

## COLOUR TERMS IN SELF-TRANSLATION: THE NOVELS "CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE" AND "DRUGIE BEREGA" BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Arina POLOZOVA<sup>1</sup>

1. PhD, "Al.I. Cuza" University of Iași, Romania  
Corresponding author: linguist777@yandex.ru

### Abstract

The present research is centred around one of the most interesting aspects of text analysis – the colour. The novels chosen for the analysis – "Conclusive Evidence" by Vladimir Nabokov and its self-translation "Drugie berega" – present a great interest from this perspective since they abound in colour. Moreover, the colourful picture created in these two novels seems to be of major importance for the author since Nabokov's palette is extremely elaborate; thus, by studying colour we aim to penetrate into the author's purport. The aim of this article is to present the results of the numeric analysis of colour occurrences in the texts of the two novels under discussion. Such kind of analysis seems to be significant for our purposes since it can give us a most clear idea of some basic features of both texts, as well as some essential discrepancies between them.

**Keywords:** *colour terms, Vladimir Nabokov, self-translation, confrontational analysis*

### I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

This article focuses on the numeric analysis of the colour terms in Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Conclusive Evidence" and its Russian version "Drugie berega". The reason why this particular book seems to be so particularly interesting for our purposes is twofold. On the one hand, as far as the content plane of the book is concerned, it is largely autobiography – a fact that is subtly decisive for the specifically emotional background against which the narration is deployed. Hence, the special importance of the colour terms used in the text and the wealth and individuality of various connotations they acquire.

A.V. Ledenyov<sup>1</sup>, a well-known literary critic, pointed out in his book that this particular genre was of special importance not only for Nabokov, but also for a great number of other writers who had to leave Russia after the Revolution of 1917. This can be accounted for by the fact that at that period of social instability there was a strong

demand for "human documents": autobiographies, diaries and fictionally-documental evidence of those who witnessed the changes the country had to go through. The critic argues that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century quite a few people had a feeling that the whole epoch was coming to an end; they were absolutely convinced that their life would never be the same. Thus, they longed to save what reminiscences they still possessed, perceiving their past as "Paradise Lost". However, according to Ledenyov, Nabokov did not just bring together all the pieces of his life before the crisis, thus creating a wonderfully vivid picture of his childhood, – he wanted to create a new "verbal" reality, with its own laws and rules<sup>2</sup>.

Second (which is of primary significance for our research), it is the fact that the book exists in two variants – English and Russian, both created by the author himself: first came "Conclusive Evidence" (1951), and then three years later, its Russian version "Drugie berega" (1954). Of special importance here is the fact that the Russian variant of the book can hardly be regarded as a case of translation in the generally accepted sense of the word: although the content planes of both are in more or less strict correspondence, the Russian text is a different version of the same idea – a variation on the original theme, so to speak. Nabokov specially emphasizes the fact in his memoirs and prefaces to his books<sup>3</sup>. In other words, we may look at the two texts as the author's own and, to a certain extent, fairly independent entities. Thus, in this article the confrontational method is going to be based on the two variants of one and the same text in two different languages created by one and the same author.

A few more words about how the two variants came into being. In his preface to the Russian edition, Nabokov points out that this book is an autobiography that covers almost forty years – from the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century till May, 1940, when the author had to move from Europe to the USA. Since childhood, as the author writes, he had spoken English and French fluently, but nevertheless, he found it quite difficult for him to write in English. When he started to work at the Russian version of the book, he realised that the English text lacked a lot in some places and in the other passages it was excessive. In the Russian version the author was determined to overcome these deficiencies. That seems to be the main reason why the Russian version differs so markedly from the English one:

*The present Russian book as compared to the English text is like the uppercase letters as compared to italics, or a staring face as compared to a stylized profile<sup>4</sup>.*

There is another reason here, too, which again brings us back to the quotation we have just adduced. The fact is that the English text was meant for the English speaking (mostly American) readers who could hardly be expected to appreciate fully and thoroughly the inner wealth of emotional, cultural, social and historical associations that the author's memory kept for so many long years when he was so far away from his native land – the land that had changed beyond recognition during his absence. Nevertheless, his retentive memory kept and

cherished all those minute associations which he meant to get across to his readers in this or that form. Since the English text was addressed to an audience that for obvious reasons could not fully share the social-cultural-historical background against which the book was written, the most he could do was to present, as he puts it, the "stylized profile" where only the basic absolutely indispensable features were retained. Nevertheless, although the colour terms could be assumed to be also subjected to this 'profile-stylizing' approach, their number and variety in the resultant texts, both the English and the Russian ones, is strikingly great, however numerous the differences and even discrepancies between them might be.

