» [9. P. 684].

The bilingual writer adapts the Russian phrase to English-speaking readers, meaning a horse with "grey" and "chestnut-colored" coat¹⁰. The writer, however, omits translating "veshaya", i.e., sibylline.

"*Andry grew not in days, but in hours*"¹¹.

The preceding quote is from Nicholas Kotar's *The Son of the Deathless*¹² is another transformed phrase pertaining to folklore. The anthroponym "*Andry*" is an altered form of the name Andrey, i.e., the Russian variant of Andrew. The expression "grew not in days, but in hours"

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kotar N. *The Throne of the Gods*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2020. P. 256.

⁸ Kotar N. *How to Survive a Russian Fairy Tale: or How to Avoid Getting Eaten, Chopped into Little Pieces, or Turned into a Goat*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2019. 80 p.

⁹ Kotar N. *The Song of the Sirin*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2017. 420 p. P. 205.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kotar N. *The Son of the Deathless*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2022. P. 8.

¹² Ibid.

is a calque of the Russian idiomatic phrase “ne po dnyam, a po chasam” «не по дням, а по часам» [11. P. 380] from fairy tales, such as Alexander Pushkin’s “The Tale of Tsar Saltan”¹³, meaning to grow extremely quickly [16]. For the English speaker, this phrase is coherent, yet the Russian speaker will recognize this allusion as one from Russian linguaculture.

*“The morning is wiser than the evening”*¹⁴.

This example is a set phrase from Russian fairy tales “utro vechera mudrenee” «утро вечера мудренее» [11. P. 87], which frequently reappears in Nicholas Kotar’s novels. This saying is similar to the English idiom “to sleep on it” [19 pearson], which means to postpone an important decision until morning. Also, in the idiom to think something over “in the cold light of day” [19 pearson] has the same meaning of making the final decision calmly, rationally, and without overreacting.

*“In a certain kingdom, in a certain land”*¹⁵.

This quote is a translation of the opening sentence to many fairy and folk tales “V nekotorem czarstve, v nekotorem gosudarstve” «В некотором царстве, в некотором государстве» [11. P. 380].

Interestingly, in this case the author does not calque word for word. Instead of translating the Russian word *gosudarstvo* (государство) as a *state*, he uses the word *land* of a wider meaning. Probably, this is done for rhythmic purpose: in Russian, rhyme is used *czarstve–gosudarstve* (царстве — государство), while English is more sensitive to the consonant rhythmic repetition /-ngd-/ — /-nd-/ (*kingdom–land*).

*“The falcon flew beyond the thrice-nine lands, into the thrice-tenth kingdom”*¹⁶.

“Poletel sokol za tridevyat` zemel`, v tridesyatoe czarstvo” «Полетел сокол за тридевять земель, в тридешатое царство» [12. P. 14].

The author coins a new word *thrice-nine* to render the Russian word *tridevyat`* (тридевять), which means ‘three multiplied by nine’, that is twenty-seven. The Russian word, which is outdated and is used only in the expression *tridevyat` zemel`* (тридевять земель) [12. P. 14] in Russian folklore, has a transferred meaning ‘very far away’ but its English equivalent seems to have some mystic meaning in English. The repetition of the word *thrice* with the increase of qualitative meaning of the numeral that follows (*nine — ten*) emphasizes the idea of remoteness and some mystery. We might also notice the lack of homogeneity of numeral forms: in the first case the author uses a cardinal numeral (*thrice-nine*), in the second — the ordinal numeral component (*thrice-tenth*), though both compounds have the same position and syntactic function (attribute) in the English sentence. In this case we see the impact of the Russian sentence onto the English structure, for in the Russian sentence the compound is a headword of the phrase *tridevyat` zemel`* (тридевять земель) [12. P. 14] and cannot be treated as a modifying element that might be expressed by an ordinal numeral, while in the phrase *tridesyatoe czarstvo* (тридешатое царство) [12. P. 14] the compound functions as a modifier.

*“Underneath was a beauty that no story can relate, no pen can describe”*¹⁷.

«Внизу таилась красота — ни в сказке сказать, ни пером описать».

¹³ Пушкин А.С. Сказка о царе Салтане. М. : Издательство «Звонница-МГ», 2019. 24 с.

¹⁴ Kotar N. The Song of the Sirin. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2017. 420 p. P. 121.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 195.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. P. 159.

This allusion a calque of the set phrase “*ni v skazke skazat', ni perom opisat'*” «ни в сказке сказать, ни пером описать» [11. P. 380] from Russian linguaculture.

The rhythm of the Russian saying is achieved through repetition of the Russian particle “*ni*” «ни» and syntactic parallelism of the infinitive expression. Nicholas Kotar uses the same stylistic devices in English: repetition of *no* and *can* and the syntactic parallelism of the structure (*no N can Inf*).

