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PHRASEOLOGY AND WORDPLAY IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *TRANSPARENT THINGS*

Abstract

The article deals with the use of figurative units (mostly idioms) in *Transparent Things*, the novel of Vladimir Nabokov, as well as their representation in Russian and German translations. There appear to be two main techniques, namely idiom modifications, which are usually lexical or lexico-syntactical, and literal translations of non-English idioms. These techniques are often combined with each other, as well as with wordplay based on paronomasia within one language or across languages.

Key words: phraseology, authors' use of idioms by authors, Vladimir Nabokov's English novels, idiom modifications, wordplay

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1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's creative activity has been attracting scholars and biographers (cf. Boyd 1993; Ляпон 2011). In this article, we shall focus on the use of idioms in one of his English novels, namely *Transparent Things*. The article deals with wordplay and the use of idioms and proverbs in the novel in question (Barabtarlo 1989, Maddox 2009). The author's text is compared to those of translators, the letter **a** marking the original examples [TT] and letters **b** и **c** marking their Russian and German translations made by Sergej Il'in [ПВ] and Dieter E. Zimmer [DD], respectively.

2. Wordplay in *Transparent Things*

Like many other Nabokov's novels, such as *Invitation to a Beheading* («Приглашение на казнь») or the unfinished *Ultima Thule*, *Transparent Things* are rich with wordplay passed on interlinguistic paronomasia¹. For instance, the name of the protagonist, an American proofreader, is *Hugh Person*. The connection to the English word *person* is obvious (see the first phrase of the novel²), yet his last name may also be construed as the French *personne* 'nobody' alluding to his ordinariness (which is most transparent when the younger Hugh Person advertises stationery such as *the Person Pen*) and the shackles of convention³ — as well as to *The Odyssey* and

¹ One may notice puns on code-switching, e.g. “*Alors allons dans la maison,*” she said, *faithfully translating from Russian* or Armande's speech patterns like “*One will go home now*”, a nod to the French impersonal constructions with the pronoun *on* (cf. the use of the German impersonate construction in [DD]: *Jetzt wird nach Hause gegangen*). Further information on code-switching in Nabokov's novels can be found in (Shafarians 2007).

² Interestingly, the translation of the first paragraph marks the stylistic properties of the entire novel, cf.: **a.** *Hullo, Person!* **b.** Привет, персонаж! **c.** *He, Sie Person!* Since the German *Person* is of feminine gender, the German translator is compelled to render the wordplay somewhat ungrammatical: **a.** Hugh, a sentimental simpleton, and somehow *not a very good Person* (good ones are above that, he was merely a rather dear one) <...>. **b.** Хью, sentimentalный простак и в общем-то персонаж не из лучших (лучшие выше этого, а он был просто довольно славный) <...> **c.** Hugh, ein Einfaltspinsel in Dingen der Gefühle und irgendwie *kein sehr guter Person* (gute stehen über solchen Dingen, er war einigermaßen nur lieb) <...>.

³ Cf. the metalinguistic use of proper names and hedges (in terms of George Lakoff): *Jack, Jake and Jacques, Tom Tam, in so-called Switzerland* (i.e., *very shortly before the event that for him would cause everything to become “so-called”*).

James Joyce's *Ulysses*⁴. Nabokov stresses (twice, at the very least) that the protagonist's last name is often mispronounced as *Parson*. As is known, rich allusions and puns in characters' names are quite a trait of the author's, cf. Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading* and Martin Edelweiss in *Glory*.

Let us take a look at example (1).