## II. NABOKOV'S PALETTE: A GENERAL VIEW

So much, then, for the novel itself and some general remarks concerning the history of its creation. Now we can proceed with the study of the colour terms as such in the texts of the novel. We shall concentrate on the numeric analysis of colour words since it can give us a most clear idea of some basic features of both texts, as well as some essential discrepancies between them. The frequency of colour in the English text is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 includes black, white, blue, red, grey, brown, green, yellow, pink, purple and orange colours. The total number of the colour term occurrences present in this table includes the

Table 1. Colour frequency in the English text.

	black	white	blue	red	grey	brown	green	yellow	pink	purple	orange	total number
Total number	201	116	74	71	68	62	56	43	25	24	8	748
Chapter 1	11	8	4	7	2	3	4	2	1	1	0	43
Chapter 2	6	4	4	4	2	6	2	0	0	2	0	30
Chapter 3	6	8	3	8	5	5	3	4	1	1	0	44
Chapter 4	16	3	8	4	6	5	4	5	2	0	0	53
Chapter 5	22	20	7	12	8	5	9	4	2	2	0	91
Chapter 6	11	6	7	3	6	6	7	5	3	3	0	57
Chapter 7	17	5	8	2	1	8	6	3	0	1	2	53
Chapter 8	11	7	5	2	3	5	2	3	2	2	1	43
Chapter 9	9	5	2	2	4	4	3	2	2	0	0	33
Chapter 10	13	8	3	8	4	2	1	1	1	2	0	43
Chapter 11/-	24	10	2	6	4	4	8	4	4	6	0	72
Chapter 12/11	21	15	5	4	6	3	3	4	3	0	2	66
Chapter 13/12	12	4	3	5	6	2	1	3	2	0	2	40
Chapter 14/13	10	6	2	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	25
Chapter 15/14	12	7	11	3	9	2	2	3	2	3	1	55

number of the occurrences of the colour terms denoting tints of the respective colours. We thought it useful not to include all the colour terms in the table in order to make it easier for understanding what colours prevail in the texts of the novel and, therefore, to make a conclusion concerning their presence or absence in different chapters of "Conclusive Evidence".

First and foremost, it should be noted here that the most frequently occurring colour terms are those denoting the black colour and its tints (201 cases), and white being second to them (116 cases). Here a question immediately arises: why do these colours prevail and which chapters abound in their occurrences?

The first and most obvious reason here might be as follows: black and white colours are indispensable elements of our everyday life, they can be found in all spheres of human activities. Diametrically opposite as physical phenomena (white – the presence of all wavelengths of the visible spectrum and black – the absence of them), they also form one of the basic oppositions in different cultures<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the black colour is largely used for the description of night, the dark time of the day, whereas the tints of white often occur when describing winter landscapes.

If we now turn to the text of "Conclusive evidence", we shall discover that the two colours are particularly conspicuous in some of the chapters. Thus, as can well be seen from Table 1, black is mentioned most frequently in Chapters 4, 5, 7, 11 and 12/11, whereas white is widely used in Chapters 5, 11 and 12/11. How can this distribution be accounted for?

The answer is not difficult to see. The fact is that Chapters 4, 5, 7, 11 and 12/11 abound in the descriptions of some events that took part late in the evening or at night. To this we have to add that Chapter 5 is dedicated to the author's reminiscences about Madmoiselle from his childhood. If we look closer at the description of the lady, we cannot but notice some dark tints in her portrayal:

*I see so plainly her abundant **dark** hair, brushed up hair and covertly graying; the three wrinkles on her austere forehead; her beetling brows; the steely eyes behind the **black**-rimmed prince-nez; that vestigial mustache; that blotchy complexion, which in*

*the moments of wrath develops an additional flush in the region of the third, and amplest, chin so regally spread over the frilled mountain of her blouse.<sup>6</sup>*

In Chapter 11 the author recalls writing his first poem – the day was rainy and the rain never stopped. Of special interest here is the fact that this chapter is included only in the English original text – in the Russian version the chapter is absent. We may suggest that the content of Chapter 11 was regarded by the author to be of a greater importance for the American and European reader.

