

## VERBAL REPRESENTATION OF A CHARACTER'S INTERNAL CONFLICT IN FICTION AND TRANSLATION: B. ANTONENKO-DAVYDOVYCH'S *SMERT'* AND ITS ENGLISH VERSION BY YU. TKACH

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### Summary

The article deals with the broad and complex issue of verbalizing a character's internal conflict in literary texts and examines the specificities of its transmission in the target language. It reveals that the internal conflict of the main character in B. Antonenko-Davydovych's *Smert'* (*Death*) is constructed through a complex interplay of lexical, stylistic, and syntactic devices, which transform psychological struggle into an intense narrative experience. Special attention is paid to the keyword *неприємно* which is traced throughout the entire artistic text and becomes a verbal marker of Kost Horobenko's internal conflict, mapping the shifts in the character's emotional state. Yu. Tkach's translation is examined with particular attention to the achievement of pragmatic equivalence, focusing not only on the accurate transfer of propositional meaning but also on the preservation of the emotional intensity and rhetorical force that shape the stylistic impact of the source text. Consideration is given to the risk of attenuation in translation, whereby the focus shifts from moral and existential torment toward milder, more neutral emotional states, thus partially diminishing the dramatic effect intended by the author.

**Key words:** inner conflict, artistic text, semantics, stylistics, verbalization, reproduction.

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### 1. Introduction

Internal conflict constitutes one of the most frequently addressed themes in literary discourse, as it is intrinsically linked to the reader's perception and emotional response. Therefore, its accurate rendering in translation is essential for preserving the intended pragmatic impact on the target readership. Various types of conflict have long been examined in literary studies (*Hromiak et al., 2007: 372–373*), with internal conflict standing out as one of the most significant. It functions as a core mechanism for character development representing the inner struggle that unfolds within a character's mind or soul, often involving conflicting emotions, desires, beliefs, or ethical dilemmas. Several researchers have given attention to analysing various dimensions of inner conflict, such as moral ambiguity, identity crises and fragmentation, in classic literary characters (*Bolea, 2020; Pum, 2025*), including those in Ukrainian literature (*Paskevych, 2000; Polianska, 2019; Shmeha, 2024*).

Although B. Antonenko-Davydovych has long been acknowledged as a “master of psychological prose” (*Boiko, 1989; Polianska, 2019: 145*), his texts have seldom been analysed in terms of their artistic portrayal of characters' psychological states. At present, considerable scholarly attention has been given mainly to the bibliographic record and general appraisal of his literary and scholarly achievements (*Tkachenko, 2022: 137*).

Particular attention to the problem under discussion is paid in D. Polianska's doctoral thesis with a separate chapter focused on B. Antonenko-Davydovych's *Smert'* (*Death*).

The researcher interprets it as not merely a conflict, but a narrative of trauma, an experience of total non-being. This understanding shifts the analytical focus from surface-level psychological struggle to the deeper existential and traumatic dimension of the protagonist's experience (Polianska, 2019: 128–174).

Diverse types of internal conflict are explored extensively in both scientific and academic literature, particularly within psychology, philosophy and literary studies. Scientific literature commonly categorizes the internal conflicts faced by fictional characters struggling with intense inner discord as moral, philosophical, emotional, identity-based, or spiritual/existential.

This paper primarily centres on the verbal means used to represent the various types of internal conflict experienced by the main character in B. Antonenko-Davydovych's *Smert'* (*Death*) (1928) and the peculiarities of their reproduction in the Anglophone translation by Yu. Tkach (*Duel*, 1986).

## 2. Title as a key to psychological fiction: original vs translation

The title of the fictional text under analysis functions as a symbolic construct with multiple semantic layers, extending far beyond the literal notion of physical death. It may be interpreted, first and foremost, as signifying the spiritual degradation and inner death of the protagonist Kost Horobenko, as well as the brutal massacre of the peasantry carried out in the name of constructing a bright communist future; and as a marker of historical rupture: the revolutionary period that precipitated the demise of the intelligentsia and moral authorities, along with the annihilation of Ukrainian cultural and spiritual identity, suppressed and trampled by totalitarianism.