1. a. The receptionist (blond bun, pretty neck) said no, Monsieur Kronig had left to become manager, imagine, of the *Fantastic in Blur* (or so it sounded). A grassgreen skyblue postcard depicting reclining clients was produced in illustration or proof. The caption was in three languages and *only the German part was idiomatic*. The English one read: *Lying Lawn* – and, as if on purpose, *a fraudulent perspective had enlarged the lawn to monstrous proportions*. **b.** Консьержка (белокурый шиньон, милая шея) ответила — нет, мсье Крониг оставил их, чтобы занять, представьте себе, посту управляющего отелем «Воображение» в Буре (или так оно прозвучало). В виде иллюстрации или же довода возникла травянисто-зеленая, небесно-голубая открытка с раскорячившимися постояльцами. Подпись на трех языках, и *только в немецкой имеется идиома*. Английская гласит: «Лежачий Лужок» — и словно назло, *мошенница-перспектива расперла лужок до диких размеров*. **c.** Das Mädchen am Empfang (blonder Dutt, hübscher Hals) sagte nein, Monsieur Kronig sei nicht mehr da, er sei, stellen Sie sich nur vor, Manager des *Phantastic in Blur* (so klang es jedenfalls) geworden. Eine grasgrüne himmelblaue Postkarte, die ruhende Hotelgäste im Bilde festhielt, wurde zur Illustrierung oder zum Beweis vorgelegt. Die Aufschrift war dreisprachig, und *nur der deutsche Teil war sprachlich korrekt*. Der englische lautete: *Lying Lawn, liegender oder lügenger Rasen* – und wie mit Absicht hatte eine betrügerische Perspektive die Wiese zu ungeheuerlichen Proportionen geweitet.

In this extract, the wordplay is based on the contrast of homonyms and their meanings. The adjective *idiomatic* (rendered in Sergej Il'in's translation

⁴ Cf. the book Cincinnatus ponders over in *Invitation to the Beheading* – a certain *Quercus*, a biography of an oak [Russian дуб, phonetically similar to *The Dubliners*] written by a relatively young author living on an island by the North Sea. This technique is later used in the beginning of *Look at the Harlequins!*, where the list of works written by the narrator is a collection of puns based on Russian and English titles of Nabokov's own prose, *Dare* as a blend of Дар (*The Gift*), Подвиг (*Glory*), and *Despair*.

as a phrase только в немецкой имеется идиома ‘only the German [part] contains an idiom’⁵) strongly implies that the original caption was written by a German speaker, the other captions being inaccurate translations. The *lying lawn* is, apparently, the German compound *Liegewiese* ‘lawn with sunbeds’. The proximity of *lying lawn* to a *fraudulent perspective* leads to a double entendre. In the German translation (1c), *idiomatic* appears as *sprachlich korrekt* ‘linguistically correct’, whereas *lying lawn* is explained as *liegender oder lügender Rasen* ‘lying [referring to horizontal posture] or lying [fraudulent] meadow’.

Another typical example is the rendering of a street sign: “*Confections. Notre vente triomphale de soldes*. Our windfall triumphantly sold, translated his father, and was corrected by Hugh with tired contempt”. The butt of the joke lies in the similarity of the French words *vente* ‘sale’ и *vent* ‘wind’, as well as, possible, that of French *confections*₁ ‘manufacturing’, *confections*₂ ‘garment manufacture’, and English *confections*₁ ‘elaborate sweets or delicacies’, *confections*₂ ‘medical manufacture’, *confections*₃ ‘elaborate articles of clothing’), French *solde* ‘balance, sales’ and English *sold*.

Let us cite some more examples of puns based on alliterations and hedges (in George Lakoff’s sense).

2. a. *Madame Charles Chamar, née Anastasia Petrovna Potapov (a perfectly respectable name that her late husband garbled as “Patapouf”)*. **b.** Мадам Шарль Камар, рожденная Анастасия Петровна Потапова (весьма почтенная фамилия, превращенная ее покойным супругом в «Патапуф»).

⁵ One should note that such a translation of *idiomatic* and *idiom* appears in other Nabokov’s novels rendered by Il’in cf. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: **a.** One day, at last, Sebastian blurted out that there was some mistake - he had not been born in Russia really, but in Sofia. Upon which, the delighted old man at once started to speak Bulgarian. Sebastian lamely answered that it was not the special dialect he knew, and when challenged to furnish a sample, *invented a new idiom* on the spur of the moment, which greatly puzzled the old linguist <...> **b.** Себастьян, наконец, выпалил, что тут-де какая-то ошибка, что на самом деле он родом не из России, а из Софии, отчего обрадованный старикан мгновенно заговорил по-болгарски. Себастьян неуклюже ответил, что этот диалект ему неизвестен, когда же от него потребовали предъявить образец, он не сходя с места соорудил новую идиому, долго занимавшую старого языковеда <...>. The author might have used *idiom* in the sense of ‘language’, not in that of ‘fixed expression’ (an opinion expressed by Julia Kristeva in Kristeva 1988). Anyway, both interpretations are possible, as Nabokov created constructed languages (conlangs) at least twice, in *Bend Sinister* and *Pale Fire* (Conley, Cain 2006; Filonov Gove 1973; Дронов 2014).

