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Subversive Neutrality: An Interactional Phenomenon of Translation-in-Talk*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the phenomenon of interpreter's neutrality. The examination is conducted in the interactional register, in a syncretic union of two co-extensive methods: conversation analysis and pragmatics. Applying this method to an analysis of some naturally-occurring translation-in-talk, I argue that, unlike previously held views on neutrality as an abstinence from action, neutrality is a particular kind of action that manifests itself in the interpreter's interactional position within the translated talk. More specifically, an investigation of various resources available to the interpreter singles out the first-person speech as a formal prerequisite for the neutral stance of the repeat provider.

Keywords: Neutrality, translation-in-talk, ethics, interactional footing, conversational action, repeat

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is situated within the field of consecutive interpreting.[1] In focus is a specific aspect of this activity, neutrality. Neutrality has enjoyed persistent attention on the part of translation researchers. Some have even defined it as the key

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problem of the field (Dimitrova 1997; Linell 1997). The reason for this potential significance lies in the presumed nature of the interpreting event, namely, the transfer of the linguistic, that is, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic matter from one linguistic code to the other as well as the consequentionality of this activity (Bowen 1989; Al-Shabab 1996; Hale 1997). Unlike written translation, the end result of which is a fixed text available to a comparative scrutiny, oral translation requires an explicit and immediate indemnity against likely contamination of the linguistic transfer (Keith 1983).

In this regard, the research on the interpreter's neutrality has advocated two co-extensive approaches: psychological and intercultural (Tijus 1997; Land 1994). Here, the interpreter is neutral when he/she is a differential and linguistically competent professional (Anderson 1994; Layton 1985). Once involved in the process of translating, the ideal interpreter acts as a cultured house help, who suspends his/her judgment, if not personality, while being faithful to the translated utterance, his/her master. From this perspective, neutrality is not an action in itself but a withdrawal from action or a collapse of the original action with the translated one (Wadensjo 1997). The end result of this view is well known: the interpreter renders himself or herself invisible; hence a loss of transparency and accountability for her actions (Venuti 1995). A drive to ethics in the neutral mode turns into an ethical liability of action.

In this presentation, I argue that neutrality is indeed an action; moreover, it can be discovered in the structure of the translation-in-interaction. At the same time, this action is elusive as it is explicitly inter-actional. The emphasis indicates a particular phenomenal field for the investigation of interactional neutrality in bilingual interpreting, translation-in-talk. I therefore investigate the translator's action within the systemic constraints of translation-in-talk. In turn, the phenomenal field is set to benefit from a syncretic method of conversation analysis pragmatics. In contrast to synthesis, syncretism creates a co-determinate structure that allows the human researcher to keep two or more perspectives simultaneously open.[2] The reason for this merger is twofold. Since, for my argument, I lean in on the

actual data, a recording of a translated event, conversation analysis is instrumental in identifying the sequential organization of translation-in-talk. The task of pragmatics is then to show how the participants make sense of this organization through locally deployed means of producing conversational action (Heritage and Atkinson 1984). In this approach, co-constituted conversational action becomes the main unit of analysis. I elaborate on the concept of dual conversational action in the next section.

2. Production of Neutrality: Methodological Issues

In the traditional understanding, conversational action is an expression aimed at achieving a specific goal in the interaction. It is not a uniform concept but exhibits a hierarchy, which manifests in the sequential size of the action as well as the mode of its production (Crow 1994). Briefly, the smallest unit is called a conversational act. A single utterance or several turns may contain a conversational act, as that which "belongs" to an individual speaker. At the interactional level, the next smallest unit is conversational sequence. Known in conversation analysis as "adjacency pair," a conversational sequence requires a contribution of two or more participants. Such adjacency pairs as "greeting/greeting" or "question/answer" are typical examples of a conversational sequence (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977). The next two types of conversational action are conversational segment and conversational episode. The difference between them is considered as quantitative: conversational segment is a smaller topical unit that contributes to the overall accomplishment of a conversational episode, which may comprise an entire conversation. I argue that our intuitive ability to segment talk endows it with a qualitative dimension; moreover, the intermeshing of this dimension is tight enough to give a conversational action an interactive orientation; after all, even statically orientated discourse linguistics readily accepts that the semantics of segment and episode differ radically from the semantics of their act and sequence.[3] Thus, in its logic and participant orientation, a conversational act is always already

interactional. I retain and develop this presupposition in the analytical part of the paper.

