

Functions of Borrowed Vocabulary in Russian Literary Texts of the 19th–20th Centuries

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Abstract: This article explores the functions of borrowed vocabulary in Russian literary texts of the 19th and 20th centuries. It examines the pragmatic, stylistic, and semantic roles of foreign words in the prose of L.N. Tolstoy, I.S. Turgenev, A.P. Chekhov, M.A. Bulgakov, and others. The study focuses on both direct borrowings and adapted lexical units, which reflect cultural intertextuality, social stratification, and aesthetic intent. The research uses lexical-semantic and discourse analysis to identify how borrowings contribute to character development, socio-cultural marking, and the stylistic depth of a text.

Keywords: borrowed vocabulary, literary discourse, stylistic function, sociolinguistic markers, intertextuality

1. Introduction

The issue of borrowed vocabulary in Russian literary discourse continues to attract scholarly attention due to its complex linguistic and cultural significance. Foreign lexical items reflect historical processes of cultural exchange, linguistic contact, and ideological shifts, and also serve as stylistic and expressive tools within literary texts. In Russian prose of the 19th and 20th centuries, such borrowings appear not as incidental elements but as meaningful linguistic signs integrated into the author's narrative strategy [1, p. 45]. Since the late 18th century, Russian has seen an influx of French, German, and later English lexical borrowings. As K.I. Chukovsky observed, “our literature is a mirror of the linguistic influences of the time” [14, p. 117]. In the works of Pushkin, Gogol, and Turgenev, the French language functioned as a marker of social status, education, and cultural affiliation. Borrowings in the realist and modernist traditions continued to carry significant stylistic and cultural weight [3, p. 88].

Moreover, borrowed vocabulary often functions beyond the referential level—it may express irony, serve as a device of linguistic play, or function as a marker of intertextuality. Foreign elements can act as stylistic masks, rhetorical distancing strategies, or even carriers of ideological meaning [6, p. 79]. This study analyzes Russian literary texts from the 19th–20th centuries to explore how foreign words operate within various artistic and communicative contexts. The focus is on the stylistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions of borrowing.

The objective of this article is to classify and analyze the functions of borrowed vocabulary in Russian literary prose and to demonstrate their role in shaping character speech, social identity, and narrative texture.

To achieve this objective, the study sets out the following tasks:

- To identify the types of lexical borrowings present in Russian literary texts;
- To describe their primary functions within the literary context;
- To examine authorial strategies for integrating borrowings into narrative discourse.

The **relevance** of this study lies in the need for a comprehensive analysis of stylistic and cultural elements in the literary lexicon and in the broader interest in intercultural aspects of language. The **novelty** of the research consists in its integrated approach: combining semantic-stylistic and pragmatic analysis of borrowings in the narrative space, treating foreign words not just as linguistic facts but as indicators of social and aesthetic positioning.

2. Methodology

This study draws upon lexical-semantic, stylistic, and pragmatic approaches to analyze the functional role of borrowed vocabulary in Russian literary texts. The analysis focuses on the interaction between the lexical form and the literary context, where a foreign word acquires distinct expressive and narrative functions. The corpus includes selected works by I.S. Turgenev (*Fathers and Sons*, *Home of the Gentry*), L.N. Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*), A.P. Chekhov (*Ionich*, *The Lady with the Dog*), M.A. Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*), as well as excerpts from the prose of I.A. Kuprin and V.V. Nabokov. These texts exhibit various modes of foreign word integration, which enable a comparative and diachronic analysis of lexical borrowings [4, p. 57].

Lexical items were collected using a continuous sampling method, documenting both directly borrowed and adapted foreign words in original or modified form. Special attention was given to their contextual use in both authorial narration and character speech. The borrowings were then classified according to:

- **Source language** (French, German, English, etc.);
- **Degree of assimilation** (fully integrated, partially assimilated, exoticisms), based on L.P. Krysin's typology [6, p. 79];
- **Functional category** (nominative, expressive, evaluative, cultural, aesthetic), based on the classification of V.G. Gak [5, p. 112].

The analysis was conducted on two levels:

- **Macro-analysis** explored the distribution of borrowings across different zones of the text—dialogue, narrative description, authorial commentary—to determine their stylistic concentration and thematic roles.
- **Micro-analysis** focused on interpreting the function of specific lexical items within the micro-context (sentence, paragraph, or scene), accounting for their pragmatic and stylistic effects.