Rendering the title *Smert'* (*Death*) as *Duel*, as suggested by Yu. Tkach (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1986), introduces a significant symbolic shift – not necessarily incorrect, but not equivalent either. While *Duel* foregrounds the narrative's dialectical structure and may be considered a literary metaphor for the internal confrontation – Horobenko vs. Horobenko, or conscience vs. conformity – it nevertheless risks narrowing the interpretive frame. Although the title captures the key aspect of the story (the internal conflict), it obscures the existential weight and traumatic finality embedded in the title *Smert'* (*Death*) and downplays the broader social and historical trauma that the story dramatizes. If *Smert'* is read not simply as a depiction of conflict, but a narrative of trauma and annihilation (Polianska, 2019: 162) the title *Duel* proves not only insufficient but potentially misleading. In contrast, the title *Death* carries a more universal metaphorical resonance, readily associated with modernist motifs of psychic collapse, moral disintegration, and the death of the soul (Shevchenko, 2024) – dimensions that are largely lost in the more situational framing of *Duel*.

## 3. Reproducing internal conflict: lexical and grammatical means in source and target texts

The entire narrative reveals a sustained tension between two opposing forces within the protagonist's consciousness – and, at times, his unconscious mind. This internal struggle becomes especially evident in his reflections on the party and his role in it. Each affirmation of his bolshevik identity is consistently followed by a parallel, often contradictory response: he initially asserts his allegiance with apparent certainty, only to immediately undermine it with irony or sarcasm: *Кость спокійно подивився крізь вікно в сад і тихо сказав самому собі:*

– Я – більшовик...

*Він хотів це донести до самих глибин свідомості, але й на цей раз спорснув. Кость зняковів і стомлено сів. На вустах заграла легка іронічна посмішка. Було неприємно (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1954: 9–10) – Kost calmly looked out the window into the orchard and said quietly to himself:*

*“I am a Bolshevik ...”*

*He wanted to impress this on the very depths of his consciousness but failed this time too. Kost became embarrassed and sat down, tired. A light ironical smile played on his lips. He felt uncomfortable (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1986: 9).*

Even though Kost Horobenko spoke quietly, the words held profound personal weight. He was still unable to internalize the new reality he was trying to adopt – one in which he was attempting to become the very opposite of who he had once been. The passage conveys his deep-seated uncertainty and inner dissonance. A number of words, phrases, and syntactic structures in the original – such as *спорснути*, *зняковіти*, *стомлено сісти*, *заграла іронічна посмішка*, *було неприємно* – function as semantic markers that construct an affective atmosphere of emotional fatigue, inner disorientation, and psychological discomfort. The most stylistically marked lexical item in the passage is the verb *спорснути*, which literally denotes 'не втримавшись на чому-небудь, падати, зісковзувати, скочуватися' (Bilodid et al., vol. 9: 576). But within the given context, it acquires a metaphorical dimension, signifying the protagonist's inability to maintain inner control, suggesting a failed attempt at internal consolidation.

The variant *but failed this time too* suggested by Yu. Tkach may be regarded as broadly adequate, insofar as it conveys the core sense of failure present in the original. However, this translation neutralizes the connotative and metaphorical charge embedded in the Ukrainian verb under analysis. By reducing a vivid image of slippage created in the original to a generalised notion of failure, the English phrase flattens the emotional dimension of the passage. A more nuanced alternative – such as *but once again, it slipped from him* or *but once again, they slipped away* – would better preserve the embodied metaphor and convey the internal disintegration implied in the original. Both variants render the idea and connotations, but they differ in subject focus and psychological implication. The first one emphasizes the character's loss of control, his involuntary failure. The use of *they* in the second one personifies the words/thoughts as fleeting, ungraspable, mirroring his dissociation; here the agency lies with the thought, not the person, making the general tone more passive in comparison with the embodied tone of the first variant.

A further illustration of verbalizing internal conflicts in Ukrainian fiction that may complicate translation into English involves the stylistically marked use of one-member sentences, particularly impersonal constructions. The difficulty arises from the systemic structural and semantic allomorphy between Ukrainian and English, where impersonal sentences exhibit different formal realization, semantic patterns, and perspectivization strategies.

The Ukrainian one-member impersonal sentence *Було неприємно*, used in the abstract under analysis creates some distance between the experience and the character, enhances the sense that the character is not fully in control of his own emotions, reflecting a modernist narrative strategy – showing inner turmoil indirectly, as atmosphere or background affect. The direct English equivalent of the structure – a two-member impersonal sentence *It was unpleasant* – sounds more like a colourless evaluative comment than an expression of psychological nuance, and it is less likely to evoke existential discomfort or dissociation, unless supported by strong surrounding context. Therefore, the translator justifiably opts for an alternative structural rendering in the target language choosing the other two-member alternative – *He felt uncomfortable* – which also shifts the stylistic register of the original. While the translation retains the

general semantic content, it transforms the impersonal expression into a direct attribution of emotion, assigning it explicitly to the character through a subject–verb–complement structure. As a result, the translation reduces the ambiguity of the original, suggesting manageable emotional discomfort rather than diffuse, disembodied dissonance. Besides, the lexical choice of *uncomfortable* in English may evoke mild physical or situational unease, lacking the psychological, moral, or even ontological dimensions of discomfort potentially implied in *неприємно* – all of which are relevant in a text that explores internal collapse and ideological dissonance.