Compliments from Russian Linguaculture

“*She wasn't exotic in her beauty. No sable-edged eyebrows*”¹⁸. «В ее красоте не было ничего экзотического, никаких соболиных бровей».

The fragment “sable-edged eyebrows”, the literal translation would be “soboliny'e brovi” «соболиные брови» [13], is a calque and a compliment for a thick-browed beauty whose brows resembled sable's fur, i.e., “sable-like brows”.

“*You've grown so much, swanling*”¹⁹. «Ты так выросла, лебедушка».

Here, English-speaking readers observe an atypical usage of the noun *swanling* as a concept from Russian linguaculture and learn its connotation in the Russian language. In the English language, the nominal suffix *-ling* is used as a diminutive suffix, or to indicate quality [14].

The suffix *-ling* can be found in English nouns that refer to young members of a species, such as *youngling* (one that is young), *swanling* (a young swan), *duckling* (a young duck or mallard), *seedling* (a young plant from seed), *sapling* (a young tree), etc [14].

The suffix *-ling* is also used to denote a certain quality of a noun or adjective that does not relate to age such as *darling* (dear + *-ling*, a beloved), *wildling* (a wild animal), *weakling* (one who lacks strength), etc [14].

In Russian linguaculture, swans are perceived as graceful and innocent creatures. In the novel, the writer uses the word *swanling* (лебедушка) as a quality, addressing a young woman who is graceful and gentle [15].

Interjection from Russian Discourse

“*Oioioi she keened*”²⁰. «‘Ойойой,’ — запричитала она».

The Russian interjection “oi” [16] is similar to the English interjection “uh-oh” [17] used to indicate concern or alarm. Nicholas Kotar applies the foreignization strategy and incorporates the Russian interjection in English-language literary discourse as a translanguing feature.

Elements of Russian Cuisine

“*Thick, buttery pancakes slathered with red caviar—fit to burst, adorned with dill and parsley*”²¹. «Толстые маслянистые блинчики, намазанные красной икрой, которая вот-вот лопнет, посыпанные сверху укропом и петрушкой».

¹⁸ Kotar N. *The Son of the Deathless*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2022. P. 172.

¹⁹ Kotar N. *The Song of the Sirin*. Las Vegas : Waystone Press, 2017. 420 p. P. 156.

²⁰ Ibid. P. 187.

²¹ Ibid. P. 181.

Red caviar is a staple appetizer for special occasions in Russian cuisine, whereas dill and parsley are used as a garnish in many dishes [16]. However, the author does not use the Russian word “bliny”, also spelled “blini” [16], applying the domestication strategy by integrating a similar concept from English-speaking linguaculture — “thick pancakes”.

Such culture-bound words, representing Russian linguaculture, are also classified as equivalent-lacking words (extralinguistic and lexical) in the English language [18]. Exotisms (slavicisms) open up a whole new linguistic and cultural worldview (LCW) to English-speaking readers with limited background knowledge in Russian linguaculture. On the other hand, these culturally loaded words and allusions are comprehended and perceived to a greater degree by readers who have some background knowledge and cultural exposure to Russian linguaculture, such as Russian heritage speakers and/or Russian-English speaking bilinguals.

Russian linguacultural borrowings and culture-bound words found in contemporary English-language literature such as Nicholas Kotar’s literary works are a part of the evolving transcultural literature that is noteworthy for continuing research. A key topic for further analysis is how bicultural and bilingual writers are able to express their worldview, and how their lives between two cultures shape not only their perception of the world but also affect their writing, combining several of their linguistic and cultural identities [5; 6]. Linguistic and cultural hybridity expressed in bilingual authors’ literary works is indispensable source material that can be analyzed by linguists, anthropologists, and literary scholars.

Conclusion

Creative writing opens a window into the writer’s mind; their thoughts, ideas, beliefs, perception of how one sees the world, and how one’s life experience shaped them into the person who they are today. The authors’ worldviews are reflected in their writings through story narratives, including archetypes, the overall themes, and messages of their stories. Bilingual and bicultural writers often, either subconsciously or intentionally, incorporate and blend elements of both cultural frames and linguistic codes in their literary works.

The linguistic code-switching and cultural frame-switching of bilingual writers paves the way for further developing transcultural literary genres, such as Nicholas Kotar’s mythopoetic novels, incorporating elements and motifs of Russian linguaculture, e.g., folklore, fairy tales, allusions. Impact of linguistic skills and cultural background on bilingual and bicultural authors’ writings in contemporary English-language literature should be a significant topic for further transcultural and translanguing study.

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