



Перевод и переводоведение

UDC 808.1

EDN GQXAKU

<https://doi.org/10.33910/2686-830X-2024-6-1-30-35>

Medieval and folk Russian culturonyms in contemporary American novels authored by bilingual heritage writers

S. M. V. Tchomodanova ¹

¹ Lomonosov Moscow State University, 1 Leninskie Gory, Moscow 119991, Russia

Author

Sofiya Mariya V. Tchomodanova,
SPIN: 9104-8158,
ORCID: 0000-0002-3799-0584,
e-mail: Sophie.t3@gmail.com

For citation: Tchomodanova, S. M. V. (2024) Medieval and folk Russian culturonyms in contemporary American novels authored by bilingual heritage writers. *Language Studies and Modern Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 30–35. <https://doi.org/10.33910/2686-830X-2024-6-1-30-35> EDN GQXAKU

Received 11 February 2024; reviewed 1 April 2024; accepted 25 May 2024.

Funding: The study did not receive any external funding.

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Abstract. This article examines Russian culturonyms in contemporary American literature. American authors come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and their literary works often reflect translingual and/or transcultural features. The relevance of this article is owed to the expanding study of bilingual creativity among bilingual and bicultural individuals. Bilingual authors, who are also heritage language speakers, often possess linguacultural hybridity because they were raised with several languages and cultures. It is in their fiction writing that this hybridity is often expressed. The aim of this work is to reveal and analyze culture-specific words from Russian medieval linguaculture found in literary works of Nicholas Kotar and Olesya Salnikova-Gilmore, American writers of Russian descent. The bilingual heritage writers often opt for internal translation to describe Russian culturonyms to English-speaking readers. By doing so, bilingual and bicultural writers of Russian heritage introduce and familiarize English speakers with elements of Russian linguaculture. This, in turn, further contributes to the growing English-Russian contact in transcultural literature. In their English-language novels, Kotar and Salnikova-Gilmore skillfully incorporate and adapt Russian culture-specific words and concepts. The findings may provide insight into contemporary literary works written by bilingual heritage writers and their linguacultural hybridity, including the translation strategies implemented in their original interlinguacultural texts.

Keywords: bilingual writer, heritage language speaker of Russian, linguaculture, interlinguaculturology, internal translation, transcultural literature, mythopoetic literature, epic fantasy, historical fantasy

Bilingual Heritage Language Writers

In American fiction, there are bilingual and bicultural writers of various ancestries who combine their linguistic and cultural hybridity in their literary works. This study presents two American writers of Russian heritage — Nicholas Kotar and Olesya Salnikova-Gilmore. As early bilinguals, these heritage language writers grew up with two languages and cultures, which resulted in a high degree of linguacultural hybridity presented in their transcultural fiction writing. By blending the two linguacultures, utilizing internal translation and other various translation strategies, the bilingual authors create hybrid Russian-English literary space.

Theoretical Basis, Research Materials and Methods

This work is based on the key concepts of interlinguaculturology and internal translation — when elements of one linguaculture are represented in another linguaculture in the process of creating original texts by bilingual authors (Kabakchi, Beloglazova 2022). Additionally, the paradigm of translanguaging and transculturalism (Kellman 2000; Pennycook 2007; Proshina 2017a) is used as a basis. The concept of cultural translation, as part of the study's theoretical framework, considers the way the source culture is adapted into the target language (Beloglazova 2023; Pym 2009). The bilingual writers translate and adapt Russian culturonyms into

English-language texts by means of cultural translation and internal translation (Antonova 2019). Bilingual individuals verbalize source culture into the target language setting, successfully integrating several linguacultures (Proshina 2017b).

The purpose of this work is linguacultural analysis of Russian culturonyms presented in American fiction by bilingual authors who use internal translation in their creative writing and examination of mythopoetic transformation used to translate certain elements of Russian linguaculture in their English-language novels.

This study was conducted using research text materials and methods to analyze bilingual authors' use of internal translation when describing culture-specific words absent in another linguacultural environment. Research materials consist of Nicholas Kotar's two novels, *The Song of the Sirin* (Kotar 2017) and *The Heart of the World* (Kotar 2018), as well as Olesya Salnikova-Gilmore's debut novel *The Witch and the Tsar* (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022). Research methodology includes text, translation and interlinguaculturological analyses (Kabakchi 2007) of the authors' internal translation and evaluation of the creative translation strategies implemented in their English-language literary texts with Russian culturonyms. The study incorporates comparative and interpretive methods. Preliminary results of the study may provide insight into the present day Russian-American contact in literary dimensions.