The pragmatic emphasis on the extended context confirms the interactional character of the analyzed unit by defining it in terms of "the immediately local configuration of preceding activity in which an utterance occurs, and also the 'larger' environment of activity within which that configuration is recognized to occur" (Drew & Heritage 1992: 18).[4] For the concepts that set boundaries for this larger environment of activity of translation-in-talk I take frame, footing, and contextualization cues. Social actors always act toward something. Their future orientation suggests that they also act out of the previously constituted cognitive, behavioral, and communicative frames with their respective positions and dispositions. In addition to frames, pre-existent interpersonal relations come to constitute specific interactional trajectories (Greatbatch 1992). It is by moving along these trajectories that an interactionally built conversational action acquires its context-specific meaning. For the same reasons of its context-sensitivity rather because of some linguistic complexity that the translated event is considered to be consequential. Before I proceed to discussing structural consequentionality of contextual matters, I would like to describe the general mechanics of translation-in-talk. For the purposes of economy, I suggest that we limit the mechanics to its very basics: the turn-taking systematics specific to translation-in-talk.

Anyone who has ever witnessed an event of consecutive interpreting immediately develops an intuitive sense that this peculiar kind of interaction is extra-ordinary. Most simply, the extra means more labor: as in an extra person in an interaction that ordinarily could have taken place without this person and an extra tongue, or code. Conversationally speaking, if we follow the general rules for talk established by Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974), we will notice significant deviations from these rules. As I have pointed out above, these deviations arise from the imperative for the translator to mediate the inaccessibility of communication for all the parties involved. On the other hand, structurally, mediation is embodied by the translator's turn

designed to repeat the preceding turn by changing its code. Unlike the function of the repeat in the ordinary talk, where it serves clarification purposes for the otherwise clear and unimpeded interaction, the repeat in translation is a necessary condition. For the structure of translation-in-talk this feature means that the order of turns in translation-in-interaction is fixed. Also, as a repeat, the translator's turn has a pre-assigned location. It always follows the turn of a monolingual party. We might say that the translator's turn imposes a particular interactional pattern, "non-translator party first//translator next." This pattern is remarkably different from other speech patterns that may coincide with the former one.

In addition to a transformed turn order, translation-in-interaction demonstrates various interactional constraints and preferences. The strongest constraint for translation-in-talk is spatio-temporal: the activity limits the turn size to no more than several complete utterances. The presumption that stands behind this constraint refers to the correlation between the size of utterance and the possibility of its fulfillment. Less strong preferential constraints involve the duration of translation-in-talk as well as its continuous production. Obviously, translated talk cannot go on indefinitely: the activity wears out both the translator and the participant. With these constraints in mind, the translated talk is typically launched as a purposive talk; hence, the pragmatic extension to the structural outfit. Finally, translation-in-talk exhibits an additional preference for self-selection and self-repair (Schegloff et al. 1977). The extent to which interactional position of the translator's turn, conversational mechanics and their constraints alter the basic parameters of the ordinary conversation allows us to consider translation-in-talk as a deviant speech exchange system that can be roughly defined as mediated interaction. In order for this interactional frame to function properly, that is, systemically consistently, the participants must maintain their respective positions or footings, which, in turn, are marked out by manifest contextualization cues.

According to Goffman (1981), footing is a specific position in an interaction that an interactant assumes in order to produce a

meaningful joint action. One footing may encompass several interactional roles that a person takes in relation to his/her utterances ("author," "principal," "animator"). For translation-in-interaction, the translator's footing is linked to that of the previous interactant as a repeat, making him/her animator or rather re-animator of the previously produced utterance. The concept of footing is especially pertinent in an institutional setting where the interactants act in accordance with the specific positions in their professional environment (Drew & Heritage 1995). Any deviation from that position is dispreferred; however, this dispreferrence is seriously augmented in a formal environment. In the case of a translated speech event, if the translator stops translating the other's assessment and starts proffering his own, unless her elaborations meta-comment on the process of translating, the shift will most likely cause sanctions (Layton 1985). Importantly, the sanctions will target not the use of the translator's opinions given in the form of assessments but rather his/her inappropriate footing in the context where the emphasis is on the collaborative construction of corresponding institutional identities (Anderson 1994). From this perspective, the translator's appropriate footing can be defined as that of the repeat provider. The presupposed action of the repeat in translation-in-talk will be to replicate the syntactic, semantic, and lexical composition of the previous turn by switching from one code to the other consistently throughout the interaction, allowing for minimal loss to content and its register.