In Chapter 12/11 the author describes his love affair with Tamara; they met mostly in the evening when it is dark. More than that, the description of Tamara's appearance opens and closes in dark colours:

*A drop of Tartar or Circassian blood might have accounted for the slight slant of her merry **dark** eye and the duskiness of her blooming cheek. [...] She accused her rich-**brown** hair of being unruly and oppressive and threatened to have it bobbed, and did have it bobbed a year later, but I always recall as it looked first, fiercely braided into a thick plait that was looped up at the back of her head and tied there with a big bow of **black** silk.<sup>7</sup>*

As far as the white colour is concerned, in Chapter 5 it is used in describing winter landscapes. In Chapter 12/11 it is usually contrasted to the colour of the late evening. Thus, we can conclude that the contrast between black and white stands out most clearly in descriptions of the setting, black being also used for people's portrayal.

At the same time it should also be pointed out in this connection that, as can be seen from Table 1, Chapter 5 is the most colourful part of the novel: all in all it contains 91 colour terms – a fact makes it clearly stand out in the text of the novel; thus, we can assume that Chapter 5 is of special importance for Nabokov, the reminiscences presented in this Chapter being emotionally marked and vivid.

The third colour in frequency here is blue. It seems to be of special importance for the author: blue and the words denoting the tints of this colour are specially connotative in the text of

Table 2. Colours absent in the Russian text.

	black	white	brown	grey	blue	red	green	yellow	pink	purple	orange	total number
Total number	54	27	21	18	13	13	12	8	4	4	2	176
Chapter 1	5	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	11
Chapter 2	3	2	4	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	14
Chapter 3	4	0	2	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	10
Chapter 4	3	0	3	3	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	12
Chapter 5	2	5	2	1	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	16
Chapter 6	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	5
Chapter 7	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	5
Chapter 8	3	3	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	12
Chapter 9	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Chapter 10	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Chapter 11/-	12	5	2	2	2	3	4	2	2	3	0	37
Chapter 12/11	8	4	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	17
Chapter 13/12	5	3	0	2	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	16
Chapter 14/13	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Chapter 15/14	2	1	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	7

"Conclusive Evidence" and appear in its most emotionally marked episodes. Moreover, it is especially significant for our analysis since English and Russian view this part of the spectrum differently: as has been pointed out in the literature of the subject<sup>8</sup>, the English colour term *blue* has two counterparts in Russian – *siniy* and *goluboy*.

Our next table deals with the colours which occur in the English text only, while in the Russian text their counterparts could not be discovered.

From Table 2 can be seen that cases in which the colour word occurs only in "Conclusive evidence" are fairly numerous (176). As for the most frequent colours here, they are again black (54 cases) and white (27 cases). This can be accounted by the fact that these two colours as such are the most frequent in the novel.

Let us now turn to the text of translation. Table 3 registers the total number of occurrences of words denoting colour in the Russian text.

The total number of the colour terms occurring in the Russian text amounts to 821. Thus, Table 3 has shown that the Russian text contains more colour terms than the English one (821 cases as opposed to 748). However, the dominating colour terms correspond to those of the English text – *cherny* (196 cases), *bely* (137 cases) and *siniy*, *goluboy* (96 cases).

It should also be mentioned that Chapter 5 in the Russian text stands out most prominently against the other chapters by the number of words denoting colour – 112 (as opposed to, for example, 28 colour term occurrences in Chapter 14/13). As can be seen from Table 1, Chapter 5 abounds in colour terms in the English text as well; thus, we may conclude that the content of the chapter is of special importance for the author – as has already been mentioned, in Chapter 5 Nabokov describes his Madmoiselle, his reminiscences are vivid and highly emotional.

Our next step is to concentrate on colours that occur only in the Russian text of the novel, but

Table 3. Colour frequency in the Russian text.

