

## LET US TALK ABOUT SUGAR

ANNA PONOMAREVA  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

anna.ponomareva.13@ucl.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** This article explores the idea of simplicity from three different angles: translate-simplify, write-simplify and teach-simplify. It is a practice-based rather than desk-top research. One specific tutorial is chosen to illustrate the pedagogy adopted on the subject which blends translation studies and comparative literature. The title of this presentation has been borrowed from a popular brochure *Your Health Your Pharmacy* (2022). One of its articles advertises the replacement or reduction of sugar by maple syrup in people's daily intakes. This text is used in my practical translation classes at UCL where I teach technical, scientific and medical translation modules to Master students who specialise in translation from English into Russian. The popular style of this publication is chosen to discuss the issues of simplicity and clarity in translation. For example, examining the idea of maple syrup as an attractive, all-natural sugar alternative is a good start for developing the students' understanding of topics related to language for specific purposes and various readerships. Our closer look at the source text has provided unexpected results which lead to an unusual conclusion that "Perhaps the All-There-Is is not all there is" (Popova, 2014). This gives me an opportunity to talk about *The Edge of the Sky: All You Need to Know About the All- There-Is* (2014). The story is written by Roberto Trotta, my former colleague from Imperial College London. It exemplifies and highlights important issues in today's popular semi-specialised writing, in particular the use of the 1,000 most common English words without compromising on clarity and depth of scientific descriptions related to astronomy and cosmology. Trotta's methodology is further examined in the field of translation. The focus is on checking the students' translation of *Let's Talk About Sugar* (2022) in which the key role of popular terminology is underlined.

**Keywords:** medical translation; Translation Studies; applied translation; pedagogy.

## 1. Introduction

At the time of submitting my abstract, to address the call of the European Society for Translation Studies and to participate at a conference on *Translate, Write, Simplify* (2022) at the University of Udine, I was inspired by the example of my former senior colleague at the Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication at Imperial College London, Professor Roberto Trotta. He wrote a popular book on astrophysics, *The Edge of the Sky* (Trotta, 2014), in which the complex scientific terms and concepts of this academic discipline were successfully introduced to his new audience of young readers. In November 2022, just before the conference, *Novelist as a Vocation*, the English translation of a book originally written in Japanese by Murakami (2015), was published in the UK. This book provided additional help in shaping the arguments of my paper. In a way, inspired by Murakami, this article is written in the style of autobiographical essays in which my teaching experience of practical translation modules at UCL is exemplified and analysed. It is an attempt to discuss and self-evaluate several pedagogical issues raised at one practical session on medical translation. *Let's Talk about Sugar* was one of the texts used during the session. There were three students in my group for English into Russian translation modules at the UCL Centre for Translation Studies in 2021-2022. I believe that they are my co-authors in this article. Examples from their translations of the text illustrate various points related to the fourth term which can be added to the name of our conference in Udine, namely 'to teach'. Thus, my contribution can be understood as part of the suggested methodology, *Translate, Write, Teach, Simplify*.

## 2. Background: The Edge of the Sky and Novelist as a Vocation

Trotta's book title is much longer than mentioned above. The title is divided into two parts by a colon: *The Edge of the Sky: All You Need to Know About the All-There-Is* (2014). What is before the colon specifies the subject of the book. However, what is after the colon looks like a strange phrase in which 'all' is used twice. Additionally, its meaning is also mystified as the second time the pronoun 'all' is used in the three-word descriptive type phrase 'All-There-Is' and the definite article 'the' is positioned in front of a hyphenated expression. As nothing follows this catchphrase, it is possible to assume that it might be the spelling of an unusual word. Meanwhile, 'the' offers a suggestion that 'All-There-Is' can be denoted as an abstract concept. Then the puzzled reader opens the book and reads about the author's self-imposed restriction on using only the one thousand most common words in English while describing astrophysics to children. In the book, 'the All-There-Is' is a term, a substitution which complements the child's vocabulary and stands for 'the Universe'.