In (2), the pun is based on the phonetic similarity of the Russian last name *Potapov* and the French noun *patapouf* 'fat and clumsy man, fatso' (one might also suggest an allusion to *Mihajlo Potapyč*, a Russian fairy-tale nomination of a bear) в этом контексте возможна также аллюзия на сказочного *Михайло Потаныча*). *Chamar*, the maiden name of Hugh Person's wife, seems to convey a meaning akin to those of his own, cf. Portuguese *chamar* 'to call, to name'. Therefore, their names strangely coincide with the famous line from *The Odyssey*: Οὐτις ἐμοὶ γ' ὄνομα 'Nobody is my name'. This sort of interlinguistic paronomasia appears in other passages. For instance, Hugh Person's future mother-in-law associates the name *Diablonnet* with яблони, the Russian for 'apple trees'. Besides, *chamar* is also an Anglo-Indian word for a 'fan made of peacock's plumes', and, in his diary, Hugh Person remembers, albeit wrongly, seeing this word in Byron's poetry (in fact, the correct lexeme appearing in Byron's *The Giaour* is *symar/simar/сymar/simarre* 'a woman's short fur-trimmed jacket, popular in the 17th and 18th centuries'. For an unspecified reason, Sergej Il'in transcribes the name as Камаp, reminiscent of the Russian комаp 'gnat, mosquito', although he does not alter the *chamar* in the entry of Person's diary. This probably is merely a transcription error.

Besides, according to L. Maddox, the narrator, apart from being omnipresent, is also cyphered as an anagram (*Adam von Librikov* — see Example 4) and a graphic paronomasia: one particular character, the German-speaking and English-writing *Mr. R.*, has a name that reads as a mirror image of the Russian letter Я (i.e. 'I' or 'ego') and sounds as *our* (meanwhile, the protagonist's future wife, addressing Hugh Person on the telephone, pronounces his name with the French accent: *You Person?*) (Maddox 2009: 136). Interestingly, this sort of wordplay becomes an object of Nabokov's reflexion and self-parody, cf. an incredibly Cratylean footnote cited by the narrator pertaining to commentaries to *a notorious fraud, the late symbolist Atman* (perhaps, an allusion to Sanskrit *âtman* 'the inner self, the superior Me'): *The cromlech (associated with mleko, milch, milk) is obviously a symbol of the Great Mother, just as the menhir ("mein Herr") is as obviously masculine.*

3. a. I have been accused of trifling with minors, but my minor characters are untouchable, if you permit me a pun. **b.** Меня обвиняют в том, что я копаюсь в пустяках, но и пустые личности в моих книгах неприкосновенны, если ты мне простишь такой каламбур. **c.** Es ist mir ein Vorwurf daraus gemacht worden, daß

ich mich an Minderjährigen vergreife, aber die Minderwichtigen meiner Figuren sind unberührbar, falls Sie mir einen Kalauer erlauben.

Curiously enough, due to the ambiguity of *minor* in this context, the translators rendered the pun using different meanings, namely ‘trifling matter’ (lit. “empty matters” and “empty personalities”) in Russian, ‘not of legal age’ and ‘somewhat unimportant or irrelevant’ (*Minderjährige* ‘juniors who are not of legal age’ vs. *Minderwichtige* ‘those of lesser importance’).

