

## Skaz, siuzhet, and byt: Notes on Russian formalism in Spanish translation

ANASTASIA BELOUSOVA – VERA POLILOVA

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### Skaz, siuzhet, and byt: Notes on Russian formalism in Spanish translation

Russian formalism. Terminology translation. Intellectual history. Byt. Fabula. Siuzhet. Priem. Motivirovka.

This article discusses the translation history of Russian formalist works in the Spanish-speaking world, examining the channels through which formalist theory was introduced and the challenges of translating its terminology. It follows the trajectory from early indirect translations to direct ones and then analyzes strategies for rendering key concepts such as *byt*, *skaz*, and the oppositions *fabula–siuzhet* and *priem–motivirovka*. The study highlights the importance of Italian mediation in disseminating formalist thought in the Hispanic context, offering insights into the circulation of ideas between non-central cultural zones. The rendering of Boris M. Eikhenbaum's concept *literaturnyj byt* illustrates the difficulties of an effective reception of the key terms of Russian theory.

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Anastasia Belousova  
Faculty of Letters and Arts  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu  
Romania

Department of Literature  
Universidad Nacional de Colombia  
Colombia  
abelousova@unal.edu.com  
ORCID: 0000-0002-0771-4271

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Vera Polilova  
Faculty of Letters and Arts  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu  
Romania

Faculty of Philology,  
Faculty of Philosophy  
Moscow State University  
Russian Federation  
vera.polilova@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7095-9909

A defining feature of Russian formalism was its ambition to establish literary studies as a rigorous science (Pilshchikov 2015, 320). This aspiration is evident in numerous programmatic statements, such as Roman Jakobson's preface to Tzvetan Todorov's anthology of formalist writings, pointedly entitled "Vers une science de l'art poétique" (Toward a science of poetic art, 1965). A key consequence of this ambition was a meticulous attention to terminology and the construction of a logical, argumentative discourse, which stood in stark contrast to the "impressionism" the formalists attributed to earlier criticism.

A prime example of this methodological stance is Viktor Shklovsky's "Iskusstvo kak priem" (1919; Eng. trans. "Art as Device", 1991), which opens by challenging a widely accepted definition: "'Art is thinking in images.' This phrase may even be heard from the mouth of a lycée student. It serves as the point of departure for the academic philologist who is making his first stab at formulating a theory of literature"<sup>1</sup> (Shklovsky 1991, 1). Shklovsky swiftly refutes this idea, proposing instead that art is fundamentally a *priem* – a device or technique – whose primary function is *deautomatization*.

Similarly, Jakobson's essay on artistic realism begins with a critique of earlier art history, which he defines as "causerie" that "knows no precise terminology" (Jakobson [1921] 1987, 19). A third famous example can be found in the opening of Yuri Tynianov's "Literaturnyj fakt" (1924, first under the title "O literaturnom fakte" [On the literary fact]; Eng. trans. "Literary Fact", 2019), where he interrogates established definitions of literature and genre.

Paradoxically, however, Russian formalist terminology is itself far from unambiguous. Key terms often lack consistent definitions across different texts, and the movement produced no comprehensive glossary. Even when definitions appear – such as in the "Index of Literary Names and Terms" in Shklovsky's *O teorii prozy* (1925; Eng. trans. *Theory of Prose*, 1991) – they are strikingly laconic and lack theoretical elaboration. For instance: "Art = a way to experience the making of a thing, to give a sense of the thing as vision, not as recognition; Defamiliarization of the image = a technique of seeing ('non-recognition'); Device – passim – art"<sup>2</sup> (1925, 179ff).

Furthermore, this terminology was not static; it evolved over time, with the same concepts being redefined by different authors, or even by the same author at different stages. As Peter Steiner highlights in *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (1984), many of the movement's central concepts were inherently metaphorical, further complicating their interpretation. Given these intrinsic challenges, the translation of formalist terminology becomes a critical issue.

From a broader perspective the problem of translation in the humanities is deeply intertwined with questions of cultural history, conceptual transfer, and the migration of theories. While the transnational circulation of the formalist paradigm is partially documented, its history remains incomplete. This study focuses on one underexplored avenue: the translation of formalism in the Hispanic world. By addressing this gap, it aims to enrich both the global history of formalist thought and our understanding of the center-periphery dynamics inherent in translation of literary theory.