Research Findings: Russian Culturonyms in Nicholas Kotar's Novels *The Song of the Sirin*, *The Heart of the World*

Nicholas Kotar is a heritage bilingual author and translator, who was born in San Francisco, California, in a family of first-wave Russian emigres (Kotar 2024). Besides being a professional translator from Russian to English, Kotar is a writer of epic fantasy novels inspired by Russian medieval linguaculture and folklore. His literary works immerse English-speaking readers into a mythopoetically transformed transcultural setting, while retaining elements of authentic Russian linguaculture by using internal translation. Kotar's novels from the *Raven Son Series*, including *The Song of the Sirin* and *The Heart of the World*, incorporate a large variety of Russian culturonyms and elements of Russian linguaculture, as is seen in the examples presented below.

Medieval Russian Attire

In Kotar's novels *The Song of the Sirin* and *The Heart of the World*, readers encounter allusions to various items of clothing from Russian linguistic

culture. Kotar often opts for internal translation when describing these culturonyms to English-speaking readers. For example, there is an allusion to men's clothing, reminiscent of the clothes of the boyars, i. e., *tall beaver hats* and outerwear with *wide sleeves*. "The men, in *tall beaver hats* and *wide, sweeping coat-sleeves*, barely looked at them before passing on to the more important business of the day" (Kotar 2017, 31). Also, the writer alludes to the medieval custom of married women covering their hair with *scarves and temple rings*, whereas young unmarried women either had their hair loose or wore it in a *single braid*. "The married women in *headscarves with temple rings*, the young women with their hair unbound or in the *tell-tale single braid* regarded them <...>" (Kotar 2017, 31).

The culturonym *kaftan* (Kabakchi 2023) is mentioned throughout the entire book series, worn by various male characters: "He was dressed in a woolen black *kaftan* with silver embroidery across the chest" (Kotar 2022, 27). Within the context of the prior quote, the bilingual writer preserves the foreignization and uses internal translation by denoting the meaning of 'kaftan' as an article of clothing.

In contrast, the culturonym *lapti* from Russian peasant attire is incorporated by using generalization. In the story, the writer opts for an explanatory translation of the footwear *lapti*, denoting it as 'bark shoes' or 'rough shoes woven from tree bark' (Kotar 2017, 192): "She began to plait a new set of *bark shoes*, humming to herself" (Kotar 2018, 76). Here, the readers encounter the process of making 'bark shoes' (*lapti*).

English-speaking readers learn of the culture-specific word *sarafan* (Kabakchi 2023), the folk attire worn by peasant women. Kotar internally translates the image of the 'sarafan' worn by 'maidens' and subtly describes it within the context of the quote: "They looked no different from Ghavanite maidens in red *sarafans* and bare feet <...>" (Kotar 2018, 46). The color 'red' (meaning 'beautiful' in Russian linguaculture) and the image of 'bare feet' denote the image of the Russian folk lifestyle.

Historical References

In *The Heart of the World*, readers encounter the early medieval culturonym *Veche*. This culture-bound word alludes to the medieval Novgorod Republic (Kabakchi 2023). "Why do you think he is calling Veche now? He is to be made knyaz, of course" (Kotar 2018, 94–95). As seen here, Kotar retains its function as a town assembly at which collective decisions were made and also incorporates the medieval title *knyaz*, i. e., prince, in his epic fantasy novels.

Throughout the novels, there is an indirect allusion to the *Golden Horde* and the tribute paid by the princes to the khans. The writer renames the Golden Horde to ‘Gumiren’, retaining former’s attributes.

An additional tribute of timber, furs, gold, and wine will be levied every few months. Furthermore, a representative of the Ghan will preside at all ruling sessions of the Dar. He will have power to supersede the Dar’s command, should the Ghan’s wishes contradict those of the Dar. (Kotar 2017, 184)

Mythopoetic transformation of other similar Russian culturonyms, e. g., ‘Tsar’ to ‘Dar’, ‘Khan’ to ‘Ghan’, is also present. English-speaking readers may not be aware of these transformations, yet Russian-speaking readers will immediately notice these transformed allusions.