Vulnerability of the translated content to manipulations and alterations during the code-switching operation requires a linguistic analysis of that linguistic matter which helps the translator maintain his/her footing. Such an analysis can be conducted in terms of contextualization cues, or those "micro contextual features" that help the participants maintain their footing (Gumperz 1982: 162). Contextualization cues are the milestones of talk; being manifestly accessible, they help the participants stay on the joint path. Most prominent contextualization cues are linguistic pointers or "deixis" defined as a "indicating reference" (Levinson 1983: 54). Three main types of indexicals play a role in the analysis: *person deixes* (the

role that the speaker assigns to him/herself or others in a speech event; expressed by personal pronouns, e.g., "I," "we," "they," etc.), *place deixes* (the spatial characteristics of the physical space as relative to the speech event; expressed by adverbs of place, e.g., "here," "at home"), and *time deixes* (a specific timeframe; expressed by adverbs of time as well as grammatical tenses). All the indexical expressions are interconnected as a system of referential coordinates, giving talk direction and texture.

The participants employ contextualization cues, footings, and frames as contextual resources that help them align their conversational actions in order to achieve a common conversational goal. My objective for the subsequent analysis is therefore to identify the ways these resources are deployed in the analyzed segment of talk. More specifically, I seek to understand how the neutral act is being constructed; in other words, what communication means are available to the interpreter for acting neutrally. On the strength of the studies of neutrality in monolingual institutional settings, such as news interviews and job interviews (Button 1992; Atkinson 1992; Clayman 1992), I would like to argue that, due to the inaccessibility of the content of interaction to all monolingual parties simultaneously, neither the typical structural parameters of the mediated talk, nor the interviewer's footing are sufficient for determining the neutrality of the translator's action. The structural uniqueness of translation-in-talk and the translator's position in that talk indicate that other means assist the translator in producing neutrality. Elsewhere, I showed the impossibility of reducing communication with the cultural other to the translator's manipulations with two codes/languages.[5] The face-to-face relationship between communicating human beings always overflows the structural constraints of the frame and the footing. We find the overflow with the contextual matters.

3. CONTEXTUAL MATTERS

The matters of context embrace a wide range of items that include time, place, participants, roles, and specific

circumstances. The analyzed recording was made while I was working as a free-lance interpreter with a group of middle-rank police officers from the Russian port city of Khabarovsk; the group was invited for a two-week training program by the International Association of the Chiefs of Police through a grant received from the U. S. Information Agency. The recorded meeting took place some time in April, 2004, at the FBI Regional Bureau located in downtown San Francisco. Present were six Russian police officers, two SFPD police officers, two FBI agents, and two interpreters, including myself, who translated the meeting consecutively. The meeting lasted forty-seven minutes; after I received written permission from all the participants, I recorded it in full. I selected this particular recording because of its quality, duration, and permission to record, but also because of the hearable tension between the interpreter, R, and the head of the Russian group, Lieutenant Colonel C. The tension erupted in the last line of the recorded episode, where R, at the end of his stretch (he was finishing translating the Colonel's previous utterance), turns to me and says: "Take over there is too much bullshit." I suggest that in the next section we examine a stretch of talk that became the first alteration of the trajectory that would lead the talk to this explicit assessment.

4. Suspending Neutrality or "Take Over There is Too Much Bullshit"

Following the earlier distinction between segment and episode, I define the isolated talk as neither. Nor is it a separate frame. This is not to say that the talk is not analytically isolatable. Its location and its internal composition indicate purpose. The talk falls at the end of the directly preceding "assessment" segment thus signifying a transition point for a different frame. The specific markers of the transition include: 1) summary; 2) request for questions, that is, permission to solicit information; and 3) acceptance of this permission by soliciting information. These features designate the stretch as liminal, that is, positioned at the limit of frames, at the point where translation as an exchange system shows itself as itself while it adjusts itself to a correction

for the continual talk trajectory. It is for these reasons that I have selected this talk. Its liminality is capable of disclosing an action that would violate the principle of neutrality.[6]

- From the conversational perspective this principle is based on minimal structural adequacy. In order for the repeat to remain a repeat, it must follow the same convers-actional path (Tannen 1989; Schiffrin 1982). The concept of path presupposes an adequacy of conversational action produced by the speaker and by the translator so that the talk could proceed unhindered. In the absence of such adequacy, talk acquires a different shape, its convers-actional path alters, thus compromising meditated neutrality. This view comes in stark contrast with those translation theories that locate neutrality in lexical, syntactic, and semantic equivalents. As the following stretch shall demonstrate, even with these equivalents in place, talk may falter in its path, change its direction. The repeat can be greater or lesser than the previous speaker's turn, have more or less emphasis, but it only repeats if repeating is the only action delivered by the translator. Neutrality is thus coded in the structural parameters of the repeat. The next segment illustrates how by deviating from this structure the interpreter produces a non-neutral act.