This article is divided into three parts. First, we discuss translations and editions of formalist texts in the Spanish-speaking world, with special attention to intermediary sources. Second, we analyze strategies for translating core formalist terminology, including terms such as story-plot (*fabula-siuzhet*), device-motivation (*priem-motivirovka*), *skaz* (a narrative technique often based on oral stylization), and *byt* (everyday life, in contrast to literature and art). Finally, we examine the peculiar history of the Spanish translations of Boris M. Eikhenbaum's article "Literaturnyj byt" (1927; Span. trans. "El ambiente social de la literatura", 1972; Eng. trans. "Literary Environment", 1971).

## RUSSIAN FORMALISM IN THE SPANISH-SPEAKING WORLD: TRANSLATIONS AND EDITIONS

The Western reception of Russian formalism is a complex, multilayered history, fundamentally transnational in character. French structuralism – significantly shaped by intellectuals such as the Bulgarians Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva, and the Lithuanian Algirdas Julien Greimas – played a central role in its global reception, alongside the contributions of Slavic émigrés such as Roman Jakobson, René Wellek, Victor Erlich, Ladislav Matejka, and Krystyna Pomorska. German, Italian, and North American scholarship also proved decisive in translation, disseminating and reinterpreting formalist thought (Erlich 1955; Todorov 1965; Lemon and Reis 1965; Shklovskij 1966; Striedter and Stempel 1969, 1972; Matejka and Pomorska 1971; Jameson 1972; Bann and Bowlt 1973; Di Salvo 1973; Hansen-Löve 1978; Steiner 1984). Recently, the comprehensive volume edited by Michał Mrugalski, Schamma Schahadat, and Irina Wutsdorff (2023) has provided a fundamental reassessment of these transnational dynamics.

In the Spanish-speaking world, this reception was conditioned by the absence of a consolidated Slavic studies tradition and the region's relative distance from the main routes of academic migration in Europe and the Americas. This placed it at a disadvantage compared to countries like France, Italy, Germany, or the United States. In Spain, this situation was exacerbated by the isolation of the Franco regime (Guzmán Tirado 2024, 16). In Latin America, the institutionalization of Slavic studies was even more delayed, and with the exception of centers in Cuba and Brazil, such programs remain underdeveloped to this day (Gomide 2024; Puñales-Alpízar 2024; Belousova and Méndez 2024; García Bonillas 2024). Consequently, formalist thought often circulated through intermediary languages, and since the source language of translation was frequently unspecified, reconstructing its precise pathways remains problematic.

Despite these limitations, a considerable corpus of formalist texts became available in Spanish from the 1970s onward. The most influential was the Spanish translation of Tzvetan Todorov's *Théorie de la littérature* (Literary theory, 1965), published as *Teoría de la literatura* by the Argentine press Ediciones Signos (1970). This short-lived but influential Buenos Aires publisher was later absorbed by the Ibero-American press Siglo XXI Editores (García 2011, 149). The translation was prepared by Ana María Nethol, an Argentine scholar who studied literature at the Universi-

dad Nacional de La Plata and later pursued graduate studies in linguistics at the Sorbonne (for more biographical details, see Reta 2022). With more than ten reprints, this volume has remained the most widely circulated and cited reference on Russian formalism in the Spanish-speaking world. It is noteworthy, however, that the Spanish translation did not entirely supplant the French anthology, which continued to exert influence. In 1984, José Domínguez Caparrós observed that “to grasp the essentials of the literary theory of the Russian formalists, one must set aside the Spanish version of the anthology that T. Todorov translated and edited in French” (276).

