



Translating the news into English

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While today many newspaper articles are being translated from Russian into English by native speakers of Russian, many news sources do not have native English speakers available to edit the material. In this article, I will look briefly at some problems common to these translations.

Common Calques

A number of typical phrases used in Russian newspaper articles are often translated literally into English. Some of these translations are stylistically inappropriate; others have slightly different meanings in English, or are not used all that frequently, and there are some which simply don't make sense. Below are a few of the most frequent offenders.

Речь идёт – In Russian, this phrase is used to elaborate on or clarify a previously mentioned point, or to focus the reader's attention on the point being made. This relatively formal phrase is appropriate for a newspaper article or a presentation.

«На данном этапе *речь идёт* ... о потенциальной возможности строительства морского газопровода-отвода на Румынию». (Правда.Ру 12.10.2009)

Any number of functional equivalents are possible here: “At the present time, we are discussing / the possibility of constructing... is under discussion”, etc. In other contexts, such as when a writer wishes to focus his readers' attention on what he is saying, two appropriate renderings could be “what is at issue is,” or “the point made/in question is.”

The translator of this article, unfortunately, chose the mysterious phrase “it goes about”: “**It goes about** the opportunity to build a gas pipeline branch to Romania.”

На базе чего-то – This phrase, which can allow the speaker to be vague while seeming to give specific information, may sometimes cause a problem for translators and editors. For example, what exactly does the sentence below mean?

«На базе Института повышения квалификации работников телевидения и радиовещания открыта IT Академия Microsoft». (04 июня 2009 fapmc.ru)

Does this mean that training courses will be physically located at this institute? Or will the institute simply be providing funding / other support? Either way, using the commonly found calques *on the base of* or *on the basis of* will not allow the translator to maintain the same level of vagueness inherent in the Russian, or indeed to make sense: “A Microsoft IT Academy will be opened on the basis of the Institute for Higher Education of Television and Radio Staff.” This does not mean anything to the English-speaking reader. The best option would be to try to find out more information in order to create a reasonable sentence: “A Microsoft IT Academy will be opened at / with the financial support of / the Institute for Higher Education of Television and Radio Staff.” If no further information proved available, a suitably vague sentence might be: “A Microsoft IT Academy will be opened in cooperation with the Institute for Higher Education of Television and Radio Staff.”

When do we use *on the basis of* in English? Usually either when writing about an abstract principle that forms the foundation of some idea, or about information that leads us to some conclusion: “In this paper, I propose an alternative approach: ranking clinics on the basis of the travel distances of their elderly patients.”

Talking about Talking – Russian has a number of verbs that journalists use when referring to what the subject of their article said: *подчеркнуть*, *отметить*, *заметить*, and so on. In English, however, there is a tendency not to use this wide a range of verbs when reporting information. Nine times out of ten English-speaking journalists will simply write: “He said, the press center said, the head of the company said.” For example:

«В пресс-центре также подчёркивают, что Индия может стать стратегическим партнёром области». (Regnum 14:27 05.12.2008)

And the translation on the same site: «They underscored at the press center that India could become a strategic partner of the region.»

What happened here was that this press center released some information, and made a statement about a recent meeting. The Russian verb *подчёркивать* is fairly neutral in this context, one of several verbs available to the journalist. But the English verb *to underscore* is not frequently used, and thus has greater force, as though stressing that the press center was very emphatic in making this point. The use of this verb in English alters the meaning of the sentence, causing it to stand out considerably more than was intended by the original author.

The verbs *note* or *remark* seem less out of place in an article than verbs like *underscore* or *emphasize*, but once again, they are less widely used in English-language than in Russian journalism.

Напомним/Заметим – These phrases in the first-person plural in Russian are often translated by imperatives in English, resulting in stylistic and semantic changes.

«Концепция создания международного финансового центра в Москве, напомним, уже утверждена российским правительством». (Российская газета – Федеральный выпуск №5018 (194) от 14 октября 2009 г.)

One translation, from another website, was: “Remember that the concept for creation of an international financial center in Moscow has already been confirmed by the Russian government”. (rt.com 11.12.2009)

As is clear from this context, *напомним* is a conventional phrase, and one not out of place

in formal newspaper writing. However, the use of an imperative such as *remember* is not all that common, and is indeed, considered stylistically inappropriate if used too frequently.