Maria Popova, an essayist, author and poet, reviewed *The Edge of the Sky* on her website *The Marginalian* (2014). There she names Randall Munroe (in her terminology "NASA-roboticist-turned-comic-creator") as a person who introduced Trotta to the idea of "illuminating complexity through simplicity". When Popova discusses this concept (see her *The Actual Algebra of Finding Your*

*Soul Mate*, 2014) it becomes clear that the notion is balanced with the scientist's scepticism and openness.

Simplicity as a methodological tool has attracted Trotta and his *The Edge of the Sky* provides a good example of its utilisation. If it works for the popularisation of science, why not try this tool in translation?

Murakami's book *Novelist as a Vocation* (2015) was published in English in 2022, about half a year after I finished teaching my course on medical translation in the academic year 2021-2022. However, this novel becomes important to my research as it presents opportunities for writing about my teaching by imitating Murakami's style of distancing from one's own experience, analysing it and providing commentaries.

His type of writing in *Novelist as a Vocation* does not have any resemblance to self-publicism. It is a different technique. There is no emphasis on the agent of doing something: the author is not the central figure there. Instead, there is an emphasis on the doing itself. Thus, for example, in one of the eleven essays of his book, Murakami explains his first experiment in writing a novel. The essay is called *When I Became a Novelist* (2022: 18-35). The triad "translate, write, simplify" appears there. Murakami applies it to his first literary experiment when he struggles to find ways in writing a novel. The episode is related to making an experiment and writing the opening of his novel *Hear the Wind Sing* (Murakami 1987/1979) in English:

My vocabulary was severely limited, as was my command of English syntax. I could only write in short, simple sentences. Which meant that, however complex and numerous the thoughts running around my head, I couldn't even attempt to set them down as they came to me. The language had to be simple, my ideas expressed in an easy-to understand way, the descriptions stripped of all extraneous fat, the form made compact, and everything arranged to fit a container of limited size. [...] As I struggled to express myself in that fashion, however, a distinctive rhythm began to take shape. (Murakami 2022: 29)

The decision to use a foreign language to write his first novel produced unexpected results. Murakami managed to remove several obstacles in his thoughts and feelings articulated in Japanese when he was trying to express them in English. He argues:

It also led me to the realization that I could express my thoughts and feelings with a limited set of words and grammatical structures, as long as I combined them effectively and linked them together in a skilful manner. Ultimately, I learned that there was no need for a lot of difficult words – I didn't have to try to impress people with beautiful turns of phrase. (Murakami 2022: 30)

Here, to a large extent, Murakami operates with the trio 'translate, write, simplify'. It is possible to see similarities between his idea of simplicity and Munroe's, which has been described by Popova (2014) as the presence of balancing the act of scepticism and openness. Additionally, perhaps to make his arguments even more substantial, the Japanese novelist names another author who has succeeded in developing her own style through writing in a foreign language. It is Ágota Kristóf

(1935-2011), a Hungarian writer who wrote in French. After pointing to her example, Murakami makes a controversial statement. He argues that in spite of several constraints and just indication of his ideas, composing in a foreign language brings something new and positive into the process. To him, these restrictions help him secure his own creative rhythm.

### 3. The Source Text: Let's Talk about Sugar (2022)

It is the title of a two-page text, about 400 words, taken from a popular brochure *Your Health: Your Pharmacy* (National Pharmacy Association 2022) in my local pharmacy in Harrow. The choice of this text was not random as diabetes is one of the most common diseases in the UK. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2020) estimates that by 2025, more than 5 million people in the UK will be diagnosed with diabetes. Additionally, even amongst the four members of the English-Russian translation module, two had family members with diabetes. So, in addition to analysing the three versions made by my students of this translated text, talking about sugar was also beneficial for us on a personal level.