That same year, *Formalismo y vanguardia: Eikhenbaum, Tinianov y Chklovski* (Formalism and the avant-garde: Eikhenbaum, Tynianov, and Shklovsky, 1970; 2nd ed. 1973) appeared in Madrid. This compact anthology, prepared by the Marxist intellectual group Equipo Comunicación, brought together three texts available in Todorov’s collection (“Teoriia formal’nogo metoda” [Theory of the formal method, 1927] by Eikhenbaum, “Art as Device” by Shklovsky, and “O literaturnoj evoliucii” [On literary evolution, 1927] by Tynianov) along with one additional essay by Tynianov (“O kompozicii ‘Evgeniia Onegina’” [On the composition of *Eugene Onegin*, 1921–1922] first published partially in an Italian translation in 1967, first fully published in Russian in 1974). The source languages of the translations are not specified, but it seems clear that the source for the first three essays was Todorov’s anthology (as the edition reproduces his *notes du traducteur* and frequently uses French transliteration for proper names and literary texts). Tynianov’s article on the composition of *Eugene Onegin* was, in turn, rendered from Vittorio Strada’s Italian version published in *Strumenti critici* in 1967: the Spanish text reproduces Strada’s notes, including their typos. The translations were prepared by Agustín García Tirado (Eikhenbaum, Shklovsky, and Tynianov) and Juan Antonio Méndez (Tynianov). The Spanish formalist scholar Cristian Cámara Outes demonstrates the group’s considerable difficulties in integrating formalist thought into their theoretical program, largely due to the dominance of Jakobson’s structuralist reinterpretation of Russian formalism during this period (on the group’s history and publishing activity, see Barreiro and Albarrán 2025; on their reception of formalism, see Cámara Outes 2026).

Subsequent Spanish publications included books by Tynianov, Vladimir Propp, and Boris Tomashevsky. Tynianov’s *El problema de la lengua poética* (1972; *Problema stikhotvornogo iazyka*, 1924; Eng. trans. *The Problem of Verse Language*, 1981), translated by Ana Luisa Poljak<sup>3</sup> for Siglo XXI, was produced from the Italian version. Although this is not explicitly stated, the Italian title appears in the edition alongside the original Russian one (López Arriazu 2010, 17). Propp’s *Morfología del cuento* (1971; *Morfologiia skazki*, 1928; Eng. trans. *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1958, 2nd ed. 1968), translated by Lourdes Ortiz, is explicitly identified as a translation from French. Finally, Tomashevsky’s *Teoría de la literatura* (1982; *Teoriia literatury*, 1925; Literary theory), translated by Marcial Suárez, does not specify its source language but clearly derives from Italian: the translation closely follows the syntactic and lexical choices of Maria di Salvo’s Italian version (1978), includes her notes, and uses the Italian transcription for Russian citations. (In her influential article on Toma-

shevsky as *formalist oublié*, Catherine Depretto cites only the Italian and German translations, apparently unaware of the Spanish edition; 2018, 14n2).

The recourse to Italian intermediaries is particularly noteworthy. Italian Slavic studies were strong, and the political ties between the Italian Communist Party and the Soviet Union made Italy a crucial conduit for Russian culture – as exemplified by Vittorio Strada’s delivery of the *Doctor Zhivago* manuscript to Feltrinelli for publication (1957). Moreover, the Italian intellectual scene of the 1960s fostered close collaboration between leading structuralists (Umberto Eco, Cesare Segre) and Slavists (Remo Faccani, Vittorio Strada), who knew each other well within structuralist circles. In 1969, Eco and Faccani published *I sistemi di segni e lo strutturalismo sovietico* (Sign systems and Soviet structuralism), a landmark volume of translations that facilitated the dissemination of Russian formalist and structuralist thought across Romance-language academic contexts (on formalism in Italy, see Larocca 2016).

The importance of Italian translations extended beyond mere availability, reflecting broader ideological affinities. As Paula Barreiro López and Juan Albarrán Diego demonstrate, the members of Equipo Comunicación relied heavily on Italian materials and sustained an intense dialogue with Italian Marxism, engaging key figures from Antonio Gramsci to Galvano della Volpe and Armanda Guiducci (2025, 295, 301n7). This reliance was substantial: nearly 25% of Comunicación’s publications were translations of Italian volumes, most published by Editori Riuniti. The brothers Juan Antonio and Alberto Méndez, members of the group from its beginning, had studied in Italy and maintained direct contact with Riuniti editors (Albarrán 2025). The ideological climate is vividly illustrated by the cover of the second edition of *Formalismo y vanguardia* (1973), which features an image of Lenin surrounded by soldiers and red flags. While not always regarded as a central hub in global cultural exchange, Italy played a pivotal role in transmitting Russian theoretical thought to the Spanish-speaking world.

