... As Nikolay Strakhov discovered when helping to prepare the text for its first publication in book form in 1878, Tolstoy set great store by what he had actually written, no matter how unconventional or clumsy it might initially appear. As he later recalled: ‘Lev Nikolayevich firmly defended his slightest expression and would not agree to the most, one would have thought, innocuous changes. From his explanations I was convinced that, in spite of all the apparent carelessness and unevenness of his style, he thought over every word, every turn of speech no less than the most fastidious poet.’

As with War and Peace, the Louise and Aylmer Maude translation of Anna Karenina, first published by World’s Classics in 1918, has long been considered one of the very best English versions of the novel. The Maudes lived in Moscow, were personal friends of Tolstoy, and were devoted to studying and disseminating his work. Nevertheless, they did not come from a literary background—Aylmer Maude ran a carpet business in Moscow before acquaintance with Tolstoy and his radical Christian ideas led him to abandon the world of commerce. Careful study of their translation shows a large number of discrepancies with Tolstoy’s original text, as well as what Henry Gifford defined as an absence of the ‘creative sense of language’ needed to render the nuances of Tolstoy’s style. They also make the regrettable decision to anglicize all first names, to the detriment of the reader’s appreciation of this aspect of Tolstoy’s sophisticated technique of characterization (as briefly outlined in the note on ‘Principal Characters’ below).

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, particularly in those chapters concerning rural life, and his subtle changes of register, as in those instances where the introduction of an almost imperceptible but unmistakable note of irony is concerned. At the same time, it is a mistake to render Tolstoy too literally. He 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, and would have surely expected his translators to draw on the particular strengths of their own languages. 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.

Russian, where one word can convey many meanings, each dependent on the context, functions in a very different way to English, which tends to have many different

*From: Anna Karenina, by Leo Tolstoy, translated with an introduction and notes by Rosamund Bartlett, Oxford University Press 2014 (Kindle edition)*
words for a phenomenon, all with precise shades of meaning. Thus, while this translation retains most of Tolstoy’s repetitions, in those instances where identical translation of the same word would fail to convey the richness of meaning implied in the original, nuance has been sought by finding equivalents in English. This is the case with the Russian word veselo and its variants, for example, a word which in general means ‘jolly’ or ‘cheerful’. It occurs three hundred and eighteen times in the text of Anna Karenina, and nine times in the space of a few paragraphs in Part Two, chapter 35. Seven different English words or expressions have been used in this translation to convey what is implied in the original Russian single root-word: ‘high spirits’, ‘merrily’, ‘jolly’, ‘livelier’, ‘amusing’, ‘light-hearted’, ‘gleeful’.

Tolstoy’s congested sentences, brimming with gerunds, participles, and relative clauses, pose a particular challenge to the translator wishing to render them into English. Not only is word-order more rigid in English, due to the fact that words do not decline, as in Russian, but some sentences are extremely long (some contain over a hundred words). ‘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. These sentences produce an impression of strength.’ Russian writers marvelled at Tolstoy’s ability to write so simply, using non-bookish, everyday speech, eschewing rhetorical devices and trite turns of phrase, but also so powerfully. As the Soviet writer Yury Olesha perceptively observed in 1950 in his notebooks, Tolstoy’s style was of a piece with the anarchic position he took on nearly everything in his life:

It’s strange that, existing in plain view, so to speak, of everyone, Tolstoy’s style with its piling up of coordinating subordinate clauses [several ‘thats’ ensuing from a single ‘that’; several subsequent ‘whiches’ from a single ‘which’] is, in essence, the only style in Russian literature characterized by freedom and by a distinctive incorrectness, and up to the present time, despite the demand that young writers write in a so-called correct way, no one has yet given an explanation of just why Tolstoy wrote incorrectly. It would be necessary (and it’s odd that up to the present time it hasn’t been done) to write a dissertation about the distinctive ‘ungrammaticalness of Tolstoy’. Someone observed that Tolstoy knew about his violation of syntactic rules (he spoke constantly of having a ‘bad style’) but that he felt no need whatsoever to avoid these violations— he wrote, it’s said in this observation, as if no one had ever written before him, as if he were writing for the first time. Thus, even Tolstoy’s style is an expression of his rebellion against all norms and conventions.

Transliteration

A simplified version of the British Standard transliteration system has been chosen for ease and accuracy of pronunciation, with a final ‘-y’ used for proper nouns ending in ы, иы and эы, as in ‘Tolstoy’, and ‘ye’ replacing ‘e’ in place-names and proper names, so that ‘Pokrovskoe’ becomes ‘Pokrovskoye’ and ‘Arkadevna’ becomes ‘Arkadyevna’. Proper
names with ‘ks’ have also been spelled with an ‘x’, thus ‘Alexandrovna’ has been preferred to the more accurate Aleksandrovna. In the case of ‘ë’, confusion often results since it is invariably printed as ‘e’. This has led to a long-standing debate about whether the name of Tolstoy’s hero Levin should be pronounced ‘Lyovin’, in accordance with the writer’s own family nickname of ‘Lyova’ and his habit of projecting his own thoughts and ideas into his central characters. In this translation ‘yo’ replaces ‘ë’ (so that ‘Fedorovna’, for example, becomes ‘Fyodorovna’, and ‘Matrena’ becomes ‘Matryona’), but Levin has been preferred to Lyovin. This is both in accordance with recent scholarly consensus, and because ‘ë’ in Russian phonology is generally only followed by a hard consonant—the ‘v’ is softened by ‘i’ in ‘Levin’, but not by ‘a’ in ‘Lyova’. Finally, the spelling of the novel’s English names and nicknames has been retained, so that ‘Kitty’ is preferred to an accurate transliterated Russian version (‘Kiti’ or ‘Kity’) and ‘Lydia’ preferred to ‘Lidiya’. A few Russian words known internationally, including ‘zemstvo’ and ‘dacha’, are transliterated, rather than translated. Proper names are reproduced exactly as they are in the original. This translation largely preserves Tolstoy’s punctuation, but diverges from his practice of never capitalizing the names of biblical figures or institutions.