4. a. Sometimes he wondered what the phrase really meant – what exactly did “*rimiform*” suggest and how did a “*balanic plum*” look, or *should he cap the ‘b’ and insert a ‘k’ after ‘l’?* The dictionary he used at home was less informative than the huge battered one in the office and he was now slumped by such beautiful things as “*all the gold of a kew tree*” and “*a dappled nebris.*” He queried the middle word in the name of an incidental character “*Adam von Librikov*” because *the German particle seemed to clash with the rest; or was the entire combination a sly scramble?* He finally crossed out his query, but on the other hand reinstated the “*Reign of Cnut*” in another passage: a humbler proofreader before him had supposed that either the letters in the last word should be transposed or that it be corrected to “*the Knout*” – she was of Russian descent, like Armande. **b.** Случалось, что смысл фразы ему не давался, – к чему, собственно, клонится «*промежек*» и что это за «*бурные бакланы*», *не переставит ли «к» и «л» и не заменить ли второе «б» заглавным?* Словарь, которым он пользовался дома, был не столь осведомителен, как издательский, встрепаный, огромный, и теперь он спотыкался на таких чудных вещах как «*вся прелесть юных черев*» или «*пятнастый небрис*». Он усомнился в имени «*Омир ван Балдигов*» — *голландская частица вроде бы не вязалась со всем остальным; или все сочетание — попросту лукавая перетасовка?* В конце концов он зачеркнул знак вопроса, зато в другом месте утвердил в правах “*Reign of Cnut*”: робкая считчица, правившая текст до него, полагала, что нужно либо переставить в последнем слове две буквы, либо совсем заменить его на “*the Knout*”, — она была из русских, как и Арманда. **c.** Manchmal fragte er sich, was der Satz wirklich bedeute – was genau hatte man unter “*kaneszent*” vorzustellen, und wie sah eine

“*Balanpflaume*” aus, oder sollte er nach dem l ein k einfügen? Das Wörterbuch, das er zu Hause benutzte, war weniger informativ als das riesige vielstrapazierte im Büro, und so schöne Dinge wie “*das ganze Gold eines Ginkgos*” oder “*eine gesprenkelte Nebris*” ließen ihn jetzt ratlos. Er stellte das mittlere Wort im Namen einer Nebenfigur, “*Adam von Librikov*”, in Frage, weil der deutsche Adelspartikel nicht zu dem Rest zu passen schien; oder war die ganze Kombination eine listige Buchstabenversetzung? Er strich seine Frage schließlich durch, setzte aber in einem anderen Passus wieder “*Reign of Cnut*” ein: Eine niedere Korrekturleserin vor ihm hatte vermutet, daß entweder die Buchstaben im letzten Wort umgestellt gehörten, oder daß es “*Reign of the Knout*” heißen müsse, die “*Herrschaft der Knute*” – wie Armande war sie russischer Herkunft.

This extract is filled with puns based on the shape and meaning of various medical and botanical terms. The adjective *rimiform*, for instance is a rarely used term meaning ‘resembling a cleft or slit’; due to its meaning and its similarity to *rim* (along with possible innuendos based upon both of these words), the protagonist does not understand what the phrase may mean. Interestingly enough, the translators do not use the same term but substitute it with rare non-terms such as *промежек* ‘interval; gap’ (4b, a dialectal counterpart of *промежуток* ‘ditto’ bearing some resemblance to the word *промежность* ‘perineum; nether regions’) and *kaneszent* ‘turning grey [of hair]’ (4c; obsolete). The obscenity of *rimiform* and *balanic plum* (that is to say, ‘a plum similar to glans penis’) mentioned in one context compels Hugh Person, as a proofreader, to suggest that the latter be substituted with *Balkanic* ‘балканский’. In (4b), this pun is translated by means of contrasting word groups *бурные бакланы* ‘fierce cormorants’ and *бурные Балканы* ‘the fierce Balkans’, whereas in (4c), a unique compound *Balanpflaume* appears. Zimmer renders *All the gold of a kew tree* (which may also be seen as the reference to *Kew Gardens*, where the oldest of these trees are found) literally as *das ganze Gold eines Ginkgos*, preserving the alliteration (4c); Il’in, on the other hand, changes the meaning of the phrase, using a substandard form of *чрево* ‘womb; belly’: *вся прелесть юных черев* ‘all the charm of young wombs’ (4b). *Dappled nebris* (*gesprenkelte Nebris*, *пятнастый небрис*) is a reference to *Papaipema nebris*, a species of moth (*dappled* being an accurate description of an adult moth’s appearance), alluding at Nabokov’s entomological hobby. A similar

