Breakfast, Birds, and Biscuits: Teaching Intercultural Reading through Student Poetry Translation

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Dialogue of Cultures in Challenging Times

Starting point

This talk is about the translation of Rita Dove's ***Dawn Revisited***

The poem builds its message through an ordinary morning scene:

- a bird outside
- an oak tree
- the smell of breakfast
- someone cooking "down there"

My question is:

What happens when Ukrainian students translate these everyday details?

Dawn Revisited
by Rita Dove

Imagine you wake up
with a second chance: The blue jay
hawks his pretty wares
and the oak still stands, spreading
glorious shade. If you don't look back,

the future never happens.
How good to rise in sunlight,
in the prodigal smell of biscuits -
eggs and sausage on the grill.
The whole sky is yours

to write on, blown open
to a blank page. Come on,
shake a leg! You'll never know
who's down there, frying those eggs,
if you don't get up and see.



Rita Frances Dove (born August 28, 1952) is an American poet and essayist. From 1993 to 1995, she served as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Source: Wikipedia.

Copyright Credit: Rita Dove, "Dawn Revisited" from *On the Bus With Rosa Parks*. Copyright © 1999 by Rita Dove.

Why this poem is useful for teaching

Dawn Revisited is difficult because ordinary words carry cultural meaning.

The poem asks us to imagine a new beginning:

waking up “with a second chance”

This hope is made concrete through:

- sound
- smell
- food
- a domestic space
- another person already cooking

So translation becomes a test of careful reading.

Corpus

The material comes from a student translation contest in 2024.

Category 1:
Translation of an English-language poem into Ukrainian

The corpus contains:

70 Ukrainian student translations of the same poem

Since all students translated the same source text, we can compare how they handled the same cultural details.

Main idea

I focus on four “scene anchors”:

- **blue jay**
- **oak**
- **biscuits**
- **eggs and sausage on the grill**

I call them “scene anchors” because they help build the world of the poem.

They answer basic questions:

- Where are we?
- What kind of morning is this?
- What can we hear?
- What can we smell?
- Who else is present?

What I looked for

For each item, I asked:

Did the translation keep the same scene?

The main types of solutions were:

- keeping the item (oak - дуб)
- replacing it with a similar item (blue jay – синиця/tit)
- making it more general (eggs and sausage – сніданок/breakfast)
- making it more Ukrainian (biscuits – пампушки/pampushky)
- omitting it

The point is to see how small choices change the poem’s world.

Oak: the stable item

Oak was the easiest and most stable item.

In **67 out of 70** translations, students translated it directly as:

дуб [oak]

Two translations shifted the focus to oak leaves:

дубове листя шелестить [oak leaves rustle]

листя дубове [oak leaves]

One translation omitted the oak.

So oak was not a major cultural problem.

It worked as a useful baseline for my analysis.

Blue jay: mostly kept, but sometimes changed

Most students (over 50 out of 70) kept the bird in the jay family.

Common choices included:

синя сойка [blue jay]

блакитна сойка / сойка блакитна [blue jay]

сойка [jay]

There were also more poetic variants, for example:

сойка небокрила [sky-winged jay]

сизойка синьокрила [blue-winged jay]

These usually preserve the bird and the color.

When the bird changes, the scene changes

Some students replaced the blue jay with other birds.
Examples:
горобчик [little sparrow]
соловейко [little nightingale]
синиця / синичка [tit] / [little tit]
сорока [magpie]
ґава [crow]
A nightingale adds song and lyric beauty.
A sparrow or tit may sound more tender and local.
A magpie or crow adds different cultural associations.
So the bird changes the tone and the scene.

The crow

Прозріння на світанку

Прокидаєшся, аж раптом – другий шанс,

Ґава кряче в синяві

(Insight at dawn
You wake up, and suddenly — a second chance,
The crow caws in the blue [sky])

(*Translations that offered such adaptation often made many changes.*)

Original poem:

Imagine you wake up

with a second chance: **The blue jay**

hawks his pretty wares







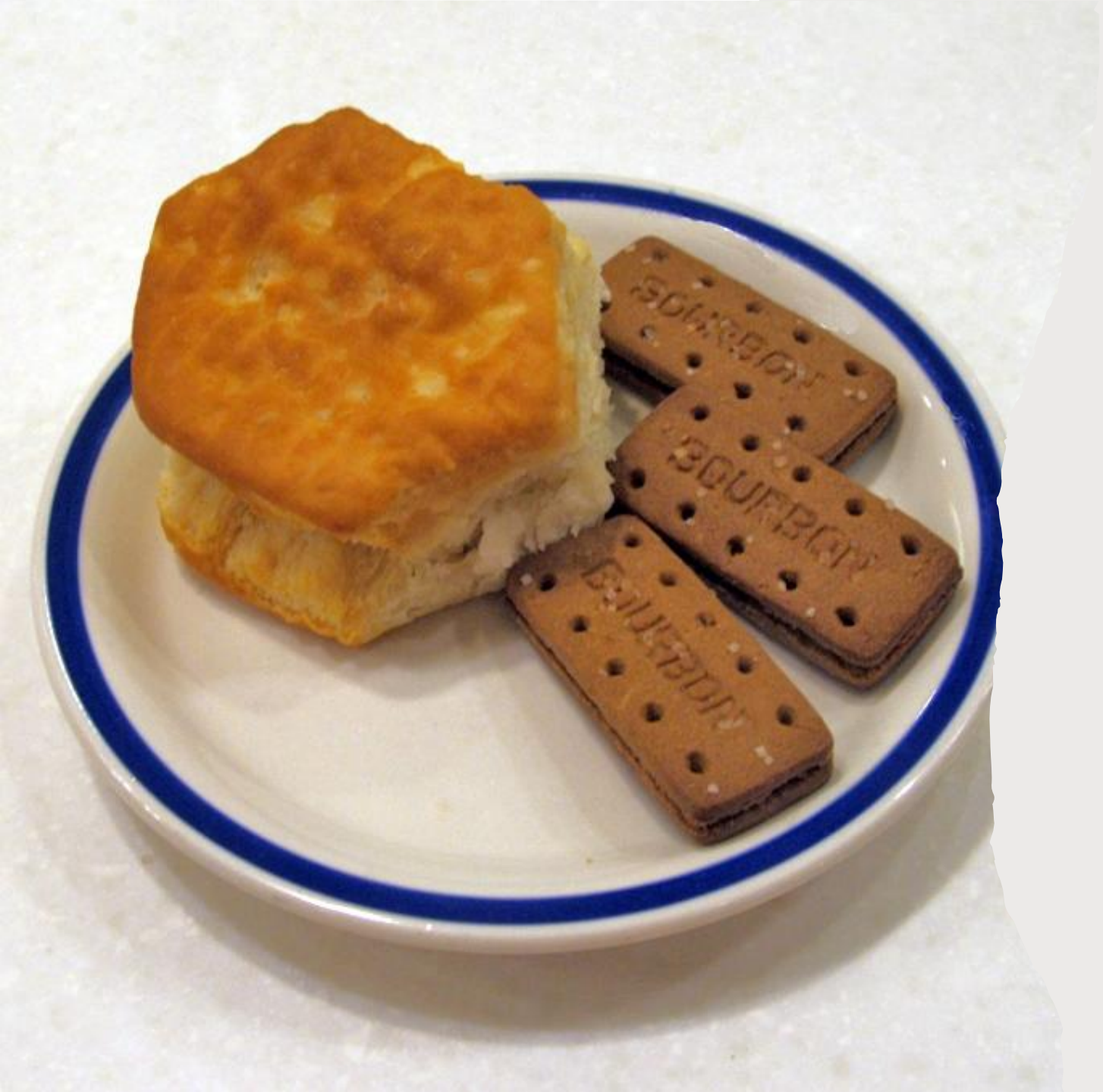


Teaching point

A useful classroom question:
What does the new bird bring into the poem?
For example:
соловейко [little nightingale]
This may sound beautiful in Ukrainian.
But it makes the scene more lyrical and song-like than the original.
Another example:
сорока кличе, чорнява цариця
[the magpie calls, a dark-haired queen]
This is vivid, but it adds strong imagery not present in the source.

Biscuits: the most difficult item

Biscuits was the most unstable item.
In American English, in this context, **biscuits** are a breakfast food.
But many Ukrainian solutions moved toward sweet food.
In **39 out of 70** translations, biscuits became sweet or cake-like.
Examples:
печиво [cookies] (American English)
бісквіт / бісквіти [sponge cake(s)]
коржики [small sweet biscuits / shortcakes]
This changes the smell of the scene.
A savory breakfast becomes more like a bakery or dessert smell.



BISCUITS

Image: Sander, L. (2009, October 12). *BiscuitsAmerican&British.png* [Image]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BiscuitsAmerican%26British.png

Other solutions for biscuits

Some students chose bread-like solutions:

хліб [bread]

булочка [bun] [roll]

These keep the breakfast feeling better than sweet “cookies” or “cake.”

Some made the item more general:

випічка [baked goods]

сніданок [breakfast]

смаколики [treats]

Some made it more Ukrainian:

пиріжки [filled buns] [small pies]

пампушки [pampushky]

млинці [pancakes]

These versions change the cultural setting, but they may still keep the idea of warm morning food.

Eggs, sausage, and grill

Eggs and sausage were easier than biscuits.
Eggs appeared in **53 out of 70** translations.
Common choices:
яєчня / яєшня [fried eggs] / [scrambled eggs]
яйця [eggs]
Sausage appeared in **51 out of 70** translations.
Common choices:
ковбаса / ковбаски [sausage] / [small sausages]
сосиски [frankfurters] [hot-dog sausages]
The harder word was **grill**.

Grill: keeping the cooking scene alive

Grill was translated directly in **32 out of 70** translations:
гриль [grill]
But in **25 out of 70**, the cooking surface disappeared.
Other solutions moved the scene indoors:
плита [stove]
сковорода [пательня] [frying pan]
Or to another heat source:
вогонь [fire]
мангал [barbecue grill] [brazier]
This matters because the poem shows breakfast being made now.

The key teaching lesson

The breakfast scene works as a bundle.

Students need to notice four things:

1. What food is there?
2. Where is it being cooked?
3. Is cooking happening now?
4. Is someone else present “down there”?

The poem’s hope depends on this lived scene.

Someone is already awake. Something is cooking. Life is continuing. Get up and see.

That is why small details matter.

Conclusion

The study shows a clear pattern.

Some items are stable: **oak → дуб**

Some items need careful cultural reading:

blue jay - because bird substitutions change tone and place

biscuits - because false friends can turn breakfast into dessert

grill / frying / down there - because the poem needs a domestic scene

For teaching, the main question is:

What scene does your translation create?

This helps students move beyond word-for-word translation towards intercultural sensitivity through close reading.