**LET'S TALK ABOUT SUGAR**

**It's true, us Britons love sugar, so much so that most of us are eating more than we should.**

While the occasional sweet treat can be part of a balanced diet, over time eating too much of the sweet stuff could have an impact on our health. Eating well as part of a healthy lifestyle can help to keep you well and reduce the risk of poor health in the future.

Cutting back on the amount of sugar we eat is a step towards a healthier, more balanced diet. Swapping ingredients such as highly refined sweeteners with minimally processed alternatives from nature, such as maple syrup, can mean you use and eat less.

Pure Canadian maple syrup is a natural sugar made from tapping and boiling the sap collected from the vast maple forests around the province of Québec. It has no artificial colours, flavours or preservatives and contains naturally occurring vitamins (riboflavin) and minerals (copper, manganese, potassium).

It is rich in the mineral manganese, which helps to look after the bones and connective tissue.\* Maple syrup is also rich in riboflavin (vitamin B2), which helps to reduce tiredness and fatigue\* and is a source of copper, which is an important mineral that supports the nervous and immune systems and contributes to iron transport in the body.\* Maple syrup is also source of potassium. Potassium contributes to normal muscle function, normal blood pressure and the nervous system\*.

**Favoured by athletes**

Maple water or syrup, with an equivalent carbohydrate content found in commercial sports drinks (60g/l), has been clinically tested to show similar efficacy compared to consumer sports drinks and can readily be used as a source of energy during endurance exercise. Pure maple syrup beverages offer an excellent alternative to commercial drinks as they do not contain any refined sugars, are gluten-free, vegan and free of any colouring or additives.

**And by chefs**

The complex flavours of maple syrup are expressed in subtle accents of caramel, berries and wood, lending it unique gastronomic qualities to many classic recipes. The simplicity and purity of maple syrup makes it an attractive, all-natural sugar alternative.

**A little goes a long way**

Reduce your sugar intake in cooking and baking by choosing a natural, unrefined alternative. Maple syrup is well suited to replace and reduce the quantity of sugars you consume as a little goes a long way while still packing a flavourful punch.

To learn more about maple as a natural alternative and source of energy, visit [www.maplefromcanada.co.uk](http://www.maplefromcanada.co.uk)

\*as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle

**MAPLE CONVERSION CHART**

SUGAR TYPE	RATIO	ADVICE
Caster sugar	1 part (100g) SUGAR = 1 part (100ml) MAPLE SYRUP - 1/4 part (25ml) LIQUID	Reduce liquid content by 25ml per 100g sugar replaced. If baking, consider reducing the oven temperature by approx 10 °C
Golden syrup	1 part (100ml) SUGAR = 1 part (100ml) MAPLE SYRUP - 1/4 part (25ml) LIQUID	As maple syrup is runnier than golden syrup, you may also wish to reduce the liquid content to maintain texture and consistency
Other liquid sugars e.g. date syrup	1 part (100ml) SUGAR = 1 part (100ml) MAPLE SYRUP	Maple syrup is a suitable 1:1 replacement for most liquid sugars

**maple from Canada**

**Figure 1.** « Let's Talk About Sugar » from the popular brochure *Your Health: Your Pharmacy* (National Pharmacy Association 2022 : 110-111)

The presence of “let’s” in the title of this brochure can be interpreted as an invitation to join a conversation about sugar: the phrase is a hortatory subjunctive which has encouraging or summoning functions. Thus, from the beginning, the reader does not have the option to stay away from participating in the proposed talk. In addition to its calls for a possible exchange of ideas, the title suggests the topic of

conversation: sugar. However, the appealing stress-free subject of the title starts building ways to more complex concepts related to the establishment and maintenance of a healthy and balanced diet. The substitution of sugar for maple syrup is recommended straight away. The swop is simple, but it is necessary to justify and introduce it at least briefly.

