

Use of Profanities in discourse between Russian speakers: Status and dominance in Svojnness

By Jenny Jarrett

The use of profanity in discourse between Russian speakers creates inclusive and exclusive relationship in speech and formulates an array of social divisions. “The ‘polarity’ of Russian styles of interaction might be linked with the ‘polarity’ of conceptualizing people into *svoi* ‘one’s own’ as opposed to *čužie* ‘alien/strangers/foreigners’” and these “indigenous terms encode interpersonal relationships associated with group inclusions and exclusion” (Gladkova, 181). When introducing the concept of Svojnness, the usage of profanity between *svoi* ‘one’s own’ must be brought to the attention of translators. In Russian there is a gradation of effectiveness between profane words “Svoj-ness is motivated both psychologically and socially, and it is subject to fluctuations that depend on subtle shifts in the speaker’s perception of him/herself and the addressee” (Yokoyama, 402). This gradation of crude language prompts a challenge to translators of Russian. When is it appropriate to translate taboo words into less obscene words of simple euphemisms?

In this paper, translators will be able to examine crude language in discourse of Russian speakers, not only through materials gathered by student researchers of the University of Washington’s Sochi Exploration Seminar’s observations, but also through contemporary Russian Pop music. When translating some taboo words, a translator must first think of the context of the speech situation. Once that step is complete, one must think of the best refinement of the word after assessing the degree of its effectiveness.

The use of spontaneous profanity was observed in a conversation of young Russian women. The Speaker displays her dismay that the young man she was interested in began seeing another young woman: “Ja opozdala, blyu”! / I’m too late (I’ve missed my opportunity), darn!

Lit: whore. This young woman in a group of *svoi* used a vulgarity of the higher level of effectiveness, but can be lowered in its effectivity when translated into English. “Po-svojski refers to the manner of speech or behavior without any restrictions and formalities, as between people who know each other well, that is *svoi*. It involves not following the social protocol of formal interaction as between people who know each other but not intimately” (Gladkova, 190).

When examining this same phenomenon in Russian pop music, it can be used as stabilizer between curses while maintaining its vulgarity, but not causing dismay to the addressee. In the song *Ochinochestvo* /Loneliness by Russian artist Slava released in 2011, the use of two profanities to describe the neuter word for loneliness, which is showing the *svojness*’ inclusiveness of *svoj* allowing both a masculine adjective as well as a feminine adjective. This inclusivity maintains the *svoj* to the addressee i.e. the Russian audience including both males and females.

“Oдиноchestvo – svoloch” /Loneliness is a scum.

“Oдиноchestvo – suka” / Loneliness is a bitch.

The word Svoloch’ literally means scum or swine it may also be translated into English and have the equal effectiveness of bastard. Although, Suka takes a higher level of effectiveness in its referential meaning the implications of its use in this song softens the effectivity of word making the meaning of the song less vulgar than the taboo words within.

With the growing popularity of Anglo application into the Russian consciousness, translators cannot disregard its use as exclusive language. In *Moya Moskva*, a Russian pop song from 2008 the artists Timati and Dj Smash use English profanity to exclude the *čužie*.

Vsyz krutye telki sbežali v Moskvu
What da fuck, Smash ja ne poimu
Kak budto na kasting na novye lica
Opjat’ prinimaet stolica

All the cool chicks fled to Moscow
What da fuck, Smash, I don't understand (Can't
believe it)
[It's] As if a casting of new faces
Has been accepted to the capital again

By using this method of foreign language cursing the artists are establishing their *svojness*, that is only including those who understand the meaning of the swear word.

One can also argue that they are describing women from all over their country arriving to the capital of their country, so instead of using a profanity of their language to describe something so near to them, they instead insist on using a word in another language. Another interesting point, is that both of these males in this scenario are using this exclusive language to both exclude addressees, but also declare their dominance in front of the women they are leering at. They are of a higher status, because while this language excludes Russian profane effectivity, it declares the males of a higher status because they are able to use these variations of higher effective foreign profanities. Although, this method of what one may call Anglo-vulgarism the males in this speech situation are deemed of a higher status, because they are capable of properly applying foreign vulgarisms, while meshing it with their own language.