In the 1990s, Emil Volek, a Czech Hispanist who went into exile after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (for more biographical details, see Belousova 2021, 198, 208–212), published his two-volume anthology *Antología del formalismo ruso y del grupo de Bajtín* (An anthology of Russian formalism and the Bakhtin group, 1992; 1995). As Volek explains, the project aimed to “deliver to the Hispanic reader the formalist and post-formalist texts in a cleaner form and grounded in a consistent interpretation of their terminological system” (1992, 14). It is important to note that Volek, as a translator and interpreter of Russian formalism, developed his work in direct contact with Czech structuralism, including its reception of Russian Formalism. Translated directly from Russian, the anthology was an important milestone. Yet, because the project – conceived in the 1970s – materialized two decades later, its impact was limited, as scholarly interest in formalism and structuralism had already begun to wane.

In the 21st century, several new translations have appeared. In 2010, Dedalus Editores (Buenos Aires) published a new translation of Yuri Tynianov’s *El problema de la lengua poética*. Prepared by the Argentine Slavist Eugenio López Arriazu, this edition

was translated directly from the Russian. Beginning in 2017, Cristian Cámara Outes has been publishing direct translations of Russian formalist texts with Ediciones Asimétricas (Madrid), in the special collection *Sdvig. Textos de las vanguardias rusas* (Sdvig: Texts by the Russian avant-garde). Among these publications is a volume of Shklovsky's writings on literature and art, which includes "Art as Device" ("El arte como procedimiento", 2021). The *Sdvig* collection represents a significant and innovative contribution to the ongoing reception of Russian theory in Spain, substantially expanding the corpus of Russian avant-garde texts available to Spanish-speaking readers.

For a comprehensive description of the reception of Russian formalism in the Spanish-speaking world, it is essential to consider not only translations but also the critical studies that shaped the understanding of this theoretical discourse. Spanish intellectuals likely first encountered Russian formalism through Victor Erlich's monumental study *Russian Formalism: History–Doctrine* (1955), translated by Jem Cabannes as *El formalismo ruso: historia-doctrina* (1974). Likewise, Antonio García Berrio's *Significado actual del formalismo ruso* (The current significance of Russian formalism, 1973) played a significant role in disseminating and explicating formalist ideas. The translations of Shklovsky's later works also contributed to this broader intellectual landscape. While we only briefly acknowledge these materials here, they point to promising avenues for future research.

### FORMALIST TERMINOLOGY IN SPANISH TRANSLATION

As established in the previous part of this work, the translation of Russian formalist texts into Spanish unfolded in two distinct stages: an initial phase during the structuralist heyday of the 1970s and 1980s, characterized by a reliance on French and Italian intermediary sources; and a second phase, beginning in the 1990s with Emil Volek's direct translations from Russian and later continued by scholars such as Eugenio López Arriazu and Cristian Cámara Outes. This trajectory not only enriches our understanding of formalism in a transnational context but also provides a valuable case study for a paradigm in translation studies that foregrounds the long-overlooked phenomenon of indirect translation. While indirect translation research has primarily focused on literary works (Pięta 2017), its dynamics are equally crucial to understanding the circulation of theoretical concepts. As Alexandra Assis Rosa, Hanna Pięta, and Rita Bueno Maia argue, the study of indirect translation helps illuminate "the complex role of intermediary centres in the cross-cultural transfer between peripheries" (2017, 113). In this part of the article, we analyze several core formalist terms across both indirect and direct translations to explore the implications of this trajectory.

Numerous formalist concepts – such as *ostranenie* (defamiliarization, making strange), *dominantna* (the dominant), *sdvig* (shift), *literaturnost'* (literariness), and *ustanovka* (orientation) – would merit detailed analysis. For the purposes of this study, however, we concentrate on a core micro-system of key terms whose translation poses particular challenges: *fabula* (the story, or the chronological/logical sequence of events), *siuzhet* (the plot, or the artistic arrangement of events as presented

in the narrative), *priem* (the device, or the deliberate deformation of material), *motivirovka* (the motivation or justification of the device), *skaz* (a narrative technique often based on oral stylization), and *byt* (everyday life, in contrast to literature and art).

