What difference is there between being repelled, being repulsed, being disgusted and being offended? Not much, perhaps, but consider the scene: Anna Karenina has taken a sip of coffee and raised her eyes to look at Vronsky, her lover, who is watching her. After hundreds of pages of love, lust, passion, fear, exhilaration, disappointment, exhaustion, aggression and, probably most important, jealousy, they are having their final fight. Leo Tolstoy is describing Anna ascribing an emotion to a man whose love she needs so desperately that she is convinced he has stopped loving her. Consider also this: When she lifted her coffee cup, she extended her pinkie away from it — a precious gesture that signals just how far this domesticated, miserable Anna has come from the glamorous young woman she was at the beginning of the novel; she made a sound with her lips — and she realized this when she lifted her gaze and saw Vronsky looking at her. She saw the most painful thing a woman can see: a lover who is turned off by her physical being.

In the classic translation by Constance Garnett, “she saw clearly that he was repelled by her hand, and her gesture, and the sound made by her lips.”

In the popular 2000 translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, she “clearly understood that he was disgusted by her hand, and her gesture, and the sound her lips made.”

In a new translation by Rosamund Bartlett, she “understood clearly . . . that he was repulsed by her hand, her gesture, and the sound she made with her lips.”
And in another new translation, this one by Marian Schwartz, she “clearly realized that he found offensive her hand, her gesture and the sound she was making with her lips.”

Surprisingly, all the translators ruled that the part of Anna’s anatomy that she believed repelled, repulsed, disgusted or offended Vronsky was her hand and not her arm, though the Russian word *ruka* can mean either. I happen to think Tolstoy is writing about the arm — one of those two full arms that were so beguilingly set off by the black gown Anna wore to the ball in Part 1, Chapter 22, when she and Vronsky fell in love. Now, in Part 7, Chapter 25, when Anna lifts her coffee cup, the full arm, the pinkie gesture and the noisy lips form a tragic triangle. On the subject of the lips, the two newer translations hew closer to the original Russian on the issue of the intentionality of the sound that Anna thinks annoys her lover: Tolstoy makes it clear that it is Anna making a sound with her lips, not her lips making an involuntary sound. Like the extended little finger, this is a habit that Vronsky may once have found charming — in fact, he may still, for, Anna’s jealousy and fears notwithstanding, he still loves her — but she thinks he no longer does.

What does she think he feels? If he is offended, he is making — or she thinks he is making — a sort of private social commentary on her provincial-aristocracy ways. If Vronsky is repulsed or disgusted, he is — or Anna thinks he is — having a visceral reaction to her very ways of being. If Anna thinks he is repelled, then perhaps she has a fleeting awareness of pushing Vronsky away. To decipher what Tolstoy wanted to say, the translator has to devise an interpretation of Tolstoy’s narrative voice in “Anna Karenina.”

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This is an exercise millions of native Russian readers of the novel perform several times in a lifetime. Teenage girls read the novel as melodramatic; adult readers of both genders begin to perceive irony — its amount seems to vary from reading to reading. The author’s sympathies, too, invariably appear to shift between characters with every reading; this, combined with ironic distance that is always contracting and expanding, makes the book endlessly rich — and endlessly difficult for the translator, who can never hope to keep pace with the author. How earnest, ironic,
condescending, moralistic and simply funny a Tolstoy should the translator inhabit? Perhaps the only way to render Tolstoy’s variable voice is to continue producing ever-varying translations. The two new translations bring the number of published English-language versions to at least nine — or 10, if one considers the fact that Constance Garnett’s translation was significantly revised by Leonard J. Kent and the great Russian prose stylist Nina Berberova in 1965. Of these, Garnett’s and Pevear and Volokhonsky’s versions have enjoyed the tightest grip on the market, though it can be argued that neither came by its reputation on the basis of literary merit alone: Garnett for decades had a virtual monopoly on translating Russian classics, and Pevear and Volokhonsky sold hundreds of thousands of copies after their translation was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for her television book club. Winfrey, however, had not read the book and chose this particular translation out of consideration of convenience only: It was the most recent and therefore the most widely available at that moment.

The Tolstoy of Garnett (one of the few translators to have met the author in person, and the only one of those whose work is still read as current) is a monocled British gentleman who is simply incapable of taking his characters as seriously as they take themselves. Pevear and Volokhonsky, a Russian-American husband-and-wife team, created a reasonable, calm storyteller who communicated in conversational American English. Rosamund Bartlett, a longtime scholar of Russian literature and culture and a biographer of both Tolstoy and Chekhov, creates an updated ironic-Brit version of Tolstoy. Marian Schwartz, Bartlett’s distinguished American competitor who has translated a great variety of Russian authors, has produced what is probably the least smooth-talking and most contradictory Tolstoy yet.