The Economist's style guide warns its writers: “Do not be too didactic. If too many sentences begin Compare, Consider, Expect, Imagine, Look at, Note, Prepare for, Remember or Take, readers will think they are reading a textbook.”

Even though *The Economist* allows for a certain amount of this, my feeling is that words and phrases directly addressing the reader are much less frequently used in English than are first person singular verbs in Russian. In addition, the function of *напомним* is to remind the reader of a relevant fact, while the imperative «remember» is more of an exhortation, a command to the reader, which causes a slight but important alteration of meaning.

The translation of *заметим* brings up similar issues.

«Заметим, что во время кризиса все государства СНГ столкнулись с масштабным оттоком иностранного капитала». (Российская газета – Федеральный выпуск №5018 (194) от 14 октября 2009 г.)

An English version: “Note that during the financial crisis, all CIS countries encountered a large-scale outflow of foreign capital.” (euroinfocenter.ru)

Again, in Russian the use of *заметим* is far less marked than the phrase *note* that. The author of the Russian text introduces a relevant fact with a stylistically appropriate phrase, while the translation seems to address the reader with unnecessary force. Omitting such phrases would be a good solution.

Articles

Of course, one of the most persistent and understandable issues for Russian translators is the use of articles. In this section, I will focus on the use of articles with proper names. Since most translators are aware that articles should not be used if a proper name stands alone, there is no real need to comment on an error such as:

“An NMC press service official told Itar-Tass that ... all the components will be made on the spot by the personnel of the French-Japanese Renault-Nissan

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alliance and **the AvtoVAZ.**" (Itar-Tass 29.10.2009, 08.35)

If, however, part of the company's name contains a noun that would normally take an article, then the definite article is ordinarily used. (Bank executives sought funding from the International Finance Corporation.) A definite article should also be used if a noun or noun phrase follows the company name and describes a part of it. (Reporters were given a briefing at the Gazprom regional office). Here "Gazprom" serves as an attribute for a regional office, which explains phrases such as "the Gazprom building," "the Gazprom pipeline," etc.

This rule helps to explain a common mistake:

"The investigation division ... has opened another criminal case against the former general director of **the Eldorado company**, Alexander Shifrin." (Itar-Tass 22.10.2009, 14.23)

The proper name of this company is simply "Eldorado." It is not necessary or correct to tack on *company* afterwards to describe it. If a company is mentioned for the first time, a descriptive phrase such as *electronics retailer* can be added before the proper name. ("Investigators have opened a case against the former general director of electronics retailer Eldorado.") After that first mention, the name can stand by itself. ("Market observers fear that Eldorado will not do well in the second quarter.")

Sometimes translators simply decide to make *company* part of the proper name:

"Currently the KD-Avia Company is undergoing a bankruptcy procedure." (Itar-Tass 29.10.2009, 13.37)

Since on this company's Russian website the airline is referred to as "КД авиа", and on its English website as "KD Avia," this transformation is clearly incorrect.

A more complicated issue is that of whether to use articles if a descriptive phrase appears in front of a company name. For example, in the following sentence, should there be a definite article in front of *electronics retailer*? "Investigators have opened a case

against the former general director of electronics retailer Eldorado." Both options sound reasonable. Not finding any resources addressing this specific topic, I conducted an informal survey of native English speakers (all Americans). The consensus was that both options were acceptable, but more than half of the respondents preferred *the electronics retailer Eldorado*. If in doubt, it is always possible to use an appositive phrase: *Eldorado, Russia's largest electronics retailer*.

Though job and position titles cause somewhat fewer problems, one recurrent issue is the need for a definite article when a person's title is given without his or her name. For example, it is clear that *President Obama* requires no article. If he is referred to without his name, however, the definite article must be used: "Reporters asked the president to elaborate on his statement."

"Finance minister stated that Bulgaria could not afford the funding of such large-scale projects like South Stream because of the financial crisis". (Pravda.Ru 12.10.2009)

In the above sentence, the job title is given without an article, thereby making *finance minister* sounds like a proper noun, i.e., like someone's name: *John Minister* or *Finance Smith*. The sentence should start: "The finance minister stated that Bulgaria..."

While these are only a few of the numerous common calques and grammar mistakes to be found, hopefully this very brief overview will be of use to Russian translators working into English.