To more effectively convey the stylistic and narrative functions of the source-language syntactic construction, it is necessary to consider more interpretive equivalents and stylistically marked syntactic structures in the target language. The interpretive alternatives which can be discussed here are *A vague unease settled over him* and *The moment left an aftertaste of unease*. The first variant is indirect but personal. It preserves the emotional ambiguity and indeterminacy of the original, suggesting a passive, enveloping emotional state – not fully understood or resisted. The second one offers a retrospective distancing as the discomfort is associated with the event, not the character's active emotional state. It suggests the protagonist doesn't fully register the unpleasantness immediately – a choice that supports psychological denial or numbness.

Another viable alternative in this context involves employing the compensatory potential of inherently expressive one-member nominal sentences (Kotsiuba, 2001: 16) to convey the stylistic functions and narrative perspective encoded in the source-language one-member impersonal construction. The nominal one-member sentence variant – *A shadow of discomfort* – advanced as a potential solution in this context, retains the impersonal tone and syntactic abruptness of the source construction, maintains its vagueness and emotional restraint, and, akin to the source-language text, leaves interpretive space for the reader. The lexeme *shadow* as a key structural and sense-component of the sentence hints at something fleeting, ambient, and undefined – perfectly in line with *неприємно*. In general, this translation preserves the aesthetic of silence and the subtle psychological fracture that are integral to the portrayal of the internal conflict by B. Antonenko-Davydovych.

It is important to note that the word *неприємно* occurs frequently in the text under analysis. This recurring keyword serves as a crucial marker for tracing the emotional state of Kost Horobenko. For instance, in the example *А все ж таки було неприємно й боляче* (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1954: 27) – *And yet it was unpleasant and painful* (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1986: 28) the impersonal construction in combination with the lexical choice and discourse markers *А все ж таки* create emotional detachment, producing a gradation of emotion from moral unease to physical or psychic pain.

While the English translation may be regarded as functionally adequate, its capacity to convey the full stylistic and narrative value of the source text could be enhanced by making the gradation more perceptible through the introduction of certain structural and lexical modifications. Thus, in the possible alternative *And yet, it was unpleasant, even painful* the insertion of the adverb *even* signs progression from mild to severe, guiding the reader's perception of gradation. The variant *And yet, it was unpleasant, and it was painful* employs clause segmentation, which through rhythmic slowing and syntactic parallelism assigns a separate weight to the lexeme *painful*. By contrast, the graphic disjunction and lexical modification in *And yet, it was still unpleasant – and it hurt* produce an effect that is marginally more emotive than that of the source text, introducing a degree of immediacy absent in the original. The lexical change enacts a process of subjectivization, shifting the perspective from the relatively objective, report-like *it*

was painful toward a more embodied representation of sensation in *it hurt*, and simultaneously underscores the persistence of discomfort despite an implied effort at self-control.

The impersonal construction *Горобенкові стало неприємно* implies an onset of discomfort or unease in the following fragment – something shifts in Horobenko's perception: *Горобенкові стало неприємно. І як це безглуздо: боремось із базарами і в той же час жінки комуністів ходять туди купувати, та й хіба ти сам, нарешті, не ходив купувати махорки?* (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1954: 24) – *Horobenko felt bad. How ridiculous this was: they fought against markets, and at the same time the wives of Communists went there to buy things, and hadn't even he himself gone there to buy some makhorka tobacco?* (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1986: 25). The source of Horobenko's unease is the cognitive dissonance: the ideals conflict with reality. In this context, *Horobenko felt bad* is not the most suitable equivalent of the original as it represents a case of pragmatic under-differentiation and semantic narrowing. In English, *felt bad* is semantically vague, typically meaning 'to feel guilty or sorry about sth' (Oxford, 2006: 99), 'feel ashamed or sorry' (Longman, 2009: 108). It lacks the situational specificity embedded in *стало неприємно*, which is closer to 'feeling frustrated' or 'feeling disturbed' – 'який спричиняє почуття незадоволення, досади, прикрасі' (Slovnyk). Furthermore, the translation under analysis conveys a more general emotional state, while the Ukrainian phrase carries a more pointed, contextually grounded evaluative meaning that is integral to the portrayal of the ideological and moral dimensions of the internal conflict. It also eliminates this grammatical impersonality, framing the emotion as an active state. This shift weakens the sense of involuntariness inherent in the source text; thus, the translation loses the subtle distancing effect of the original, which is integral to the portrayal of the character's passive experience of discomfort within the broader conflict depicted in *Smert'*. Overall, the central idea of the original extends beyond the notion of "feeling bad" to encapsulate the impact of a disquieting realization.