Here, an interesting decision is made: a different layer is added to the text. The article is not printed on a clear white page, but on the wintery image of a remote village in the woods which is covered in snow and surrounded by bare trees. In contrast, in the bottom right corner of page 111 there is the picture of a brightly coloured maple leaf with ‘the maple from Canada’ sign written in white. This elegant and magic transportation to Quebec maple groves has been done with the help of colours (white is used for snow and various shades of yellow associated with maple syrup are applied to houses, tree trunk outlines, the title and subtitles of the sections and the link to the website of Quebec maple syrup producers) and pictures. In other words, the design of the text is simple but meaningful. Meanwhile, the reader is not there only to appreciate the symbolism of colours and images which are used to set a scene for the story. The word-based layering of the multimodal text also introduces the reader to a palette of minerals and vitamins.

#### 4. Bits and Bolts of the Original and its Target Texts

As mentioned earlier, controlled vocabulary is a feature of other simple texts. For example, in his book, Trotta (2014) restricted himself by deciding to use only the 1,000 most common words. So, it might be a good idea to analyse the range of words used in *Let's Talk about Sugar* (2022). Please see the diagram of repeated words below<sup>1</sup>:



Figure 2. Repeated words

The figure illustrates the range of words in the original text. It shows that the fifteen most repeated words appear from 2 to 12 times. Meanwhile, the

<sup>1</sup> Technical restrictions are responsible for the reduction of the third item in the range of repeated words from ‘maple syrup’ to its ‘maple...’ representation on the diagram.

frequency of these words has not been analysed in the target texts made by my three students. There are reasons for this. In the diagram, an asterisk is used to point that the translation into Russian operates with various synonyms of words such as 'health', 'sweet', 'flavour' and 'help'. It shows that the density of repetition in the original, which is about 16 percent (or 63 out of 404), is slightly reduced in Russian by the diversification of meanings associated with the listed fifteen categories. This happens because the notion of good style in Russian is different from its understanding in English. English aims to achieve clarity with the help of repetition, but Russian tries to do the same with numerous specified details. So, it appears that the early proposed idea of connecting simplicity with vocabulary restriction and the use of repeated words might not work that well in different languages as it does in English.

The small sample from the text is selected as our data sample. It includes four subtitles which name the appropriate sections of the text. The first sentence of the brochure can be classified as either a long opening statement or an extremely expanded subtitle. Three other subtitles are particularly short, consist of positive information and emphasise different angles of looking at the substitution of sugar with maple syrup. They are all presented in the same colour. It is one of the shades of colour associated with maple syrup. The special meaning of this specific feature of the text reveals the elements of advertisement included in the text. In this way, the additional layer is created. Thus, its multimodality is expanding. It grows in various directions: in terms of its depth, there are text and image layers; in terms of its width, there is an informative text with elements of advertisement.

The first title states the following: "It's true, us Britons love sugar, so much so that most of us are eating more than we should." In this sentence, 'Britons' sounds too formal, given the informal context of the message. It can be argued that the English text aims at establishing a direct link with its readers; the use of the emphatic form 'us Britons' aims at achieving the phatic function and establishing a contact with the specific readers it addresses, that is, the British people. The communicative intent of the text is to raise awareness among British people on the use of sugar, also as a preventive measure against the increasing spread of diabetes.

The two variants of translation of the phrase 'us Britons love sugar' suggested by my students [back translation is provided for the words in italics] are exemplified below:

*мы любим сахар* = we

*мы, британцы, любим сахар* = we, British

The first one applies omission: 'Britons' is removed from the target text. The student who suggested the use of this translation procedure decided that if the Russian translation was intended for Russian people living in the UK, removing the reference to British nationality would allow for a greater inclusivity of readers, including many immigrants who do not have British citizenship. Moreover, by omitting 'Britons', the translated text avoids the complex historical connotations that the term has. Indeed, according to *Britannica*, it indicates "one

of a people inhabiting Britain before the Anglo-Saxon invasions beginning in the 5th century AD”, who did not derive from the Celts, but were an “indigenous population”.<sup>2</sup> The omission was thus done with the deliberate intent of avoiding any direct reference to one’s nationality, i.e. for the sake of simplicity and inclusivity.