The following five functional categories were established for analysis:

1. **Nominative function** – naming foreign or new realities (*boulevard*, *cabinet*, *depêche*);
2. **Characterizing function** – reflecting social status or nationality of a character (*madame*, *herr*, *monsieur*);
3. **Expressive and evaluative function** – emotional intensification or aesthetic coloring (*chic*, *glamour*, *shock*);
4. **Intertextual and cultural function** – referencing other cultural systems or literary traditions;
5. **Aesthetic function** – stylization, rhythm, or genre-specific color.

Each function was examined in its dynamic context, with attention to authorial intention, socio-historical setting, and narrative strategy. For instance, in Turgenev's prose, French borrowings serve to identify aristocratic affiliation, whereas in Bulgakov's works they often highlight irony or create

satirical distance. Special attention was paid to the contrast between the use of borrowings in the 19th and 20th centuries: in the former, borrowings primarily indicate cultural refinement or elitism; in the latter, they are often resemanticized or used with a critical, ironic undertone. In this way, the methodology combines traditional linguistic analysis with discourse and interpretative methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of how borrowed vocabulary operates as a meaningful component of Russian literary language.

3. Results

One of the most frequent functions of borrowed vocabulary in literary texts is nominative. In 19th-century Russian prose, foreign words—especially from French and German—are used to name concepts, institutions, or cultural artifacts that had no prior equivalents in Russian. Terms such as *madame*, *boulevard*, *cabinet*, *salon*, and *dépeche* served to integrate elements of Western European life into the Russian narrative space [6, p. 79].

In Turgenev's *Home of the Gentry*, the word *madame* is used to typify a character: "Lisa had a governess—a dry Frenchwoman named Madame Jules, who adored order and needlework." (*original: «У Лизы была гувернантка — сухая француженка мадам Жюль...»*) [8, p. 47].

In this context, the borrowed title *madame* not only denotes nationality but also highlights the class and educational divide between Russian and Western pedagogical models. Similarly, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, French and German borrowings such as *salon*, *comme il faut*, and *bifsteck* (beefsteak) evoke aristocratic life and reinforce the social identity of the characters [11, p. 102].

Borrowed vocabulary also serves to characterize individuals—particularly their level of education, social aspirations, or ironic dissonance between image and essence. This function is especially prominent in the prose of A.P. Chekhov.

In the story *Ionich*, a character comments: "This is not an audience—it's pure vulgarity." (*original: «Это уже не публика, а какая-то пошлость»*) [9, p. 183]. The word *audience* (*publika*), although assimilated, adds a sense of cultural pretension to the character's speech.

In V.V. Nabokov's *Mary*, the borrowed word *charm* is used ironically: "Her charm was like perfume on a doll—too obvious to be real." (*original: «Её шарм был как духи на теле куклы...»*) [16, p. 51]. This metaphor not only emphasizes artificiality but also critiques superficial Europeanization.

Foreign words often intensify stylistic expressiveness, particularly in contexts of luxury, elegance, or sophistication. In M.A. Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, borrowings such as *maestro*, *marquise*, *bravo*, *café*, and *travelling* construct a theatrical, bourgeois environment and underline the surreal dimension of the narrative. "He rose into the air with the grace of a *maestro of levitation*." (*original: «Он поднялся в воздух с таким изяществом, как будто был маэстро левитации»*) [10, p. 138].

In Kuprin's *The Garnet Bracelet*, romantic French phrases highlight emotional nuance: "*Mille grâces*, she said without raising her eyes—it was wonderful..." [17, p. 109]. These expressions reinforce the sentimental and aesthetic registers of the narrative voice.

French language segments in Tolstoy and Bulgakov often act as stylistic masks. In *Anna Karenina*, French phrases are used precisely at moments when characters are emotionally detached or insincere: "Eh bien, mon cher, que faites-vous dans cette galère?" (*Well, my dear, what are you doing in this mess?*) [11, p. 213]. This quotation, lifted from classic French literature, appears comically misplaced, revealing the artificiality of aristocratic etiquette.

In Bulgakov's novel, borrowings function as intertextual markers: "It was all like *déjà vu*, like in a theatre where the audience already knows the lines." (*original: «Всё было словно déjà vu, как в театре, где зритель уже знает реплики»*) [10, p. 276].

Here, *déjà vu* captures both the stylistic atmosphere and existential disillusionment of the scene.

In 20th-century literature, borrowings frequently signal cultural competence and social prestige. Nabokov's characters often employ French expressions such as *à propos*, *en passant*, *vis-à-vis*, *ridicule*, subtly asserting intellectual superiority. "He spoke in little bursts of *à propos* and *en passant*—like a man rehearsing Parisian monologues." [16, p. 72]. In Turgenev, terms like *la vie mondaine* and *salon* fulfill a similar role, indexing the protagonist's immersion in elite society. In both cases, borrowings serve as **social emblems**, indexing the speaker's refinement, education, and self-positioning in the narrative world.