More adequate alternatives in this context are those that maintain emotional restraint and avoid excessive personalization, for instance, *An unease came over Horobenko*, *A discomfort took hold of Horobenko*, or *Horobenko felt a pang of unease*. These variants convey the involuntary nature of the feeling. They also semantically and aspectually capture *стало* as a point of sharp onset. Short adverbial markers – *suddenly*, *all at once*, etc. – may be incorporated to heighten the immediacy and align more closely with the internal conflict tone of the original.

In the next passage under analysis, *неприємно* is repeated, but in different registers: first, as an internal, shame-infused feeling (*стало неприємно за самого себе*), intensified by *і навіть соромно*, which expresses reflexive moral pain; and second, as a projected social consequence – embarrassment, awkwardness, unpleasantness in the eyes of others (*було б дуже неприємно*):

– Донос?

Стало **неприємно** і навіть соромно за самого себе.

Так низько впасти... Піти до Радченка й виказати... Міг же там, в учительській, встати й одверто сказати, навіть просто заборонити їм наплюжити... Це був би скандал, було б дуже **неприємно**, але принаймні було б чесно... (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1954: 56) – 'A denunciation?'

He felt bad and even ashamed.

'To stoop so low... To go to Radchenko and tell on them ... You could have stood up there in the 'staff room' and told them all openly, even simply forbidden them to slander like that... It would have been a scandal, you would have felt very uncomfortable, but at least it would have been honest... (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1986: 58).

The translator omits the repetition of *неприємно*, which in the original ties the two aspects of the conflict together with the same lexical anchor, even though the shades differ. He also flattens the contrast by the lexical choice and fails to convey the sudden impersonal onset of the first *неприємно*, as discussed in the preceding context.

The challenge here is to pursue functional equivalence, not only by reproducing the repetition, but by finding a formulation that reads naturally in English while still allowing *неприємно* to echo.

To replicate the gradation in translation adequately it is crucial to preserve the impersonal onset and reflexive moral pain encoded in the first instance of *неприємно*, for example, *A pang of unease, even shame at himself, swept over him*, while differentiating the second occurrence as an instance of social embarrassment rather than inner moral unease, as in the variant *It would have caused a scandal, it would have been painfully awkward, but at least it would have been honest*. Such a distinction exemplifies a strategy of register differentiation and pragmatic disambiguation in translation.

Preserving the Ukrainian stylistic device of repetition is a viable strategy, as it can strengthen the psychological impact of the passage. The main challenge, however, concerns the choice of an appropriate equivalent for the repeated *неприємно*. A literal rendering as *unpleasant* results in semantic and affective reduction, since *неприємно* possesses a broader expressive range in Ukrainian. This discrepancy highlights the problem of lexical adequacy and requires the use of compensatory techniques aimed at retaining the psychological impact of the original. Instead of the literal *unpleasant*, equivalents such as *distressing* or *troubling* provide greater adequacy, as in *It suddenly became troubling, even shameful, to himself... That would have been a scandal, very troubling, but at least it would have been honest*. In this rendering, the repetition spans the semantic field between inner unease and social awkwardness. The expressiveness may be further reinforced through graphic means and the use of lexical intensifiers, for example: *It suddenly became troubling – shameful, even – to himself... That would have caused a scandal; it would have been deeply troubling – but at least it would have been honest*.

B. Antonenko-Davydovych carefully mobilizes verbal means of the Ukrainian language to portray the dynamics of moral self-conflict in the following passage. Kost Horobenko is tormented by a recollection that dramatizes the opposition between his former self and his desired identity, and this conflict produces pain and self-disgust. This inner dissonance functions as a site of psychological self-alienation, generating affective responses of pain and self-disgust: *Горобенкові до болю стало неприємно від цієї згадки. Хотілось навіть застогнати, витравити якось із пам'яті ті наївні гімназійні візитні картки, що виникали тепер на живому* (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1954: 52) – *Horobenko felt painfully annoyed at this recollection. He even wanted to let out a groan, to somehow erode those naive gymnasium call cards from his memory, which now burned his heart* (Antonenko-Davydovych, 1986: 54).