Folk Festivals

There are references to Russian folk festivals subtly incorporated into the narrative. For instance, the *Feast of the Larks*, also transliterated as *Zhavronki*, is a folk festival for the Orthodox Christian feast of the Forty Martyrs of Sevaste (Kiktenko 2023). This folk holiday commemorates the forty Christian martyrs and symbolizes the arrival of spring, celebrated by Orthodox Christians half-way during the Great Lent. For this holiday, buns in the shape of birds are baked. In Kotar’s novel, *The Heart of the World*, there is a subtle allusion to this feast day:

It was already passing high noon, and the spring festivities were reaching a boiling point... By now, hundreds of bird-shaped breads hung from every tree <...> The more breads the women baked — and the more realistic they were — the faster spring would come. (Kotar 2018, 76)

Russian folk traditions are reflected in the *ritual of lamenting the bride* as she says goodbye to her former life before marriage (Kotar 2016). This ritual lamentation can be seen in the following examples featured in Kotar’s novels.

Away, away! Avert your eyes,
The sacred distance don’t despise
For now’s the time the bride must die
To all her past. Cry, nightingale, cry!
(Kotar 2018, 206–207)

The lament was sung by women, lamenting the bride and urging her to cry herself. The following example of the folk ritual lamentation shows the bride bidding farewell to her unmarried life. “Oh, my single braid, my single braid! <...> Is it time for

my braid to be split?” Lebia keened, almost wailing. “Is it time to part from my father’s house?” (Kotar 2018, 206–207). Kotar alludes to these ancient traditions in his transcultural literary works, introducing English-speaking readers to elements of Russian folk culture.

Russian Diminutives

Readers also encounter terms of endearment, which allude to Russian folklore. For instance, the diminutive *swanling* refers to a ‘swan-like’ maiden. “Sleep now, my swanling. You need to rest” (Kotar 2017, 3). The use of the possessive pronoun ‘my swanling’ helps English-speaking readers better understand this term of endearment, such as ‘my sunshine’, ‘my love’, etc. The masculine term of endearment would be *falcon*, meaning strong and brave. “Oh, my falcon” (Kotar 2017, 333). Here, the readers also interpret this hypocorism with the use of the possessive pronoun ‘my falcon’, similar to ‘my knight in shining armor’.

As a bilingual author, Nicholas Kotar mythopoetically transforms elements of Russian linguaculture and folklore, adapting unfamiliar culturonyms to an English-language literary setting.

Research Findings: Russian Culturonyms in Olesya Salnikova-Gilmore’s Novel The Witch and the Tsar

Olesya Salnikova-Gilmore is a writer of Russian heritage born in Moscow, Russia and raised in the United States (Salnikova-Gilmore 2024). Her writing is inspired by Russia’s history and linguaculture. Salnikova-Gilmore’s debut novel *The Witch and the Tsar* is a reimagined historical fantasy set in the late 1500s during Ivan IV’s reign.

Mythopoetic transformation of Baba Yaga

The story is told from the perspective of *Baba Yaga*, an ancient immortal being who is presented as a young woman in appearance despite typically being portrayed as a wise and often malevolent hag in Russian folk culture. In the novel, she is the daughter of East Slavic goddess *Mokosh* and a nameless mortal man. Instead of having a patronymic, Baba Yaga has a matronymic *Mokoshevna*, i. e., daughter of *Mokosh*: “Why are you here, Yaga *Mokoshevna*?” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 45). Throughout the story, many of the characters expect to see a crone “with an iron nose and a bony leg, fangs for teeth, barely any hair” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 6) instead of an ageless young woman. Yaga is also called ‘*Yagusynka*’ as a term of endearment. The reimagined depiction of Baba Yaga portrayed in a positive light as the novel’s protagonist is part

of the mythopoetic transformation of the original malicious character from Russian folk tales (Kabakchi 2023; Kotar 2019; Sviridova, Kravchenko 2001).