Schwartz begins by giving the most literal rendition to date of one of the greatest first lines in the history of the novel.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” wrote Garnett.

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” wrote Pevear and Volokhonsky.
Bartlett made the exact same choice of words.

Here, meanwhile, is Schwartz: “All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

In her introductory note Schwartz explains her decision: “The first half of this now famous saying is often translated using the word ‘alike.’ The sentence thus rendered becomes aphoristic: ‘All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’ It is a tidy package, but not the package Tolstoy wrote. Tolstoy said not that happy families are ‘alike’ (odinakovy) but rather that they ‘resemble’ one another (pokhozhi drug na druga). By not using the expected word in that first half, Tolstoy makes the reader take a second look and points to a more complicated opinion about those happy families.”

There are two problems with this argument. One, the Russian word odinakovy would not be the expected word at all in this sentence — indeed, it would be jarring there. Two, odinakovy actually means “same,” while the English word “alike” is more often used to mean not identical but precisely very similar — it is indeed the best word to express the Russian phrase “resemble one another.” But Schwartz’s larger point is well taken: Tolstoy’s writing is indeed remarkable for its purposeful roughness, the use of repetition and the obsessive breaking of clichés to force the reader to consider the meaning of each word and phrase. “Beginning with Garnett,” Schwartz writes, “English translators have tended to view Tolstoy’s sometimes radical choices as ‘mistakes’ to be corrected, as if Tolstoy, had he known better, or cared more, would not have broken basic rules of literary language.”

Fourteen years earlier, in their own translators’ note, Pevear and Volokhonsky quoted Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote of a particular case of repetition that it is “characteristic of Tolstoy’s style with its rejection of false elegancies and its readiness to admit any robust awkwardness if that is the shortest way to sense.” Pevear and Volokhonsky conclude: “In previous English translations such passages have generally been toned down if not eliminated. We have preferred to keep them as evidence of the freedom Tolstoy allowed himself in Russian.” The differences between these two translations, in other words, stem not from a difference in goals or attitudes toward Tolstoy’s style but from differences in the ways the translators
Bartlett, for her part, quotes Chekhov, Tolstoy’s contemporary: "‘Have you ever paid attention to Tolstoy’s language?’ Chekhov once said to a friend; ‘enormous sentences, one clause piled on top of another. Do not think this is accidental, that it is a flaw. It is art, and it is achieved through hard work.’” Bartlett writes, “This translation seeks to preserve all the idiosyncrasies of Tolstoy’s inimitable style, as far as that is possible, including the majority of his signature repetitions, so often smoothed over by previous translators, his occasional use of specialized vocabulary . . . and his subtle changes of register, as in those instances where the introduction of an almost imperceptible but unmistakable note of irony is concerned.” But though Bartlett shares Schwartz’s and Pevear and Volokhonsky’s understanding of Tolstoy’s intentions — and their appraisal of previous translation efforts — she proposes that Tolstoy was “often a clumsy and occasionally ungrammatical writer, but there is a majesty and elegance to his prose which needs to be emulated in translation wherever possible. Tolstoy loved the particular properties of the Russian language, but he would not have expected them to be reproduced exactly in translation. . . . The aim here, therefore, is to produce a translation which is idiomatic as well as faithful to the original, and one which ideally reads as if it was written in one’s own language.”

The opposition between the ideal of producing a translation that reads as though the original had been written in the language and one that has an accent, like a Russian character speaking English in a Hollywood movie, is an old one, and convincing arguments have been made on both sides of the debate. In this case, Bartlett, like Pevear and Volokhonsky before her, appears to be on the side of those who aim for idiomatic English, while Schwartz prioritizes formal equivalence. In reality, though, it is Bartlett who sometimes introduces an awkwardness that is absent in the original. In Chapter 25 of Part 7, for example, as Anna and Vronsky initiate their final fight, Vronsky reads from a telegram: “Few hopes.” In Russian, just as in English, hope can be used as either a count or a noncount noun, and Tolstoy in this case opts for the more common noncount option, which would have sounded more idiomatic in translation as well: “Little hope,” just as Schwartz has it. A few lines later, when Vronsky tells Anna she needs a divorce from her estranged husband, she responds, in Schwartz’s version, “Clarity is not in the form but in the love.” Bartlett has her say, “Clarity is not a matter of form but of love,” introducing an error
of syntax that is absent in the original. And neither of the new translations compares to Pevear and Volokhonsky’s in its ability to match the pitch and intonation of one of the novel’s most important scenes.