The impersonal construction with the key word *неприємно*, intensified by *до болю*, connects to the broader motif of Horobenko's recurring unease, shame, and inner turmoil, emphasizing the almost physical acuteness of the feeling. The translator personalizes the target text by eliminating the impersonal onset and diminishes the moral-psychological depth encoded in *неприємно*, rendering it as *annoyed* – 'irritated, angry' (Longman, 2009: 59) – within the collocation *painfully annoyed* which may seem awkward to the target reader since annoyance in English conventionally lacks the intensity to be associated with pain.

Another authorial verbal choice that dramatizes the intensity of the character's inner struggle – transforming psychological torment into physical suffering – is the phrase

візитні картки, що **випікали** тепер **на живому**. The Ukrainian idiom *донікати до живих печінок* (до живого, до душі, до серця і т. ін.), meaning 'дуже зачіпати, боляче вражати когось, торкаючись чогось найбільшого для нього' (Bilonozhenko et al: 262), is transformed here and intensified by the morphological form, emphasizing the duration of the action. The proposed equivalent, *call cards from his memory, which now **burned his heart***, may be considered adequate: although the idiom is not attested in English dictionaries, the artistic image remains comprehensible to the Anglophone reader. Nevertheless, the translation tends toward sentimentalization, resulting in an attenuation of the acute raw corporeality of the source text, that renders the character's psychological conflict more palpable.

The English language offers the possibility of stylistic compensation to preserve the expressiveness and visceral force of *на живому*. For instance, the verb *to sear*, used figuratively in the meaning 'to cause sb to feel sudden and great pain' (Oxford, 2006: 1367) (cf. *searing* – 'so strong that it seems to burn you'), proves effective in this context, as it enacts a metaphorical transfer from physical burning to psychic suffering, thereby foregrounding the acuteness of the character's inner torment: ...*cards which now seared him as if on raw flesh*.

Sometimes, a single lexeme may carry sufficient semantic potential to render the character's emotional state more accessible to the reader. In the passage under analysis, this function is performed by the verb *вуправити*, whose semantic harshness – connoting violent, destructive removal – reflects Horobenko's desperate struggle with memory and his wish to obliterate recollections. The equivalent *to erode*, suggested by Yu. Tkach, denotes 'to gradually destroy something or make it weaker over a period of time' (Oxford, 2006: 515) and thereby weakens the psychological intensity of the original. Rather than conveying a desperate, forceful attempt to expunge the past, it implies a slow, natural wearing away, which misrepresents the urgency and violence embedded in the source text. A more adequate translation would opt for verbs like *scour out* or *burn out*, which reproduce both the semantics and the intensity of the internal conflict.

#### 4. Conclusions

In B. Antonenko-Davydovych's *Smert'* (Death), the internal conflict of the main character is represented with exceptional linguistic intensity, achieved through a network of emotionally charged lexicon, evaluative idioms, metaphorical imagery, and inherently expressive syntactic structures. They become key markers of Kost Horobenko's psychological torment, conveying moral struggle, and the painful clash between his ideals and his compromises, his past and his present. The author's deliberate use of the lexeme *неприємно* recurring in different contexts throughout the whole text reinforces the continuity of this inner discord, while lexemes with strong destructive or bodily connotations externalize inner pain, making memory and conscience almost physically unbearable.

In the context of conveying internal conflict, the Ukrainian original offers a more complex recreation of psychic tension. It aligns with modernist strategies of showing emotional dissonance indirectly, often through shifts in tone, narrative distance, or linguistic defamiliarization. Yu. Tkach attempts to reproduce these peculiarities but faces substantial challenges. The English translation, while serviceable, reduces this tension to a more accessible but less textured emotional state, and in doing so, risks flattening the psychological nuance that characterizes B. Antonenko-Davydovych's prose.

The research highlights the importance of a translation approach that foregrounds expressive and connotative equivalence, ensuring that the aesthetic and psychological impact of the original remains intact and that the reader perceives the protagonist's conflict with equal intensity. The translator must operate on the level of both meaning and effect, aiming for functional equivalence that reproduces not only propositional content but also emotional resonance and stylistic texture.

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