

# **Translation of Place-Based Writing: The Concept of “Derevnya” in Russian Literature**

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## **Project Background**

Folkloric literature provides a direct window into the cultural and historical nuances of a society, offering insights into its character, values, and beliefs. The portrayal of the Russian village or “derevnya” in literature often has deep connections with folklore and folk traditions. It reflects the harmony between humans and nature, as well as between different social classes within society. Many Russian writers, including nineteenth-century author Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, acknowledged the darker aspects of rural life—poverty, isolation—but also revealed the beauty and depth of the peasant soul in their works. Saltykov-Shchedrin’s works showed how people found joy and meaning in everyday tasks, in their faith, and in their connection with nature. Drawing inspiration and wisdom from folklore and folk tales, they incorporated these elements into their works (Zlygosteva, 2013). Thus, the portrayal of the Russian village in literature is deeply rooted in folkloric traditions that are uniquely linked to specific geographic locations.

Place-based writing as a concept has emerged in the context of writing pedagogy to help students connect to the landscape of their home, connect with the real world, and identify more closely with the practice of writing (Montgomery and Montgomery, 2024). Place-based writing emphasizes the profound relationship between storytelling and the environment. As celebrated Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich explains, writers strive to capture this essence by weaving the natural world into their narratives, imbuing it with meaning and symbolism that resonates with readers. Place-based writing goes beyond mere description; it seeks to evoke the emotional and psychological impact of a particular location on the characters and the story itself. Through vivid imagery and sensory detail, writers transport readers to a specific time and place, inviting them to experience the sensations of the landscape. By connecting narratives with specific places, writers can create works that resonate on a personal and universal level, inviting readers to explore the complex interplay between human experience and the natural world (Erdrich, 1985).

I bring the concept of place-based writing to bear on the fiction of writer and satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. While the concept has never before been used to examine nineteenth-century Russian literature, I argue that the lens of place-based writing provides us as readers with necessary tools and perspectives to understand Saltykov-Shchedrin’s fictional world. Saltykov-Shchedrin’s writing can be classified as place-based as it vividly captures the setting of the Russian village, portraying its landscape, customs, traditions, and daily life. It provides a unique insight into the socio-political landscape of nineteenth-century Russia, offering readers a glimpse into the culture and society of the era (Shevchenko, 2017). Through rich experiential descriptions of the Russian village, its textures and particularities, Saltykov-Shchedrin conveys this landscape with an impression of the real that forges a connection between the land and his readers.

An important aspect of Saltykov-Shchedrin’s writing that identifies his style as place-based writing is his language, which reflects the complexities of everyday life in rural Russia. His vocabulary encompasses a rich lexicon of Russian everyday life realities that includes numerous words and expressions signifying objects and phenomena of common life, the surrounding environment, customs, flora, and fauna. These encompass names for residential and farm buildings, household items, traditional clothing, national cuisine, means of transportation, monetary units, units of measurement, national holidays, tools, crafts, musical instruments, crops, geographical features, and more. These realities not only include terms familiar to every

Russian but also some requiring explanation even for native speakers, such as obsolete terms and local household realities specific to certain dialects or regions. Each of these terms comes with a constellation of associations linked expressly to place and represents a connection to a very real, concrete landscape.

The question arises, then, as to how these place-based terms, couched in the ultra-local context of the nineteenth-century Russian village, can be translated to convey that world meaningfully into English. Translating such a rich and diverse lexicon requires a nuanced approach that preserves cultural and contextual significance (Titova, 2019). Translation within the context of a Russian village presents numerous challenges, primarily due to the deeply embedded cultural and historical connotations within the language. Terms describing the rural landscape, such as “буераки” (small peasant houses) and “усадыбы” (estates), carry layers of social significance that are erased in simple word-for-word translations such as those I provide here. Additionally, words like “бедность” (poverty) and “рабство” (serfdom) encapsulate complex socio-economic realities specific to Russian village life, requiring additional context for full understanding. Concepts like “рекрутские наборы” (recruitment drives) and “вопли” (cries) reflect unique cultural practices and experiences, necessitating explanations to ensure clarity in translation. Overall, translating the complexities of the Russian village context requires a delicate balance between fidelity to the original text and readability in the target language, acknowledging the diverse layers of cultural, historical, and emotional significance inherent in the text (Korotkova, 2009).

