

## Inside the Linguistic Laboratory: The New Languages of Politics in Eighteenth-Century Russia and their Craftsmen

Rodolphe Baudin  
Sorbonne University

[Rodolphe.baudin@sorbonne-universite.fr](mailto:Rodolphe.baudin@sorbonne-universite.fr)

---

Review of: S. V. Pol'skoi & V. S. Rzhetskii, eds., *Laboratoriia poniatii. Perevod i iazyki politiki v Rossii XVIII veka*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2022. 575 p. ISBN: 978-5-4448-1762-9.

---

Sergei Pol'skoi and Vladislav Rjéoutski's new volume explores the role played by translation in the importation into eighteenth-century Russia of Western political concepts, and the formation of specific languages to discuss them. The lengthy introduction opening the volume can be divided into two parts. The first focuses on the history of translation theory, both in Russia and the West, as well as on various relevant concepts, such as cultural transfers and cultural translation. The second addresses the history of books and brings in valuable data on translation in eighteenth-century Russia, with a specific focus on the three main genres forming the so-called "*grazhdanskaia nauka*" ("*civilis scientia*"): theoretical texts on politics, economics and the law; texts providing examples of their concrete use; moralistic literature popularizing political concepts, such as the immensely popular genre of the Fenelon-type political novel ("*staatsroman*"). The introduction also aptly questions the artificial difference between printed and manuscript books, in order to bring the later into the picture. Finally, it stresses the importance of using a sociological approach to the process of translation in order to shed light on translation acts and translation patronage, two important issues in eighteenth-century Russia.

The following thirteen studies, authored by some of the most authoritative specialists on eighteenth-century Russia, deal with three major issues: the transfer of specific concepts (such as "despotism" or "nation"); the transfer of discourses (such as the monarchical, medical or judicial discourses); the various linguistic practices and social strategies developed by translators to fulfill their task.

The transfer of political concepts is the focus of the first part of the volume, which consists of five chapters. In her chapter, Ingrid Schierle relies on historical semantics to study the functional equivalents of the German and French concepts of "people" ("*narod*") and "nation" ("*natsia*") in Russian translations from the second half of the eighteenth century. Konstantin Bugrov's chapter focuses on the concept of "despotism" in Russian political thought of the eighteenth century. It shows how the elites integrated this concept and how Russian intellectuals or intellectuals in Russian service managed to dissociate it from Russia. In her study, Riva Evstifeeva explores Sergei Volchkov's translation of Baltazar Gracián's *Oráculo Manual y arte de prudencia*. After explaining the meaning of "*prudencia*" in Gracián's original and the already more limited meaning of "prudence" in Amelot de la Houssaie's French translation, Evstifeeva focuses on Volchkov's Russian translation and its use as equivalents of "*blagorazumie*" and "*mudrost*." Nadezhda Pavlinskaia's chapter deals with Catherine II's (and Kozitskii's)

borrowings from Montesquieu and Beccaria. Focusing on concepts such as “*esclavage*,” “*servitude*,” “*législateur*,” “*liberté*” or “*politique*,” she compares their translation in the *Nakaz* with their translation in other contemporary or later Russian versions of *L’Esprit des Lois* and *Dei delitti et delle pene*. In her study, Tat’iana Artem’eva looks at the unpublished translation of Ferguson’s *Principles of Moral and Political Sciences* by Vasilii Sozonovich and at the various Russian equivalents of Ferguson’s concepts of “civil society,” “progress,” and “intelligence,” for instance, in Russian translations from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The volume’s second part, dedicated to the transfer of discourses, opens up with Pol’skoi’s lengthy study of manuscript books on politics from the first part of the eighteenth century. Stressing the equal symbolic value of manuscript and published books to eighteenth-century Russian book owners, Pol’skoi notes the importance of political texts among the first ones, due to economic reasons and censorship, before exploring who ordered these translations (D. M. Golitsyn and M. I. Vorontsov, mainly), who translated them, how they circulated among members of the elite and to what use. Examining the linguistic evolution of translating practices at three different periods from the 1700s to the 1760s, Pol’skoi’s paper is a truly remarkable contribution to the volume. It opens up a whole new realm of knowledge to readers used to judging Russian readers’ bookish knowledge by relying solely on the *Svodnyi katalog* and lists of foreign books or books in foreign languages available in Russia at the time. Kirill Ospovat’s chapter focuses on the importation under Peter I of a Western-type discourse about knowledge and medicine. As he demonstrates, the creation of the *kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg, with its collection of “monsters,” was meant as a showcase of sovereignty and a metaphor of the modern State’s physical and moral reform of the tsar’s subjects. Mikhail Kiselev studies the role played by Andrei Khrushchev’s early manuscript translation of *Les aventures de Télémaque* in the development of anti-absolutist ideas in Russia. Fénelon, it turns out, was no less influential than Montesquieu in defining a proper (“*samoderzhavnaia*”), non-despotic (“*samovlastnaia*”) monarchy, where the power of the sovereign is limited by the law, if not by institutions.