	<i>cherny</i>	<i>bely</i>	<i>siniy, goluboy</i>	<i>sery</i>	<i>zeleny</i>	<i>krasny</i>	<i>zhelty</i>	<i>korichnevy</i>	<i>rozovy</i>	<i>fioletovy</i>	<i>oranzhevy</i>	<i>bagryany</i>	total number
Total number	196	137	96	79	54	78	50	47	34	31	16	3	821
Chapter 1	12	9	3	2	2	7	3	3	1	1	0	0	43
Chapter 2	4	6	7	2	4	5	2	4	0	4	1	0	39
Chapter 3	11	18	7	6	8	8	4	3	3	3	1	1	73
Chapter 4	19	7	8	4	4	7	5	4	2	2	1	1	64
Chapter 5	26	22	13	11	7	15	6	3	4	3	2	0	112
Chapter 6	18	15	13	8	9	5	6	6	3	4	3	0	90
Chapter 7	20	10	7	1	6	4	4	8	0	1	2	0	63
Chapter 8	12	7	7	3	3	3	4	3	5	3	1	0	51
Chapter 9	11	5	2	6	3	5	3	4	5	1	0	0	45
Chapter 10	18	10	4	6	2	8	3	3	1	3	0	0	58
Chapter 12/11	16	13	11	8	2	4	4	1	5	0	2	1	67
Chapter 13/12	9	2	2	9	1	3	3	2	3	1	1	0	36
Chapter 14/13	10	6	3	4	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	28
Chapter 15/14	10	7	9	9	2	3	3	3	2	3	1	0	52

Table 4. Colours absent in the English text.

	cherny	bely	siniy, goluboy	sery	krasny	zhelty	zeleny	rozovy	fioletovy	oranzhevy	korichnevy	bagryany
Total number	61	53	35	31	23	17	15	15	14	10	8	3
Chapter 1	6	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chapter 2	1	4	4	2	3	2	2	0	2	1	2	0
Chapter 3	9	10	4	2	2	1	6	2	2	1	0	1
Chapter 4	6	4	2	1	3	1	0	0	2	1	2	1
Chapter 5	6	7	8	4	4	3	0	2	1	2	0	0
Chapter 6	8	9	6	3	3	2	2	1	1	3	0	0
Chapter 7	4	5	0	0	2	2	1	0	0	0	1	0
Chapter 8	4	3	3	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	0	0
Chapter 9	4	2	0	3	3	1	0	3	1	0	1	0
Chapter 10	5	2	1	3	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	0
Chapter 12/11	3	2	6	4	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1
Chapter 13/12	2	1	0	5	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0
Chapter 14/13	3	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Chapter 15/14	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0

cannot be found in the English text. They are presented in Table 4.

As can be seen from Table 4, the number of words denoting colour that can be found only in the Russian text is vast (285 cases). What is even more important, it is greater than that of the English text (this has already been shown in the previous table).

In quite a few cases, however, the occurrences of English and Russian words denoting colour correspond in both texts. Table 5 presents the number of the cases where the use of colour words in English and Russian text coincides. By this we mean words denoting colour occurring in the texts of the novel in the same episodes and referring to the same objects.

As the present table has shown, there are quite a few coincidences between the two texts (537 cases). This suggests that, even though the two texts can be called fairly independent entities, they cannot be treated as two completely different novels. At the level of colour terms it is shown by the fact that we can establish a more or less strict correspondence between the colourful pictures created by the author in both English and Russian texts.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

We shall now present the conclusions we have arrived at in course of our research.

Table 5. Colours present in both texts.

	black= cherny	white= bely	blue= siniy, goluboy	red= krasny	grey= sery	brown= korichnevy	green= zeleny	purple= fioletovy	pink= rozovy	orange= oranzhevy	yellow= zhelty
Total number	135	84	61	55	48	39	40	17	19	6	33
Chapter 1	6	7	3	6	1	3	2	1	1	0	2
Chapter 2	3	2	3	2	0	2	2	2	0	0	0
Chapter 3	2	8	3	6	4	3	3	1	1	0	3
Chapter 4	13	3	6	4	3	2	4	0	2	0	4
Chapter 5	20	15	5	11	7	3	7	2	2	0	3
Chapter 6	10	6	7	2	5	6	7	3	2	0	4
Chapter 7	16	5	7	2	1	7	5	1	0	2	2
Chapter 8	8	4	4	2	2	3	2	1	2	0	3
Chapter 9	7	3	2	2	3	3	3	0	2	0	2
Chapter 10	13	8	3	7	3	2	1	2	1	0	1
Chapter 12/11	13	11	5	4	4	1	2	0	3	2	4
Chapter 13/12	7	1	2	3	4	2	0	0	1	1	3
Chapter 14/13	7	5	2	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	0
Chapter 15/14	10	6	9	3	9	2	1	3	2	1	2

First and foremost, the present analysis has shown that the texts of the novel – both the English and the Russian ones – abound in colour terms. Therefore, we may assume that they form an indispensable part of the author's world perception and should be given special attention as 'transmitters' of the author's intention.