autoallusion, a reference to oneself, is the anagram *Adam von Librikov* (*Vladimir Nabokov*; cf. *Vivan Darkbloom*'s foreword to *Lolita*). To preserve the anagram, Sergej Il'in turns Adam into Homer (an obsolete form Омир instead of Гомер) and substitutes the German honorific with the Dutch one. These allusions are quite obvious (*a sly scramble* – лукавая перетасовка – *eine listige Buchstabenversetzung*; the German translator refers to the anagram directly as 'a sly change of letters') and may be considered the eponymous transparent things.

The extract ends with another lengthy and transparently obscene pun based on interlinguistic paronomasia: the female proofreader who had been checking Mr. R.'s novel before the protagonist, misinterpreted the word group *Reign of Cnut* (that is to say, *Canute*) and opted for substituting it with either the Russian loan word *knout* 'whip' or the notorious English profanity.

3. Use of idioms

First of all, it is not atypical of Nabokov to modify idioms and materialize their underlying metaphors, cf. (5).

5. a. With an oath and a sigh *Hugh retraced his steps, which was once a trim metaphor*, and went back to the shop. **b.** Выругавшись и вздохнув, Хью повернул оглобли, что было когда-то меткой метафорой, и направился к магазину. **c.** Mit einem Fluch und einem Seufzer *nahm er seine Spur in umgekehrter Richtung wieder auf, was einst eine angebrachte Metapher war*, und ging zum Laden zurück.

The original (5a) contains a stylistically neutral idiom *to retrace one's steps* 'to walk back the same way'. The relative clause inserted into it is an example of metalinguistic lexico-syntactical modification (see [Dronov 2011; Добровольский 2007]; on metacommunicative framing of idioms see [Dobrovolskij, Lûbimova 1993]) indicating the idiomatic character of the phrase and referring to the underlying metaphor. The idiom is used alongside with a free word group that has a similar meaning (*went back to the shop*), which leads to a comic double-entendre. The Russian translator uses the informal and somewhat obsolete idiom <по>воротить оглобли 'to go back' (lit. "to turn back traces [of a horse harness]"). This decision

seems original, if not entirely adequate, because *to retrace one's steps* is marked as neutral (since in phraseology, it is an informal idiom that may be considered unmarked; see [Баранов, Добровольский 2006а; Шмелев 1977]), whereas the Russian one is marked as obsolete, with no contexts in the Russian National Corpora found after 1889. In the German translation, the neutral phrase *jmds. Spur aufnehmen* 'to find one's trace' is used; this phrase does not appear in dictionaries such as [Duden 2008; НБНРС]) but can be found in [ДЕРЕКО].

6. a. "Anyway – how are you?" asked Hugh, *pressing his disadvantage*. "To make a story *quite* short," replied Mr. R. (who had an exasperating way not only of trotting out hackneyed formulas in his would-be colloquial thickly accented English, but also of getting them wrong), "I had not been feeling any too healthy, you know, during the winter. My liver, you know, was *holding something against me*." **б.** «Во всяком случае — как ваши дела?» — спросил, справясь с ощущением неловкости, Хью. «Говоря *как нельзя* короче, — отвечал мистер Р. (имевший пренебрежительное обыкновение не только прибегать к избитым клише в своем подпорченном тяжким акцентом, якобы разговорном английском, но к тому же еще их калечить), — мне, понимаешь ли, всю зиму неужилось. Печень, понимаешь, что-то такое *затаила против меня*.» **в.** «Gleichviel – wie geht's Ihnen?» fragte Hugh, *auf seinen Nachteil pochend*. «Um nicht *lange* um den heißen Brei herumzureden», erwiderte Mr. R. (*der eine entnervende Art hatte, in seinem pseudo-umgangssprachlichen, mit starkem Akzent ausgesprochenen Englisch nicht nur mit abgedroschenen Klischees aufzuwarten, sondern sie obendrein auch noch durcheinander zu bringen*), «den Winter über habe ich mich nicht ganz besonders wohl gefühlt, wissen Sie. Meine Leber *hielt* etwas gegen mich, wissen Sie.»