4. Discussion

The analysis of Russian literary texts from the 19th and 20th centuries reveals consistent patterns in the use of borrowed vocabulary and highlights how these patterns reflect the historical, stylistic, and cultural dynamics of each period. Foreign words in literature do not simply function as linguistic borrowings but act as pragmatic, stylistic, and symbolic tools that contribute to the construction of meaning. A major tendency is the **functional shift in borrowings between the 19th and 20th centuries**. In 19th-century literature, especially in the works of Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, borrowings—predominantly from French—serve as natural markers of aristocratic culture. French expressions are not merely decorative but signify class affiliation, elite education, and cosmopolitan values [2, p. 56]. These borrowings require no explanation for the reader of the time, as fluency in French was considered a norm for the Russian nobility.

By contrast, 20th-century writers such as Bulgakov, Nabokov, and Platonov reinterpreted the function of foreign vocabulary. Borrowings in this period increasingly perform **stylized, ironic, or intertextual functions**. They are no longer signs of unproblematic elitism but often indicate a critical or distanced attitude toward cultural imitation or linguistic pretension. Nabokov, for instance, uses French and English expressions as a kind of **cultural password**—inviting only culturally literate readers into the game of literary references [16, p. 60]. Borrowed vocabulary also serves as a **discourse strategy** for shaping character voices and social identity. In character speech, foreign words function as **social and communicative markers**—signaling the speaker's education level, aspirations, or cultural affectation. This is particularly evident in Chekhov's prose, where characters use borrowings to emulate sophistication or to mask their own limitations. The resulting stylistic effect is often subtle irony [9, p. 173]. Another key finding concerns the **level of assimilation of borrowings**. Some words, like *parikmakher* (barber) or *bulvar* (boulevard), have become fully integrated into Russian and lost their foreign aura. Others, such as *comme il faut* or *déjà vu*, retain their foreign form and thus preserve a sense of otherness or elite distinction. This dual status—between assimilation and foreignness—gives borrowings a powerful stylistic and symbolic potential.

Lastly, the study emphasizes the importance of **reader reception** in shaping the function of borrowings. As I.S. Ulukhanov notes, "foreign vocabulary in literary texts is an invitation to dialogue—a test of the reader's cultural competence" [15, p. 63]. In the 19th century, this competence was linked to noble education; in the 20th century—to intellectual circles; and in the 21st century—to globalized media and digital culture. The decoding of borrowings thus becomes a **literary performance** shared between author and reader. In sum, borrowed words in Russian literary discourse are deeply functionalized. They reflect historical moments, characterize speech, shape reader interpretation, and contribute to the aesthetic and ideological fabric of the text. The evolution of their usage over time underscores the interplay between language, literature, and culture.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of 19th–20th century Russian literary texts confirms that borrowed vocabulary performs a wide range of functions that extend beyond mere naming. These include stylistic enhancement, social signaling, cultural referencing, character development, and intertextual allusion. Foreign words operate as expressive units that help authors structure narrative voice, aesthetic effect, and ideological positioning. In 19th-century literature, borrowings serve as markers of aristocratic culture, education, and status. French, German, and English terms are seamlessly integrated into the speech of characters

from the upper class, signaling their cultural capital and social identity. These borrowings perform primarily **nominative and characterizing functions**, reflecting a shared cultural norm within the target readership.

In 20th-century literature, however, borrowings acquire additional layers of meaning. They may serve **intertextual and ironic functions**, become elements of **linguistic play**, or challenge the very conventions of speech. Writers such as M.A. Bulgakov and V.V. Nabokov use foreign vocabulary to question ideologies, construct hybrid narrative forms, and engage readers in culturally coded dialogue. Thus, the borrowed word becomes a site of aesthetic and ideological tension, rather than a neutral linguistic unit. An important distinction was observed between **fully assimilated** and **non-assimilated** borrowings. The former function as neutral vocabulary within the Russian lexicon, while the latter retain their foreignness and therefore carry greater stylistic weight. These words often serve as markers of elitism, irony, or cultural critique, depending on the context.

Finally, the study highlights the role of **reader interpretation** in activating the function of borrowings. The ability to recognize and decode foreign words is often a test of cultural literacy, creating a semiotic contract between writer and reader. As literary language becomes increasingly intertextual and multilingual, the function of borrowings evolves accordingly. In conclusion, borrowed vocabulary in Russian literature is not a marginal or decorative element. It is a **semiotic tool** that authors use to navigate social, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Further research may explore how these functions are reconfigured in 21st-century literature and digital discourse, where borrowings interact with memes, global slang, and code-switching practices in new ways.

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