The first four terms were introduced by Shklovsky and later adopted by Eikhenbaum and other formalists; Eikhenbaum himself developed *skaz* as the principal device of plotless prose and *byt* as a concept that introduces a sociological dimension into literary functioning. His emphasis on *literaturnyj byt* (the literary milieu or environment) further highlights its mediating role between literature and everyday life. Taken together, these terms form a coherent set – beyond the widely known *ostranenie* – and justify our analytical focus, as each presents significant translational difficulties. The primary difficulty in translating them lies in the need to convey their position within a system of conceptual oppositions, without which their meaning remains obscure.

As previously noted, a major challenge in translating formalist terminology derives precisely from this systemic and evolutionary character. It is systemic because the meaning of each term is defined by its position within a network of theoretical oppositions. It is evolutionary because these meanings shifted over the course of the movement’s development. For instance, the fundamental dichotomy between art and life generates a series of subordinate conceptual pairs, as outlined by Peter Steiner (1984, 48):

<b>art</b>	<b>byt (everyday life)</b>
de-familiarization	automatization
teleology	causality
device	material
plot (sjužet <sup>4</sup> )	story (fabula)

Within this structure, a term like *siuzhet* is unintelligible in isolation; its meaning is contingent on its opposition to *fabula*. This very relationship is itself a specific manifestation of the broader opposition between artistic construction and raw material. Similarly, *byt* in this context signifies more than “everyday life”; it represents the unorganized raw material of experience against which art actively defines itself. This systemic logic extends to other key pairs, such as the relationship between *priem* and *motivirovka*.

Let us now examine how the terms *priem*, *motivirovka*, *skaz*, *fabula*, and *siuzhet* have been rendered in key Spanish translations.

The following table illustrates the translation choices across several key Spanish editions, alongside the corresponding Russian terms and their French and Italian equivalents from Todorov’s anthology and its Italian version (Todorov 1968; the anthology was translated by Gian Luigi Bravo, Cesare De Michelis, Remo Faccani, Paolo Fossati, Renzo Oliva, Carlo Riccio, and Vittorio Strada):

Russian term	<i>priem</i> (device)	<i>motivirovka</i> (motivation)	<i>fabula</i> (story)	<i>siuzhet</i> (plot)	<i>skaz</i> (narrative technique)
Tzvetan Todorov (1965)	procédé	motivation	fable	sujet	récit direct
Italian translation (1968)	procedimento	motivazione	fabula	intreccio	skaz
Ana María Nethol (1970)	artificio, procedimiento	motivación, causa	trama	argumento	relato directo
Agustín García Tirado (1970)	procedimiento	motivación	fábula	tema	relato directo
Marcial Suárez (1982)	procedimiento	motivación	fábula	trama	skaz
Emil Volek (1992)	procedimiento	motivación	fábula	siuzhet	skaz
Cristian Cámara (2021)	procedimiento	motivación	fábula	argumento	skaz, relato oral <sup>5</sup>

While Ana María Nethol’s Spanish translation of Todorov’s anthology follows the French source closely, it introduces several consequential terminological shifts. The first concerns the rendering of the key formalist concept *priem*. Nethol employs two different terms – *artificio* and *procedimiento* – to translate it. Although both are possible equivalents, in the text they are used indiscriminately and intermixed, to the point that the centrality and terminological coherence of the concept dissipate. Rather than functioning as theoretical terms, they begin to read as merely descriptive words. This inconsistency is particularly striking in the case of Shklovsky’s essay, whose title appears as “Arte como artificio” in Nethol’s translation, even though the term *artificio* occurs only once in the body of the essay, where *procedimiento* is used in all other instances. As a result, the title loses its terminological force and introduces unnecessary confusion.

The second shift concerns the rendering of the French *fable* as *trama*. This choice is problematic because *trama* is the standard term in Spanish literary theory for “plot” – the very concept designated by the Russian *siuzhet* (compare Marcial Suárez’s later translation, which renders *siuzhet* as *trama*, following the Italian *intreccio*).