81 1.0)
82D: And that in a in a in a nutshell is pretty much what
83 our arh- case arh- our squad does.
84R: Nu aeto ja vam kratko rasskazal o tom chem nashe
85 podrazdelenije zanjato
Translation lines 84-85): well, this is a brief story about what our squad does
86 1.0)
87D: Do you have any questions?
88R: Est' li u vas voprosy=
Translation line 88): are there any questions?
89C: =yest' (3.0) s professional'noj tochki zrenija
90 cheloveka kotoryj zanimajetsja, ah organizovannoj
91 prestupnost'ju, russkoj aetnicheskoj gruppy 1.5)kak

92 on schitajet chem aeto vyzvanno, (1.5) shto russkije
93 okazalis' libo khitreje libo mudreje vsekh ostal'nykh
94 prozhivajuschikh v San Francisko. Rech' ideut o
95 moshennichestve ob otmyvanije de:neg, o ser'jeuznykh
96 tak nazyvajemykh organizovannykh ustojchivykh grupp
97 kotoryje sovershajut ochen' ser'jeuznyje prestuplenija. (.)
98 Chem aeto vyzvanno?

Translation lines 89-98): yes, from the professional point of view of a person who deals with the organized crime of the Russian ethnic origin, what is his opinion that the reasons for this situation are, that the Russians turned out to be either smarter or wiser than everyone else who lives in San Francisco. I mean in terms of fraud, money laundering, other serious so called organized formations that commit very serious crimes. What is the reason?

99R: The Colonel says eh literally eh since you're an
100 expert in Russian organized crime ah what is your
101 theory uh to explain why you have the Russians
102 outwitted everyone else uh in Bay area in going into
103 big time fra:ud, and money laundering.
104 1.0)
105D: Uh-uh- I don't know if they ah outwitted everybody orr
106 tha- they just this ah one of the- one of the things
107 we've found. is that becuj- because uh de educational
108 system. (.) the former Soviet Union ha:d. (1.0) the
109 Russian criminals, at least the ones that are running
[

110R: Uhmu
111D: these organizations tend to be (.) sharper than some of
[
112R: Uhmu
113D: older groups such as uhm Colombian organized crime or
114 Italian (.) organized crime.
115 1.5)

The stretch of translation-in-talk evolves in lines 82-114 directly following D's overview of himself and his unit (D is the regional FBI section head in charge of the Russian organized crime; R is the translator, and C is head of the Russian delegation). The overview closes the assessment frame that positions the assessor as the primary speaker and the respondent (interpreter) as the secondary one. The recipient constitutes the audience. In lines 82-83, D marks the shift from one frame, that of assessing the duties and responsibilities of his squad, a largely monological activity to the dialogical format by proffering a summarizing statement: "And that in a in a in a nutshell is pretty much what our arh- case arh- our squad does." The poetic error by way of replacing the term "squad" (subject) with the term "case" (object) indicates outward orientation; this is to say, the speaker who tends to make a poetic slippage does not monitor his talk as much as he monitors the activity of talking. After R's turn (lines 84-85) that repeats D's utterance for the Russian party, D invites questions. In line 89, after another translator's turn, C self-selects by taking the turn for a delayed (three-second pause) production of a compound question. Note that C's question contains a partial formulation of D's previous assessments. The use of a formulation is an affiliative device. It is employed to mitigate a potential disagreement by giving the other party a chance to account for the problematic content (Pomerantz 1984). The potential problem is D's assessable that links the ethnic association of the criminals to that of the visiting police officers as in "Russian organized crime." With the help of qualifiers "smarter" and "wiser," C appears to be re-constructing this association in positive terms as a favorable reflection on the

intelligence of the Russian nationals living in the United States. As my colleague summarized what he deemed C's competitive drive in this particular instance, "even in crime, he wants to be the first."

In line 95, R responds to C's question by repeating it as coded in the English language. Neither the structure nor the function of R's response differs from his previous responses. It is still a repeat that features a code-switching operation. However, this turn is radically different from all the other preceding translator's turns since the beginning of this episode. Line 95 breaks the previously established pattern of the first-person speech as R introduces the reported speech performed in the third person. The transition has more than simply stylistic implications. Consecutive translation is commonly performed either in the second or first person speech. Although official interpreting protocols of the US State Department and UN recommend that consecutive interpreting be carried out in the first-person mode, there is no single rule, and many interpreters advocate delivering their repeats in the second-person speech (Gile 1994; Gentile, Ozolins & Vasilakakos 1996). R, a seasoned State Department interpreter, was familiar with the protocol and would typically adhere to the first-person speech. In my subsequent conversation with him he stated the first-person delivery as a personal preference. Moreover, in this episode he did not deviate from the first-person speech up to line 95; yet, in line 95, he chose to switch. Importantly, the switch is performed on C's first full turn.