The idiom *to press [home] one's advantage* 'to use an already existing advantage to succeed' has its noun group substituted with the cognate *disadvantage*. This lexical modification changes both the underlying metaphor and the figurative meaning, effectively reversing the latter (since the protagonist's lines make the whole communicative situation a failure). Example (6c) contains a modification of the same kind: *auf seinen Nachteil pochend* 'insisting on his disadvantage', where *Nachteil* is a substitute for

Recht from *auf sein Recht pochen* ‘to insist on one’s right’. Il’in’s variant is a free word group *справясь с ощущением неловкости* ‘having coped with the feeling of embarrassment’ (6b), whose meaning is somewhat different than that of the original phrase. The idiom *to hold sth. against sb./sth.* (6a) is translated with the nearly equivalent figurative unit *затаить что-л. против кого-л.* (6b) and the lexically modified idiom *etwas gegen jmdn. haben* (6c). The verb is substituted with *halten* ‘hold’, effectively making it both a lexical modification and a literal translation.

The idiom *to make a long story short* has the adjective *long* omitted and an adverbial modifier inserted. This means of modification may be seen as a magnifier (LF [lexical function] Magn) in terms of Igor Mel’čuk’s Meaning–text theory [Mel’čuk 2007]. Dieter E. Zimmer translates it *um den [heißen] Brei herumreden* ‘not to speak to the point’ (lit. “to talk around the hot mash”) with a negative particle and an adjectival modifier: *nicht lange um den heißen Brei herumreden*. In the narrator’s commentary, these modifications get a conclusive definition: *an exasperating way not only of trotting out hackneyed formulas <...> but also of getting them wrong*. This autocommentary is rather close to the views on idiom-breaking expressed by authors such as Aleksandr V. Kunin, Anita Načisčione, and Tim Ifill (Ifill 2003; Naciscione 2010; Кунин 1996). One should note that the character uttering the phrases cited in (6) is described as anything but a native speaker: *Mr. R. is a writer with a long German name, in two installments, with a nobiliary particle between castle and crag*. Here one has to consider the description of speech peculiarities of the protagonist in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* [RLSN], Nabokov’s first English novel:

7. It appears that Sebastian’s English, *though fluent and idiomatic, was decidedly that of a foreigner*. His r’s when beginning a word, rolled and rasped, *he made queer mistakes, saying, for instance, ‘I have seized a cold’ or ‘that fellow is sympathetic’ – merely meaning that he was a nice chap. He misplaced the accent in such words as ‘interesting’ or ‘laboratory’. He mispronounced names like ‘Socrates’ or ‘Desdemona’*. Once corrected, he would never repeat the mistake, but the very fact of his not being quite sure about certain words distressed him enormously and he used to blush a bright pink when, owing to a chance verbal flaw, some utterance of his would not be quite understood by an obtuse listener. *In*

*those days, he wrote far better than he spoke, but still there was something vaguely un-English about his poems.*⁶