The next variant translates ‘Britons’ as ‘British’. This option can also be classified as simplistic. However, its rationale is different: the proposed substitution makes the original message straightforward and uses the standard term for people’s nationality who live in the UK.

The next subtitle is *Favoured by athletes*. It has three versions which are listed below with their back translation:

- 1) Предпочитается спортсменами = preferred by athletes
- 2) Фаворит спортсменов = athletes’ favourite
- 3) Выбор атлетов = athletes’ choice

The syntactic diversity of these subtitles in Russian can be justified by the translators’ decision which is related to the peculiar form of the third subtitle. It looks like the list of beneficiaries identified in the second subtitle, *Favoured by athletes*, continues in the third subtitle, *And by chefs*. However, in the second subtitle, the three translators use one of three synonyms formed from ‘to prefer’, ‘to favour’ and ‘to choose’ as their direct translation of ‘favoured’. Coining the meaning of ‘favoured’ they determined to find a simple and suitable solution in order to decode the original meaning and to preserve it in their target texts.

As it has been argued before, the third title adds other recipients who benefit from swapping sugar with maple syrup. They are chefs or cooks. ‘And by chefs’ is translated as:

- 1) И поварами = and by cooks
- 2) И шеф-повара = and of a chef
- 3) Совет от поваров = advice from chefs

If one combines the second and the third subtitles into a phrase, it is possible to see that the first translation reads more naturally and smoothly. Meanwhile, using ‘cooks’ instead of ‘chefs’ reduces the managerial function of chefs and their professionalism to the more traditional and routine job of cooks. The second and the third version of the subtitle provide evidence on how challenging it is to preserve the original style in the target text. The idea that chefs are different from cooks is there – both translators operate with ‘chefs’ – but it is not packed nicely. The second translator changes the plural form of ‘chefs’ into a single form, or the single noun ‘chef’. The third translator adds ‘advice’ as the description of chefs’ activity. This immediately contributes to the extra meaning of ‘favoured’ as the second and the third subtitles complement each other.

The last subtitle of the original article *A little goes a long way* has the form of a complete sentence in which subject and predicate are easily identifiable.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Briton>.



Meanwhile, it is possible to see there the presence of idiomatic characteristics: it is compact and talkative. The three translations offer three different versions in Russian; each is based on its own rationale and implements a unique translation procedure:

- 1) Немного – достаточно = a little is enough
- 2) Экономичный расход = economic consumption
- 3) Мал, да удал = little pigeons can carry great messages

The first translator acknowledges what has been encoded in the original title and makes attempts to decode the idiomatic-style message in Russian. The target language expression is not a set phrase in Russian, but its lexis and syntax form a slogan-type sentence. The second translator does not seem to recognise or believe in the idiomatic value of the fourth subtitle. However, his or her message in Russian is clear and straightforward. It might be that using 'consumption' there, instead of 'spending' sounds a little bit controversial. The third translator uses substitution: the Russian idiom, which corresponds to the English idiom, is related to the unusual power of little birds in delivering important messages. Overall, the third version is the example of simplicity which everybody can understand and accept. It is not plain or naïve but effortlessly meaningful.

My relatively small data sample, which consists only of four subtitles, shows that it is challenging to find simplistic solutions on word and sentence levels in Russian in order to preserve the clarity of the original in English.

I also tried to look at the notion of simplicity from a different perspective and suggested to discuss possible changes in the target text if our translation blob required a change of readership, that is, if we were to prepare a version of this brochure for children. In this way, the popular messages in the original text might become even more popular in the target text as its audience is different and consists of young people who are less knowledgeable in health issues, in particular those related to healthy food.

Students were asked to write their comments or reflections on the proposed adjustments in their target texts if their audience is changed from adults to children. One of these observations<sup>3</sup> is below:

- If I were translating this document for an audience of children, I would exclude the maple conversion chart, as this is not something a child would be interested in. Perhaps, instead, I would include pictures that would visually convey that maple syrup can replace other, less healthy types of sugar.
- I would not include all the names of vitamins and minerals that maple syrup contains. For instance, I would more generally write that maple syrup simply contains more vitamins and minerals than sugar.
- I would try to find more child-friendly alternatives to concepts like 'highly refined', maybe something along the lines of 'produced in a factory'.