A distinct feature of the novel *The Witch and the Tsar* is that the bilingual writer introduces many Russian culture-specific words, often followed by an explanatory translation. For instance, English-speaking readers learn of the word *izbushka* and its meaning 'log hut' within the context of Baba Yaga's dwelling, i. e., a hut on chicken legs with the ability to move (Kabakchi 2023; Kotar 2019).

Yet day clung on, delaying what mortals intended to find their way to my izbushka. The log hut stood on chicken legs, not swaying or spinning or even pacing, as unnaturally still as me. (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 3)

In the Russian language, the word *noch* means 'night'. In the novel, Noch is the name of Yaga's messenger owl. "Like her namesake, night, Noch came in the company of darkness and shadows" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 3).

Dyen is the name of Yaga's tame wolf that accompanies her on most errands. The bilingual writer introduces and defines the Russian word 'dyen' as 'day' within the same sentence for the English-speaking readers: "Dyen, meaning day, silently followed me as I turned the corner of my hut <...>" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 27).

Olesya Salnikova-Gilmore introduces English-speaking readers to the Russian word '*vedma*' and provides the English equivalent '*witch*' in the following sentence: "I have traveled all the way from Moscow to see the vedma <...>' I had not flinched at the word witch" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 5–6). However, Salnikova-Gilmore does not apply the explanatory translation for every Russian culturonym. Certain culture-specific words are used without an explanation and remain as exotisms that readers deduce the meaning of by context, as is seen in the following section of this work.

Medieval Russian Attire

Throughout the novel, English-speaking readers discover the numerous articles of clothing from Russian linguaculture. For instance, in the subsequent sentence, there are two Russianisms — *dublenka* and *valenki boots*. "Suddenly, a man appeared on the edge of the clearing in a dublenka and valenki boots" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 18). The culturonym 'dublenka' is left unexplained by the bilingual writer. The context helps readers interpret that 'dublenka' is a type of outerwear. Russian-speaking readers will notice the tautology of *valenki boots* as a form of explanatory translation.

Another folk attire from the novel is the *sarafan* with a *kokoshnik headdress* (Kabakchi 2023). "Several women whirled by, their velvet *sarafans* a rainbow of dazzling colors, their scarlet *kokoshnik headdresses* piled high on their heads like layers on a cake" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 38). The English plural form of sarafan is used instead of the Russian plural form 'sarafany'. The author does not provide a direct explanation of the word 'sarafan'. Instead, Salnikova-Gilmore uses the unexplained culturonym within the context of the sentence. Readers are able to interpret that 'sarafan' is a type of dress with the help of word combinations, such as, 'whirled by', 'velvet', 'a rainbow of dazzling colors'. Salnikova-Gilmore opts for the explanatory translation by the usage of the tautology 'kokoshnik headdresses'.

Another article of clothing would be *shuba*. "My wonder turned into incredulity when she took off her rich, fur-lined *shuba*" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 19). In this example, Salnikova-Gilmore also omits any direct explanation and indirectly explains this culturonym with the use of word combinations "rich, fur-lined" found in the context of the prior sentence.

The word *rubakha* is also provided within the context without a direct explanation. "Then he spun on his heels, nearly tripping over his oversized *rubakha*" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 62). Instead, Salnikova-Gilmore internally translates that this is a type of article of clothing.

Dushegreika consists of the words 'dusha' and 'greika', i. e., 'soul warming'. "Despite the heat, the tsaritsa wore multiple gowns under a scarlet fur-lined dushegreika that ended at her waist in a burst of ruffles" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 107). English speakers learn that this is an outer garment due to word combinations such as 'wore', 'fur-lined'.

Historical References

There are many examples of where Salnikova-Gilmore alludes to Russian history in her writing. For instance, the medieval icon *Our Lady of Vladimir* (Vladimirskaya icon) was originally from Byzantium but got its name when Saint Andrei the God-Loving (Bogolyubsky) relocated the icon to the Vladimiro-Suzdalian principality (Kabakchi 2023). English-speaking readers learn of this venerated icon and its significance in Russian linguaculture: "I have been praying to *Our Lady of Vladimir*" (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 77). English-speakers with the help of the verb 'praying' and the word combination 'Our Lady' deduce that 'Our Lady of Vladimir' is an icon of the Virgin Mary.