The third shift involves the translation of *siuzhet* as *argumento*. In Spanish, *argumento* typically denotes a story’s summary or general premise, a meaning that foregrounds narrative content rather than discursive construction. This lexical choice obscures the formal, constructive nature of the *siuzhet*. Consequently, the foundational formalist dichotomy becomes conceptually unstable for the Spanish reader, articulated through terms whose conventional meanings are counterintuitive to the original theoretical distinctions.

The translation of *skaz* as *relato directo* appears to be a literal equivalent of the French *récit direct*. However, a crucial paratextual note from Todorov is lost: the French edition explicitly states, “Nous traduisons ainsi le terme russe *skaz* (N.d.T.)”<sup>6</sup> (1965, 54). The Spanish version omits this clarification, making it impossible for the reader to connect *relato directo* back to the original Russian concept. This omission is not an isolated incident; Nethol’s translation systematically leaves out several of Todorov’s explanatory notes (Domínguez Caparrós 1984, 274). Moreover, her rendering can easily be mistaken for a simple synonym of direct speech (*discurso directo*), thereby erasing the nuanced specificity of *skaz* as a stylized narrative mode that constructs a distinct “speech mask”. This conceptual opacity is further compounded by the omission of the index included in the French edition, a crucial tool for tracing terminological networks, whose absence further disconnects the reader from the conceptual architecture of formalism. It is difficult to understand the rationale behind these omissions and terminological decisions, which obscure the coherence of the formalist system. In any case, the cumulative effect resembles a game of telephone: the double mediation of translation results in subtle yet significant distortions of the original concepts. This phenomenon may be partially explained by Todorov’s own translational strategy, since he provides the Russian terms only sporadically. By contrast, Italian editions – typically prepared by Slavists rather than literary theorists – include the original terminology in transliteration far more consistently, thereby offering readers a more stable conceptual anchor.

The practical repercussions of these decisions become evident in the translated text. Consider the following passage (Todorov’s lexical choices are indicated in parentheses):

La composición se vuelve diferente si el argumento [le sujet] – combinación de motivos y de sus causas [motivations] – deja de desempeñar el papel organizativo, es decir, si el narrador se coloca delante y se sirve del argumento [du sujet] únicamente para ligar los procedimientos [procédés] estilísticos particulares. El centro de gravedad del argumento [du sujet], reducido ahora al mínimo, es transferido a los procedimientos del relato directo [les procédés du récit direct].<sup>7</sup> (Shklovsky in Todorov 1970, 159; cf. Todorov 1965, 212)

Here, the consistent use of *argumento* for *sujet* (*siuzhet*) and *relato directo* for *récit direct* (*skaz*) systematically obscures the theoretical relationships. A more nuanced loss occurs with the term *motivirovka*. The French edition translates this as *motivations*, retaining the idea of narrative justification. However, the Spanish version renders it here as *causas* (causes), also in other contexts Nethol uses *motivación*. This shift reduces a sophisticated literary device – the internal *justification* for a narrative device (*priem*) – to a mere logical or psychological *cause*, misrepresenting the formalist concern with artistic motivation by conflating it with an external logic of causality.

Another translation based on Todorov’s anthology – Agustín García Tirado’s – partially reproduces the same problems. The translator renders *skaz* as *relato directo*, again with no explanatory note. He also translates *sujet* as *tema* (theme), a term even further removed from the original meaning than *argumento*. Marcial Suárez’s translation, by contrast, proves more consistent. Because he follows the version produced

by the Italian Slavist Maria Di Salvo, the terminology remains coherent and it becomes possible to reconstruct the underlying system of terms and meanings.

In direct response to the challenges posed by indirect translations from French, Emil Volek made a deliberate decision to retain some of key terms in their transliterated form: *skaz*, *fábula*, and *siuzhet*. This approach, which aligns with Lawrence Venuti's concept of foreignization (1995, 19ff), is explicitly justified in his introduction. Volek argues that

Russian formalism created a terminology that was at times “difficult”, and was thus resisted even in its original context. Many of these terms became internationalized precisely because the proposed translations were inadequate. Therefore, in our version, we have also preferred to retain a group of Russian terms, generally already widely disseminated, rather than seeking a translation that could give rise to misunderstandings. (1992, 14)

His method prioritizes terminological fidelity and the preservation of the original theoretical system over immediate readability.