Judging by these remarks (interestingly, they demonstrate of a peculiarity of the stress in the word Дездемона in the speech of Russian emigrés, which appears to have been closer to that of *Desdémone* in Romance languages than that of the English *Desdemona* or its contemporary Russian counterpart), Nabokov's view is close to the so-called introspective approach in the studies of linguistic and cultural specificity of idioms (Баранов, Добровольский 2008b: 275–280). From this point of view, an opinion of native speakers on appropriateness or unfitness of an idiom in a foreigner's speech may be a sign of its specificity. This criterion may be applied to figurative units that are morphologically nonstandard or contain unique (possibly archaic) constituents (cf. English *kith and kin* 'friends and relatives', German *klipp und klar* 'оротко и ясно'), proper names (Russian петъ Лазаря 'to beg alms', lit. "to sing [the parable of the Rich man and] Lazarus", English [every] *Tom, Dick and Harry* 'every or any person', Afrikaans *Jan Rap en sy maat* 'ditto', lit. "Jan Rap and his mate"), references to events and places (German *ab nach Kassel* 'a demand to leave the premises immediately', lit. "begone [and move] to Kassel [a rally point for German recruits sent to Great Britain and then to the New World during the Seven-Year War]", Serbian *i mirna Bačka/Bosna* 'and everything shall end well' [an ironic allusion to the nearly constantly war-torn regions]), rhymes and alliterations (Russian ни кожи ни рожи 'plain appearance [usually referring to a woman]', lit. "having neither skin nor snoot"; English *prunes and prisms* 'affected, primly precise, or priggish speech or behavior' [a reference to Mrs. General's speech in Charles Dickens' *Little Dorritt*]). This idea of appropriateness or unfitness of an idiom in a foreigner's mouth may be clearly seen in Zimmer's translation (6c): the idiom is barely altered (the modifier *lange* and negative particle are widely spread in German corpora such as [DEREKO]).

8. a. *Insomnia and her sister Nocturia harry me, of course, but otherwise I am as hale as a pane of stamps.* **b.** Бессонница и сестрица ее, Никтурия, конечно, порядком меня изнурили, но в остальном я крепок, как пласт почтовых марок. **c.** *Insomnia und*

⁶ Inter alia, this episode is addressed in Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves (Étrangers à nous-mêmes)* [Kristeva 1988].

ihre Schwester Nocturia plagen mich natürlich, aber sonst bin ich
heil wie ein Bogen Briefmarken.

Here, medical symptoms are anthropomorphized, resembling ancient deities such as *Hypnos* / Ἵπνος ‘sleep’ and his mother *Nyx* / Νύξ ‘night’. The apophatic comparison *as hale as a pane of stamps* is based on the model of set phrases such as English *as sound as a bell, fit as a fiddle*, German (so) *gesund/munter/fit wie ein Fisch im Wasser* ‘as healthy/strong/fit as a fish in water’, Russian *здоров как бык* ‘as healthy as a bull’, Serbian *zdrav kao dren/drijen* ‘as healthy as a buckthorn’. The adjective *hale* (descended from Old English *hæl* ‘whole’) is used in the alliterated idiom *hale and hearty* but would not appear in comparisons of the aforementioned sort. Furthermore there is a play on the co-occurrence of *pane* with other nouns: judging by the text corpora, the most frequently used collocation is *pane of glass* ‘лист стекла’ (75 out of 81 contexts in the British National Corpus [BNC], 352 out of 391 contexts in the Corpus of Contemporary American English [COCA]), whereas *pane of stamps* (a synonym for *sheet of stamps*) is encountered only once and only in BNC. Zimmer translates this *heil wie ein Bogen Briefmarken*. *Heil* ‘крепкий, здоровый’, a cognate of *hale*, is not found in idioms. The collocation *Bogen Briefmarken* substitutes a more conventional compound *Briefmarkenbogen*.

4. Literal translation and Idiom blending

The other typical approach is literal translation of a non-English idiom, often combined with blending several idioms. Cf. (9).

4. a. As to the title [*Tralatitions*], which is a perfectly respectable synonym of the word ‘metaphor,’ *no savage steeds will pull it from under me*. **b.** Что до заглавия [«Фигуральности»], представляющего собой вполне добропорядочный синоним слова «метафора», то его из-под меня не выдрать и взбесившимся жеребцом. **c.** Was den Titel angeht, der ein absolut respektables Synonym des Wortes „Metapher“ ist, so werden ihn mir keine zehn Pferde unter den Füßen wegziehen.

The metaphor is based on a number of Russian, English and German idioms, namely: *jmdn. bringen keine zehn Pferde dazu (etw. zu tun)* ‘someone is not intending to do something under any circumstances’ (lit. “not even ten

horses would bring sb to sth”), *jmdm. den Boden unter den Füßen wegziehen* ‘to take away support or assistance from someone, or to cause problems for them’ with its counterparts in English (*to pull the rug from under sb.*) and Russian (выбить (у кого-л.) почву из-под ног ‘to disturb someone beginning something, harming their confidence of success’). Zimmer translates this by blending the two aforementioned German idioms (9c).