<sup>3</sup> They belong to the same student whose translation of subtitles is identified as the first translation in my examples.



- I would not include the ‘favoured by athletes’ bit, as children are unlikely to consume isotonic drinks. In many countries, their consumption is banned for children. For instance, in Russia, isotonic drinks can only be given to children who play sport professionally or follow a professional programme, and only after a consultation with a doctor. Hence, I do not think this part is helpful for a general audience of children.

Out of the four points suggested above by Student One in my group, two other students also mentioned the maple conversion chart in their comments but suggested renaming it, for example as *How to replace sugar with maple syrup*. According to them, the descriptive style of naming the chart will be more suitable for children as they might not be familiar with convention charts. The idea of applying omission to translate specific vitamins and minerals was also welcomed by the rest of my group.

We had a nice discussion related to the final point in the observations provided above. Isotonic drinks or energy drinks has been a big topic in Russia for many years. The issue has its own history. Moreover, they might be banned in different regions of the country as well as in different time periods. Additionally, these drinks are part of religious debates, for example in Chechnya (see Ferris-Rotman 2011).

Overall, my class dedicated to discussing the translation of the popular brochure. *Let's Talk about Sugar* into Russian and the change of its audience was an interesting experiment to address the notion of simplification.

## 5. Conclusion

This article addresses several issues discussed in the publications of Montalt and Conzález-Davies (2007) and Crezee, Hautekiet and Rura (2021), but it is different from them. On the one hand, it aims to report on one specific experiment which takes the form of a practical translation class, part of a Master Degree Programme in Translation and Technology at the UCL School of European Languages, Cultures and Society. On the other hand, it provides insights into teaching this session by focusing on the notion of simplicity as a methodological tool in translation. The idea has been borrowed from the writings of Trotta (2014) and Murakami (2022) who deliberately decided to restrict themselves in using complicated vocabulary and worked hard on creating their own language and style to communicate with the reader. It looks like the trio of ‘write, translate and simplify’ appeals to both authors in spite of the fact that they work in different literary genres. Their intention to achieve transparency without reducing their thoughts to bald and boring statements sets up an example for me and directs my attention to experiment with the same triad of ‘write, translate and simplify’ in my teaching.

A popular brochure *Let's Talk about Sugar* from a patient information booklet taken from a local pharmacy is chosen as my trial text. The original is written in English which can be understood by non-specialists. As discussed before, it is a multimodal text in which information is delivered through verbal and visual

messages. It is also a hybrid in terms of its text type as several factual elements have some advertising features.

My students were asked to make translations into Russian with the same communicative effects as their original in English. Their work is not discussed in my article in its entirety, but a small sample is selected. This data includes only four subtitles which name each section in *Let's Talk about Sugar*. They have the form of largely simply phrases or sentences. The analysis of these captions stimulated our discussion in class on the notion of simplicity and its connotation in different cultures. For example, my group of students did not consider that it would be possible to preserve the same number of repetitions from the original in English in their translations into Russian. So, the maintenance of simplicity on word level might be problematic. Meanwhile, there is evidence in our sample that stylistic simplicity is possible by preserving, for instance, the idiomatic structure of the message.

An attempt was made to look at simplicity from a different perspective. Students were asked to reflect on the quality of language if the translation of this text is commissioned for a younger audience. Here our obstacle was not the special language for children but a certain class of sugar beverages, the so-called energy drinks, which might be banned to children in Russia for health and religious reasons.

It appears that 'to simplify' as a methodological tool opens various topics to discuss during my practical translation classes and enhances the students' educational experience. Thus, it will be appropriate to expand the trio of 'write, translate, simplify' by adding a fourth member to it, 'to teach'.

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