The third and final part of the volume, which focuses on translating practices, opens with Oleg Rusakovskii’s study of two Russian translations of Emperor Leo VI’s military treatise *Taktika*. After analyzing the reasons for *Taktika*’s appeal to Russian readers in the early 1700s, Rusakovskii reconstructs the trajectories of its two translators—Fedor Polikarpov and Il’ia Kopievskii—before commenting on their work at translating concepts such as “strategy,” “tactics,” “emperor,” “subjects,” “politics” and “punishment.” Mariia Nekliudova’s chapter deals with Sergei Volchkov’s translation of an educational tract attributed to abbé de Bellegarde for commercial reasons, but actually written by Jacques de Callières and to which Volchkov added elements from Gracián. Callières is also the focus of Mariia Petrova’s study, which analyzes Pavel Levashov’s translation of his treatise *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains*. A diplomat, Levashov used his translation as a tool in his career strategy. An apt translator, using different contextual forms to translate concepts such as “*pays*,” “*État*,” “*politique*,” “*nation*,” or “*robe*,” he nevertheless faced challenging translation issues while looking for equivalents to “*hommes de lois*” and “*gens de robe*,” for example, due to the absence of similar social categories in Russia. Maiia Lavrinovich’s chapter deals with a Russian manuscript translation of Christian Hempel’s biography of Andrei Osterman. The biography was apparently translated by people from the Moscow Archives of the Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, a department known for its translation activity and run by Osterman's son. While reconstructing the social dynamics which led to the translation, Lavrinovich comments on the translators' choice of equivalents for concepts such as "staat," "staatsman," "unthertanen," "nation," or "souveraineté." In the last chapter of the volume, Elena Borodina and Michel Tissier study Vasilii Novikov's *Teatr sudovedeniia*, a Russian collection of volumes inspired by the *Causes célèbres*, a genre developed in France by Gayot de Pitaval and François Richer. While examining Novikov's debt to Richer, Borodina and Tissier analyze his choice of cases to translate, his additional sources (Blackstone, Howard) and his work with finding equivalents to terms such as "plainte," "requête," "se pourvoir," "appel," "interjeter appel" or "compétence."

As this short presentation suggests, Pol'skoi and Rjéoutski's volume, which also offers an index of names and a most-welcome index of concepts, is a fascinating collection of rich in-depth studies on an innovative topic, at the crossroads of the history of concepts and the cultural and social history of translation. The variety of sources is remarkable and the erudition displayed by the contributors is truly astonishing. Some articles interact very nicely, as they address similar concepts, translation issues or sources (Bugrov and Kiselev about "despotism," Schierle and Lavrinovich about the translation of the German word "nation;" Bugrov, Pol'skoi and Kiselev about Strube de Pirmont's *Lettres russiennes*). The volume also offers a perfect balance between theoretical insights and a meticulous treatment of data, a combination particularly visible in the introduction and in the articles by Pol'skoi and Kiselev. The inclusive, multi-faceted approach to translation is also much appreciated, as it allows the reader to study the social, professional and political strategies of both translators and their translating patrons (see Evstifeeva, Pol'skoi, Rusakovskii, Petrova and Lavrinovich). Finally, most papers showcase a solid command of historical semantics and offer fascinating insights into the process (and its drawbacks) of developing new languages to understand and discuss politics.

In the light of these obvious qualities, I was slightly frustrated with some minor aspects of the collection. First, the structure of the volume did not always seem clear to me. For instance, I struggled to understand why Pol'skoi's paper opens the second part or why Rusakovskii's chapter is located in the third one, considering that they could easily be located in other sections. I also found the depiction of the historical context, the history of some translations and their multiple sources, or the physical depiction of certain manuscripts to be too detailed, which too often takes the attention of the reader away from the linguistic and semantic analysis of the importation of concepts, an aspect dealt with too swiftly at the end of some of the contributions. Additionally, some of the chapters, although undisputedly fascinating in their own right, such as the contributions of Bugrov and Ospovat, for instance, seem to be somewhat loosely tied to the main topic of the volume, as they do not deal with translations in the same way as the other contributors. Finally, I was surprised to see André Lefevere's name mentioned only once in the footnotes, considering his major contribution to the development of descriptive translation studies and the approach of translation as translation acts.

This said, *Laboratoriia poniatii* is an extremely valuable addition to the history of concepts in eighteenth-century Russia, which brilliantly demonstrates the significance of translation as a mirror of ongoing linguistic, social and intellectual dynamics. It also clearly establishes the importance of developing new languages in order to build a modern society and to rule over it, while forming enlightened subjects moved by the desire to take an active part in this process.