It should be mentioned in this connection that the number of colour terms varies throughout the novel. This brings us to the conclusion that Nabokov's palette is extremely elaborate; it produces a certain effect upon the reader. Thus, the chapters which abound in colour are meant to stand out prominently in the text of the novel since they are most likely to create a vivid picture in the reader's mind.

Second, the number of the colour terms in the Russian text is greater than that of the English version (821 versus 748); thus, the Russian text is oriented towards creating a more colourful picture in the reader's mental vision – something that needs further comment on the basis of a more detailed confrontational analysis of the material.

However, a great number of colour words (537 cases) occur in the same episodes, refer to the same objects and are, therefore, fully correlatable as 'parallel' counterparts. This brings us to the conclusion that, even though the English and the Russian texts present two fairly independent entities, they cannot be regarded as two different novels. This difference lies in the fact that the English variant is somewhat detached: it is primarily oriented towards description and explanation, whereas the Russian variant is more personal and emotional – the author addresses his compatriots, with the same mentality and with the same past.

### References

1. Ammer, Christine. (1992) *Seeing red or tickled pink: color terms in everyday language*. London: Penguin Books.
2. Baleka, Yan (2008) *Sinii – tsvet zhizni I smerti. Metafizika tsveta*. Moskva: "Iskusstvo – XXI vek".
3. Giubbenet, I.V., Cherezova, T.L. (1997) *Tsvetovoye prostranstvo v russkom i angliiskom yazykah // Kategorizatsya mira: prostranstvo i vremya. Materialy nauchnoy konferentsii*. Moskva.
4. Itten, Johannes. (1961) *The art of colour*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
5. Ledenyov, A.V. (2004) *Nabokov i drugie: Poetika i stilistika Vladimira Nabokova v kontekste khudozhestvennykh iskany pervoy poloviny XX veka*. Moskva: Moskovsky gos. universitet im. M.V. Lomonosova.
6. Matveeva, N., Mirkovskaya, A., Ananyeva, E. (2010) *Cherny/bely*. Moskva: KITONI.
7. Nabokov, Vladimir (2004) *Drugie berega: Memuary*. Moskva: "Zakharov".
8. Ter-Minasova, S.G. (2008) *Voyna i mir yazykov i kultur*. Moskva: Slovo.
9. Vasilyevich, A.P. (2002) *Katalog nazvany tsveta v russkom yazyke*. Moskva: "Smysl".
10. Yanshin, P.V. (1996) *Emotsionalny tsvet: emotsionalny komponent v psichologicheskoy strukture tsveta*. Samara: SamGPU.

### Endnotes

1. Ledenyov, A.V. (2004) *Nabokov i drugie: Poetika i stilistika Vladimira Nabokova v kontekste khudozhestvennykh iskany pervoy poloviny XX veka*. Moskva: Moskovsky gos. universitet im. M.V. Lomonosova.
2. Ibid., pp. 65-67.
3. Nabokov Vladimir (2004) *Drugie berega: Memuary*. Moskva, "Zakharov" – pp.6-7.
4. Nabokov Vladimir (2004) *Drugie berega: Memuary*. Moskva, "Zakharov" – p.7.
5. The present chapter does not have its Russian version. Thus, Chapter 12 in the English text corresponds to Chapter 11 in the Russian one.
6. See, for example, Baleka, Yan (2008) *Sinii – tsvet zhizni I smerti. Metafizika tsveta*. Moskva: "Iskusstvo – XXI vek"; Vasilyevich, A.P. (2002) *Katalog nazvany tsveta v russkom yazyke*. Moskva: "Smysl".
7. Nabokov Vladimir (2004) *Drugie berega: Memuary*. Moskva, "Zakharov" – p. 126.
8. Nabokov V. *Drugie berega: Memuary*. – Moskva, "Zakharov", 2004. – p. 320.
9. See, for example, Giubbenet I.V., Cherezova T.L. (1997) *Tsvetovoye prostranstvo v russkom i angliiskom yazykah // Kategorizatsya mira: prostranstvo i vremya. Materialy nauchnoy konferentsii*. Moskva – pp. 160-165.