Cristian Cámara Outes (*fábula/argumento*) navigates the tension between foreignization and domestication by creating more intuitive pairs that strive to avoid the conceptual inversions. His work represents a compromise, seeking to make the theory accessible without fundamentally misrepresenting its core dichotomies.

## MULTIPLE TRANSLATIONS OF EIKHENBAUM'S “LITERATURNYJ BYT”

To conclude our analysis, we shift from the central narrative categories to the concept of *byt*, a notion that evolved within the formalist framework. We briefly examine the reception of Boris Eikhenbaum's seminal essay “Literaturnyj byt” (1927), a work that marked a decisive turn in formalist thought by emphasizing the social dimension of literature. The reception of this essay in Spanish follows not so much a linear trajectory of interpretations as a series of isolated and parallel efforts.

To date, three independent translations can be identified – one of which exists in two distinct versions:

- 1a. Emil Volek's translation, first published in 1972 in the Chilean journal *Problemas de literatura* (Eichenbaum 1972);
- 1b. a revised version of Volek's translation, reissued in his 1992 anthology (Eichenbaum 1992);
2. a translation by the Colombian scholar of Russian origin, Marina Kuzmina, published in 2004 in *Literatura: teoría, historia, crítica* (Eichenbaum 2004);
3. a recent translation by Danila Andreev, Spanish scholar of Russian origin, published in 2024 in *Vremennik russkogo formalizma* (Eichenbaum 2024).

The translators propose different solutions to the key term, reflecting the conceptual instability surrounding it. Volek's first translation (1972), *la vida socio-literaria* (socio-literary life), emphasizes the institutional and collective aspects of the concept and the contrast between life and art, central to formalist thought. Two decades later, in his revised version (1992), he chooses *ambiente social de la literatura* (the social environment of literature, possibly influenced by the English translation as “literary environment”), foregrounding context rather than raw material. Kuzmina

(2004) renders the term as a calque of the Russian – *la cotidianidad literaria* (literary everydayness) – thereby highlighting routine and daily practices, though somewhat blurring the formalist distinction between art and extra-artistic life. Andreev (2024) likewise adopts *la cotidianeidad literaria* (literary everydayness) but adds *material socio-literario* (socio-literary material), combining the emphasis on everyday life with explicit attention to the raw social matter against which literature defines itself.

This multiplicity raises an important question: what does it actually signify? In established academic traditions, retranslations typically emerge from sustained critical engagement with a canonical text, often as part of a dialogue that refines or disputes earlier versions. In this case, however, the evidence points in another direction. A close reading of the translations and their paratexts shows that each was produced in isolation, without awareness of preceding Spanish attempts. Kuzmina (Eichenbaum 2004, 305n\*) explicitly describes Eikhenbaum’s essay as *olvidado* (forgotten). Andreev (2024, 177n1) discusses the translation problem, but only in relation to the English rendering (literary environment), not to earlier Spanish versions. The essay’s absence from Todorov’s influential anthology meant it was repeatedly “rediscovered” by scholars seeking to fill a gap in the available canon, but these isolated efforts never converged into a shared reception.

The reasons for this fragmentation lie less in theoretical disagreement than in the material limits of circulation. Volek’s pioneering 1972 translation appeared in a Chilean journal that disappeared from distribution after the Pinochet coup, resurfacing only with its recent digitization. His 1992 anthology, though published by the respected press Fundamentos, never achieved the widespread circulation of Todorov’s volume. Kuzmina’s 2004 version, now available online, was originally published in print with limited regional reach. Most tellingly, Andreev’s 2024 translation makes no reference to the earlier ones, a clear indication of their invisibility.

## CONCLUSION

This study has traced the trajectory of Russian formalism into the Spanish-speaking world by analyzing routes of circulation and translation strategies for key theoretical terms. The findings reveal a reception conditioned by processes of mediation, adaptation, and uneven transmission, with circulation often hindered by material and political constraints. Three interrelated observations emerge from this analysis.