The literal translation and blending become a technique of producing original metaphors, sometimes leading to sophisticated ones (10).

5. a. Perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: its demands would be balanced by those of the future. Persons *might then straddle the middle stretch of the seesaw* when considering this or that object. **b.** Возможно, если бы будущее существовало, конкретно и индивидуально, как нечто, различимое разумом посильней моего, прошлое не было бы столь соблазнительным: его притязания уравновешивались бы притязаниями будущего. Тогда бы любой персонаж *мог уверенно утвердиться в середине качающейся доски* и разглядывать тот или этот предмет. **c.** Wenn die Zukunft konkret und individuell existierte, als etwas, das einem überlegenen Hirn erkennbar wäre, dann vielleicht wäre die Vergangenheit nicht derart verlockend: Ihre Ansprüche würden von denen der Zukunft aufgewogen. *Jede Person könnte dann mit gespreizten Beinen auf dem Mittelteil der Wippe stehen und kippen*, um diesen oder jenen Gegenstand in Augenschein zu nehmen.

The author’s metaphor *to straddle the middle stretch of the seesaw* seems to be a reinvention of that underlying idioms such as *to live on the edge* or *to teeter on the brink*. In (10c), the German translator uses the modification of the idiom *auf der Wippe stehen* ‘to be in the state of unstable equilibrium’ (lit. “to stand on the seesaw”, which can be found in [НБНСП] but is not present in [Duden 2008]. Nor does it occur in text corpora. Yet, this expression is somewhat similar to a more widespread idiom *auf der Kippe stehen* ‘to be in an unstable or critical situation’ (lit. “on the tip/butt of a cigarette”) whose figurative meaning is not unlike that of thee aforementioned *to teeter on the brink*. Meanwhile, the prepositional part *mit gespreizten Beinen* may serve as a reference to the idioms *mit beiden Beinen auf der Erde stehen* ‘to be realistic, pragmatic, and down-to-earth’ (lit. “to stand with both feet on

the ground”) and *mit einem Bein im Grabe stehen* ‘to be terminally ill or to be approaching death’ (lit. “with one foot in the grave”, cf. Russian одной ногой в могиле, Serbian *jednom nogom u grobu*, etc.).

5. Conclusion

Based on the evidence listed above, the conclusions one can arrive are as follows:

1. The figurative units, most notably idioms, found in *Transparent Things*, tend to be modified, the modifications being mostly lexico-syntactical (e.g. adjectival or adverbial modifier insertion) or lexical (such as substituting one constituent with another), as well as metacommunicative.
2. A literal translation of idioms from one language to another appears to be a widespread means of coining original metaphors.
3. The first two phraseological devices are not easy to discern, as literal translation often involves a blend of several idioms and their modification, cf. (8–10).
4. The peculiarities of the author’s phraseology may be reflected in the translation. As one can see in the examples cited above, Sergej Il’in and Dieter Zimmer attempt at preserving idiom modifications, the German translator also trying to reconstruct the original idioms, as may be seen in (11).

These models of idiom use are highly productive, occurring in many novels of Nabokov’s, such as *Pnin*, *Ada*, and *Look at the Harlequins!* What is also noteworthy is that the author’s phraseology is intertwined with the wordplay based on interlinguistic paronomasia and code-switching (see [Safarians 2007]). Russian works of Vladimir Nabokov’s feature a similar phenomenon, for the figurative units used by their characters (as in *Camera obscura/Laughter in the Dark*) serve as hints of the plot’s development or even plot devices [Фарева 2004]. Some of the instances of Nabokov’s wordplay cast a long shadow in other authors’ creative activity, e.g. the phrase *yellow blue tibia* (the garbled version of the Russian sentence я люблю тебя ‘I love you’ learnt by a character of *Transparent Things*) has become the title of the British science fiction book written by Adam Roberts (published in 2009).

What is obvious is that Nabokov's metalinguistic use of idioms becomes an important stylistic and plot device, suiting his ever-present taste for metafiction one can observe in many a novel of his.

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