In another example, Salnikova-Gilmore uses explanatory translation when referring to the

historical figure *Grand Prince Vladimir Monomakh* (Kabakchi 2023). “That is the *Grand Prince Vladimir Monomakh*, the greatest and bravest of all Russia’s princes” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 78). She uses foreignization in the form of analogue substitution for the title ‘Grand Prince’, yet transliterates the name ‘Vladimir Monomakh’.

An important historical moment is mentioned when Ivan IV becomes a *tsar*, not a prince (Kabakchi 2023). “Grand Prince Ivan has crowned himself *tsar*! He is *tsar* of all Russia!” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 18). Salnikova-Gilmore also introduces readers to the title *tsaritsa*, i. e., the tsar’s wife. “To your health, our most illustrious *tsar* and lord, and to the health of Her Majesty, the *tsaritsa*, too!” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 69). Readers learn the tsaritsa’s name. “It was *Anastasia Romanovna Zakharyina-Yurieva* — the *tsaritsa* and wife of *Tsar Ivan IV* of Russia” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 7).

Salnikova-Gilmore alludes to the historical figure of *Ivan Grozny* (Ivan IV), also known as *Ivan the Terrible*. “Our lord tsar, our beloved *Ivan Grozny*, is the one who sent us... *Grozny* meant thunderous, dreadful, terrible. *Ivan the Terrible*” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 153). First, Salnikova-Gilmore opts for the foreignization ‘Ivan Grozny’, shortly followed by the domestication of the tsar’s name ‘Ivan the Terrible’.

Related to the time period, the author mentions another historical figure, *Boris Godunov* (Kabakchi 2023). “This was none other than the tsar’s *Boriska*, otherwise known as *Boris Godunov*” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 372). Salnikova-Gilmore introduces the character by using the diminutive form ‘tsar’s Boriska’ as a sense of familiarity.

Explanatory translation is implemented when describing the historic title of *boyar* (Kabakchi 2023). “Who is new at court?” I asked. ‘Many *boyars*’, the tsaritsa said vaguely, referring to the *ruling elite descended from old aristocratic families, ranking only below princes*” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 16). The writer uses the English plural form ‘boyars’ in lieu of the Russian plural form ‘boyary’ in the prior sentence.

Folk Festivals

In *The Witch and the Tsar*, the readers are presented with the Russian holiday *Kolyada festival* (Kabakchi 2023). “Common folk still celebrated the winter solstice and the *Kolyada festival* that came with it.” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 251). Here, the author internally translates this holiday to English speakers. The *kolyadki carols* is a culturonym that

readers encounter in the story. “They danced around the raging bonfire, singing *kolyadki carols* and making merry” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 251). Here, Salnikova-Gilmore uses this word within the context of the sentence. The writer also uses the tautology ‘kolyadki carols’ as part of explanatory translation.

Russian Diminutives

Salnikova-Gilmore uses Russian diminutives in her English-language novel. The diminutive *solnishko*. “Worry not, *my solnishko*. Oh, my little sun” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 359). For this example, the writer opts for the explanatory translation ‘my little sun’ to denote the diminutive.

Another hypocorism incorporated by Salnikova-Gilmore is *docha* from the word ‘dochka’, meaning ‘daughter’. “*My docha*, my dear girl, was growing up” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 330). The writer internally translates this hypocorism with word combinations ‘my dear girl’, ‘growing up’.

For the term of endearment *lapochka*, the author uses the explanatory translation “Oh, *lapochka*, my sweet!” (Salnikova-Gilmore 2022, 360). The foreignization shortly followed by the domestication is a distinct translation strategy implemented by the bilingual writer.

As a heritage speaker of Russian, Salnikova-Gilmore combines two linguacultures in a mythopoetically transformed historical fantasy setting presented to the English-speaking readers.

Conclusion

American bilingual authors of Russian heritage express their linguacultural hybridity in their creative writing, creating vibrant transcultural and translingual imagery for English-speaking readers. The preliminary results may contribute to the continued interlinguacultural studies of Russian culturonyms found in English-language literature. Heritage language writers, who were raised with several linguacultures, exhibit an innate understanding of the intricacies of linguacultural hybridity. Kotar and Salnikova-Gilmore are able to successfully incorporate and adapt Russian medieval and folk culturonyms into their English-language novels in a way that is easily comprehended by their English-speaking readers.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential.

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