This is not strictly a male mechanism of dominance, women too can impose the use of Anglo-vulgarism to put forth a dominant stride in their social *svoi* groups. An account of this use was observed in a situation in a group of young women. For example, in a group of two young American women and two young Russian women who have recently acquainted themselves. One of the young Russian women implemented this method during a casual conversation. She was looking out the window and saw something strange and interrupted her own sentence.

“Da, ja rodilas’ v Pitere, no moi roditeli... What the fuck?!” / Yes, I was born in Peter, but my parents... What the fuck?!” When this young woman expressed her surprise in English, she was like the men in *Moya Moskva* declaring her higher status. Yokoyama suggests “that the crucial distinctive feature of CR is its *svoj* mode, in which the speaker assumes” short

interlocutor distance” (SID) between him/herself and the addressee” (Yokoyama, 402). While this is a use of SID the Russian woman makes sure that the American woman as well as her Russian friend know her capabilities in foreign vulgar discourse, thus making her of higher social standing in the group. She, the speaker, makes clear to the addressee that she is competent in two languages and makes the two American women see her as a fellow speaker of English and her Russian friend see her as one with the knowledge of both formal and informal speech in English. In 2008 Russian R&B/hip-hop artist B’yanka released the song *Pesnya pro lyubov’* [A]Song about love, in which she uses a play on words to imitate English Profanity to demonstrate her dominant status in her former relationship. “Ja ž tebya lyubila, tak tebya lyubila...maza faza”/ “I (really) loved you, I loved you so (much) motherfucker” Lit: Mass Phase. Although, she is not actually using the English profanities to a trained ear of English it can be interpreted as such. In many cases “vulgar language produced by women is still perceived as play” (Yokoyama, 409), this artist is using language that is playful to assert her feelings toward the addressee, or former lover, and through word play her dominant status is made clear. Some may state that this does not demonstrate dominance, but one can argue that by using this exclusive language she is making her a smaller group of *po-svojski*.

Finally, another interesting form of taboo discourse can be seen when two members of the opposite sex use the same taboo language. Gladkova states, “treating someone *po-svojski* implies behaving with another person in the way that inner desires and feelings are suggesting, without restrictions and formalities. This is consistent with behavior between people who can be categorized as *svoi*”. The Artists Dima Bilan and Julia Volkova demonstrate *po-svojski* language in their duet released in 2012 called *Lyubov’ Suka* /Love is a bitch.

Lyubov’ suka
No to čto tz khočeš

Love is a bitch
but it's what you want

I dnem I nočyu	during the day and night
Lekarstvo ili bolezn'	A medicine or an illness
Lyubo' suka	Love is a bitch
No pomniš' ona ne idet proč'	But remember she doesn't pass by
Deržit sil'nei I sil'nei	(She) Holds stronger and stronger
My k drug drugu idem bosikom po oskolkam	We are going barefoot on the odds and ends
Ostavlyaya v prošlom pečal'	towards each other
Vydykhaem vdvoem I vydykhem svobodu	Leaving sadness in the past
Proščai nelyubov' proščai	Breathing out together and breathing in the freedom
	farewell not(true)love, farewell

Having both genders unite calling the feminine word *Lyubov'* a bitch lowers its level of effectiveness and making this highly operative word have a lesser meaning. Though translators cannot interpret this word in English as one of lower effectivity, they can analyze the meaning to be less obscene. It is Vulgar to come right out and declare the personified version of *Lyubov'*, a female, is a bitch, it creates inclusive *po-svojski* because speakers of the Russian language have the “embedded” vision of *Lyubov'* as a female.

To conclude, when translating “there is an important difference between the ways slang and vulgarities are used by men and by younger women” (Yokoyama, 413). In daily speech, however through music there is a sense of musical *svojness*, which, creates, a greater balance between genders. When translating songs versus direct speech the idea of *svojness* must be applied differently in each situation. In musical translation “ ‘Openness’ in the manner of interaction with *svoi* extends not only to the domain of speech but also to the domain behavior; it involves allowing oneself to express one’s desires and to speak and behave as one wants” (Gladkova, 190). This allows for a greater divide among the effectiveness of taboo words. Knowing when to interpret these words into less effective words is a delicate process that should not be taken lightly. It is appropriate to translate taboo words into less obscene words after one

combines the ideas of *svojness*, *po-svojski*. Thus, the interpretations of these vulgarities and their usage can be translated into simple euphemisms when it is necessary.