But while Schwartz seems to have a better ear for the Russian, her translation is often in the end less readable than Bartlett’s. At the very beginning of the book, in the second paragraph, where Tolstoy describes his first unhappy family, that of Anna’s brother, Bartlett gets tripped up by the use of tenses in Russian and writes, “The wife had found out that the husband was having an affair with the French governess formerly in their house.” Schwartz has “The wife had found out about her husband’s affair with the French governess formerly in their home” — this is an accurate reflection of the ambiguity of the sequence of verb tenses that makes Russian very different from English, as well as the ambiguity characteristic of all such discoveries: Neither the wife nor the reader can possibly know whether the affair is over.

But in her drive to convey the full and complete meaning of every word, Schwartz weighs the paragraph down with detail: She has the children “racing through” the house “like lost souls” while for Bartlett they are “running about the house as if lost.” The Russian word poteryanniye indeed suggests that the children are spiritually rather than physically lost, but this exactitude creates the distracting image of souls rushing at breakneck speed, in no way implied by Tolstoy. Schwartz indicates that the cook quit the day before, “during the midday meal,” while Bartlett translates the meal simply as “dinner.” Technically, Schwartz is right because Russians consume the meal in question later than Americans would have lunch and earlier than they would have dinner — around the time, in fact, when British people would have tea. But the Russian obed is the most important meal of the day, which is why Bartlett’s “dinner” accurately conveys the meaning of the cook’s insult, if not the timing of the walkout.

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But let us consider the first line again. Did Tolstoy actually mean that all happy families are alike while each unhappy family enjoys its own form of misery? The structure of the book seems to affirm this view: It tells the stories of many unhappy families and only one happy one, as though the one happy family could represent all
the families that are just like it. On second look, however, it turns out that all unhappy families are very much alike — decimated by unfaithfulness, jealousy and lack of trust that work in predictable ways — while the one happy family develops in unpredictable, fascinating detail. Did Tolstoy mean to start the reader off with a false assertion to make his moral point all that much more clearly, or is this reader reading too much into the apparent paradox? The answer colors the reading of much of the text that follows.

Take Part 7, Chapter 15, in which Kitty, the wife in the book’s sole happy family, gives birth to a son — an event the anticipation of which is described in excruciating detail: Kitty even goes weeks past her due date. In Bartlett’s version, her husband’s first encounter with the baby goes as follows: “As he gazed at this tiny, pathetic creature, Levin tried vainly to find some signs of paternal feeling in his heart. He felt only disgust for it.”

Schwartz’s image of Levin is essentially the same as Bartlett’s: “Levin gazed at this tiny, pitiful being and made vain efforts to find in his heart some signs of fatherly feeling toward it. All he felt for it was revulsion.”

In both of these translations, Levin’s fears, described over hundreds of preceding pages, have been realized: For all his efforts at building the perfect family, he cannot rise to the challenge of fatherhood — he is undeserving of happiness, just as he suspected. The ending of the chapter therefore cannot redeem him. Bartlett: "‘Look now,’ said Kitty, turning the baby towards him so that he could see it. The wizened little face suddenly wrinkled up even more, and the baby sneezed.

“Smiling and barely able to hold back tears of tenderness, Levin kissed his wife and went out of the dark room.

“What he felt for this little creature was not at all what he had expected. There was nothing jubilant or happy about this feeling; on the contrary, it was an agonizing new fear. It was the consciousness of a new area of vulnerability. And this consciousness was indeed so agonizing at first, and the fear that this helpless creature might suffer so intense, that he failed to notice the strange feeling of absurd joy and even pride he experienced when the baby sneezed.”
Russian uses the same pronouns for both animate and inanimate objects, so Bartlett’s choice of “it” for the baby serves to underscore Levin’s failure to relate to the baby in a way that is absent in the original. Schwartz uses “him.” She also uses the word “emotion” where Bartlett has “tenderness”; “anticipated” rather than “expected”; “cheer” and “joy” over “jubilant” and “happy”; “terror” rather than “fear”; and “senseless” rather than “absurd.” None of these distinctions, however, change the narrative: Levin appears to be failing, and the birth of the baby is likely the point at which this family, too, starts on its path to failure.

Pevear and Volokhonsky, in their 14-year-old translation, rendered Levin’s initial reaction to the baby not as disgust or revulsion but as squeamishness. And that changes everything.

ANNA KARENINA
By Leo Tolstoy
Translated by Rosamund Bartlett
847 pp. Oxford University Press. $29.95.

ANNA KARENINA
By Leo Tolstoy
Translated by Marian Schwartz
754 pp. Yale University Press. $35.

Masha Gessen’s seventh book, “The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy,” will be published in April.

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