First, the standard narrative of Russian formalism’s reception – often centered on its French diffusion – requires substantial nuancing. While French structuralism undoubtedly formed the theoretical landscape of Spain and Latin America, the Italian channel proved equally consequential. This reliance on Italian intermediaries stemmed not only from the strength of Italian Slavic studies but also from specific political affinities within communist intellectual cultures. The absence of direct translations from English, despite the prominence of Anglophone formalist scholarship, further illustrates that the routes of theoretical exchange depend on a complex interplay of cultural proximity, intellectual networks, and material conditions rather than linguistic dominance alone. Crucially, this shows that indirect translation does not necessarily proceed from a more “central” language, complicating our understanding of how cultural relations and theoretical lineages are constructed.

Second, the practice of indirect translation, though pragmatic, came at a considerable conceptual cost. The comparison of Spanish translations reveals how strongly mediation determined – and often distorted – the reception of formalist theory. French mediation, especially through Todorov’s influential anthology, introduced a domesticating logic that normalized terminology into familiar theoretical vocabulary, flattening oppositions central to the formalist system. Spanish translators who relied on this intermediary inherited these distortions, producing problematic renderings – *trama* for *fabula*, *argumento* or *tema* for *siuzhet*, *relato directo* for *skaz* – that obscure the conceptual mechanics of the theory. The loss of paratextual notes, omission of indexes, and terminological instability created a “broken telephone” effect, producing a representation of formalism marked by conceptual fragility.

By contrast, Italian Slavist scholarship generally adopted a more foreignizing method, preserving transliterated Russian terms and maintaining relatively consistent terminological networks. When Spanish translations were based on Italian intermediaries rather than on Todorov’s more domesticated renderings, the resulting conceptual transfer tended to remain closer to the original system. This comparison underscores a central point: the choice of intermediary strongly influences the degree of terminological continuity. Whether a translation adopts domesticating or foreignizing strategies directly affects the possibility of reconstructing the original conceptual framework through an indirect translation.

Third, the case of Eikhenbaum’s article on *literaturnyj byt* demonstrates that the availability of multiple translations does not necessarily ensure sustained impact or continuous critical engagement. The prominence of the Todorov/Nethol anthology – from which Eikhenbaum’s essay was absent – meant that the text had to be repeatedly “rediscovered” by scholars seeking to address a gap in the canon, although these recoveries remained scattered rather than forming a consolidated tradition. This suggests that canonical formation in translation depends not only on availability but also on the institutional and material contexts that determine which texts circulate widely and which remain marginal.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Искусство — это мышление образами. Эту фразу можно услышать и от гимназиста, она же является исходной точкой для ученого филолога, начинающего создавать в области теории литературы какое-нибудь построение” (Shklovskij 1919, 101).

<sup>2</sup> “Искусство = способ пережить делание вещи, дать ощущение вещи, как видения, а не как узнавания; Остранение образа = приём видения («неузнавания»); Прием — *passim* — искусство.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian, French, Italian and Spanish are by the authors of this study.

<sup>3</sup> Ana Luisa Poljak Zorzut – better known as Ana Goldar, an Argentine professor who went into exile in Spain in 1975; for further biographical details, see Falcón 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Steiner’s transliteration is used.

<sup>5</sup> Cámara Outes has also devoted an article to the concept of *skaz* (2019).

<sup>6</sup> We are thus translating the Russian term *skaz*.

- <sup>7</sup> “The composition becomes different if the *argumento* [le sujet] – a combination of motifs and their causes [motivations] – ceases to play the organizing role, that is, if the narrator comes to the foreground and uses the *argumento* [du sujet] only to link particular stylistic *procedimientos* [procédés]. The center of gravity of the *argumento* [du sujet], now reduced to a minimum, is transferred to the *procedimientos* of direct narration [les procédés du récit direct].”
- <sup>8</sup> The authors extend their gratitude to Igor Pilshchikov, Cristian Cámara Outes, Giuseppina Larocca, and Juan Albarrán Diego for their help and comments. We also wish to thank the anonymous peer reviewers and the editors of this volume for their thoughtful feedback.

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