I have been unable to find any scholarly research on the translation of place-based writing. While the practice of grounding fiction in a specific setting is age-old, the concept of place-based writing is quite new, and it invites serious questions about the possibility of communicating a geographically specific place across cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries. How, for example, could a translator convey into Russian the concept of “sweetgrass,” a plant native to North America and used by Citizen Potawatomi scientist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer as a symbol of her connection to her ancestors’ land (Kimmerer, 2013)? There is no word for “sweetgrass” in Russian because it does not grow in Russia. And how, conversely, is a translator to convey the rootedness inherent in a writer’s choice of the word “конь” over the word “лошадь,” when both can only be translated as “horse”? In addressing such challenges, translators often resort to the concept of domestication versus foreignization. Domestication involves adapting the text to the target culture’s norms and linguistic conventions, making it more accessible to readers. By contrast, foreignization aims to retain the cultural and linguistic peculiarities of the source text, offering readers a glimpse into the original context (Paloposki, 2011). While the concepts of domestication and foreignization help, they do not resolve the question of how to translate across geographical and linguistic distance a specifically local, place-based text.

### **Hypothesis**

The effective translation of place-based literature, such as Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin’s “Деревенский пожар” (Village Fire), necessitates a specialized approach that prioritizes the preservation of narrative setting, cultural nuances, and environmental specificities. Effective conveyance of the original text requires carefully considering the unique socio-cultural context and linguistic particularities embedded within the narrative. By employing techniques that capture the deeply rooted features of the setting and language, the translator can offer readers a compelling glimpse into the intricacies of Russian village life depicted in the source text.

## Objectives

1. To analyze the narrative setting and cultural nuances of Saltykov-Shchedrin's short story "Деревенский пожар" to identify key elements essential for a place-based translation.
2. To examine the idiomatic expressions and vocabulary utilized by Saltykov-Shchedrin in the original text, with a focus on understanding their place-based significance.
3. To explore various translation strategies and methodologies, including domestication and foreignization, to determine the most effective approach for preserving the place-based features of the text while making it accessible to a global anglophone audience.
4. To develop a translation plan that incorporates techniques for capturing the unique features of the Russian village setting, including detailed descriptions and immersive storytelling.
5. To translate "Деревенский пожар" into English, ensuring accuracy in conveying the narrative setting, cultural nuances, and place-based intricacies present in the original text.
6. To evaluate and document the translation process, including challenges encountered and decisions made, to contribute to the body of knowledge on translating place-based literature and inform future translation endeavors in this genre.

## Methods

1. Literature Review: Conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature on translation theory, place-based writing, and nineteenth-century Russian socio-political life in rural areas of the country to inform the translation process and theoretical framework.
2. Translation Analysis: Analyze the original text of the short story "Деревенский пожар" in Russian to identify specific phrases, idioms, and expressions that may pose challenges in translation. Pay close attention to cultural references, wordplay, and place-based nuances that may not have direct equivalents in the target language.
3. Communication with Professional Translators: Engage in dialogue and collaboration with professional translators proficient in both Russian and English to gather insights, exchange ideas, and develop effective translation strategies.
4. Translation Strategy Development: Develop a translation strategy that prioritizes accuracy in conveying the narrative setting, cultural nuances, and linguistic intricacies present in the original text. Use a combination of literal translation, cultural adaptation, and localization techniques to capture the essence of the story while ensuring readability in the target language.
5. Documentation and Reflection: Document the translation process, including communication with professional translators, challenges encountered, and decisions made, and reflect on the outcomes to inform future translation efforts and contribute to the scholarship on translation studies.

## Expected Results

1. By the end of June 2024, I will produce a publishable translation of Saltykov-Shchedrin's short story "Деревенский пожар," drawing a vivid image of the concept of a Russian village and capturing the place-based linguistic nuances, local terms, slang, and socio-political context present in the original Russian text. Over the course of the summer, I will submit my translation for publication.
2. In the first two weeks of July 2024, I will write a study comparing the original Russian text and the translated version, examining how linguistic and cultural nuances are preserved or adapted in the translation process, and the implications for the interpretation of the tales.

3. In the last two weeks of July 2024, I will develop a translation strategy that prioritizes accuracy in place-based translation and ensures that the translated text conveys the original meaning, cultural nuances, and place-based connections forged by the author. My strategy will include the most useful approaches to translating place-based writing, contributing valuable insights into effective approaches to conveying local terms, slang, and socio-political nuances across languages. This translation strategy will take the form of a document that can be published and shared with translators.

4. In August 2024, based on my research into place-based writing and translation, as well as on my observations throughout the process of translation, I will begin to write an article that will open a new field in translation studies problematizing the translatability of place-based writing. I will complete the article under the supervision of Dr. Tolliver and submit it for publication by December 2024.

Date (2024)	Goal
June	Complete translation of “Деревенский пожар”
July 1-16	Develop study comparing original and translation Submit translation for publication
July 17-31	Create translation strategy specifically for place-based writing
August	Start writing theoretical paper on translation of place-based writing
Fall	Finish writing and revising paper on translation of place-based writing
December	Submit paper on translation of place-based writing to journal

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