The CA literature showed that the reported speech is a story-telling device as it involves the role-switching (Mandelbaum 1989). It therefore abandons the formal claim to the first hand knowledge implied by the first-person speech. The reported speech also "contaminates" R's neutral stance of the report repeater as R switches from being "an animator" of the other's words to being somewhat "an author" and "a principal," that is a person who offers an opinion on the basis of the previous speaker's lines. Still a repeat, when performed in the second person, the translator's turn frees room for implicit and explicit assessments of the previous speakers or the content of their talk

(Pomerantz 1980). More importantly, for the translator to produce his own assessment alongside the repeated one means to disaffiliate with the "author" of the previous statement. By default, in a second-order effect, the repeat misaligns and disaffiliates the interacting monolingual speakers.

Let us now examine R's assessment. Lexically, it is given by way of the interjection "literally." The adverb "literally" contains the crux of R's meta commentary. Although, as an assessable, "literally" is neither positive nor negative in itself, its placement and vocal emphasis, as well as the subsequent material endows it with misaligning and disaffiliative qualities of a meta-commentary. The commented matter is the presentational side of the repeat, or the how of interpreting. In contrast to the non-literal way of delivering the previous speaker's material, "literally" serves the purpose of dissociating R's own opinion from the one proffered by the previous speaker. From my own experience, I can imagine the use of other such dissociatives: "as I understand it," or "what has been said." In either case, the pronouncement points to a change of the speaker's position toward the repeated discourse. Further testimony to the disaffiliative character of this position is the use of the membership category, "The Colonel," to designate the speaker. The use of this term in an informal setting, after a round of introductions, is redundant. Note also the placement of this deixical attribution. "The Colonel" appears in the very beginning of R's opening lines, directly preceding the modifying "literally." Together, the dexis of person and the deixis of state cue the participants to the dissociation from the previous speaker's turn and its formalization in the reported speech.

Moreover, R's choice of the term that describes the head of the Russian delegation embeds an opinion, that is, assessment of the speaker himself. As a term of formal address used in a semi-formal, "The Colonel" suggests irony. My knowledge of the context reinforces this interpretation. In contrast to D, who R has just met, but will call by his first name later in the interaction, R has known C and worked with him for a number of days, and, as far as I remember, he has never called C by rank to his face in Russian, reserving it for addressing the Colonel in his absence,

mostly in private discussions with myself and some of the group members. There, the term was used in an explicitly ironic manner. The use of the term "The Colonel" in the code inaccessible to either "The Colonel" himself or the rest of the Russian party makes me believe that it was intended specifically for the English speaking party, including myself, who were able of accessing its other meaning. Thus, by disaffiliating with the previous speaker, R simultaneously affiliated with the English speaking party.[7]

The content of R's repeat contributes to his disaffiliation with C. R's "literal" rendition carries a strong vocal emphasis on the words "outwitted" and "fraud and money laundering." If we compare my translation with R's repeat, we will see that C's assessment does not have an emphasis on "either smarter or wiser." On the contrary, the syntactic structure of "either/or" displays ambiguity. Vocal hesitation markers such as micropauses and in-breaths reinforce C's hesitant delivery. All these markers are removed by R in his turn. Lexically, by rendering the Russian adjectives "smarter" and "wiser" in the verbal form of the English Past Tense "outwitted," R upgrades C's assessment to a fact. He also introduces a potentially ironic characterization of D by upgrading him to "an expert" and requesting from him "a theory" instead of an explanation requested by C. My translation shows that there is no word "theory" or "expert" in C's original utterance. From this moment on, there ensues a growing tension between C and D, a tension that results in the negative meta-commentary that sums up R's stance: °take over there is too much bullshit° ·hhh khhh· (line 794).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I suggest that neutrality should be considered as a specific kind of action. As the above analysis shows, neutrality does not manifest itself in a series of lexical, syntactic, and semantic alterations imposed upon some previously presented material. Contrary to the traditional view of translator's neutrality bearing on maximum linguistic equivalency, only when the

structure of the translator's repeat is compromised, a disaffiliative component is introduced, and only then, in the moment of its withdrawal, neutrality gets exposed. Essentially an interventional concept, neutrality is not exclusively contingent on the translator's professional expertise. By the same token, the frame of translation-in-interaction alone within which the translator interacts does not uphold neutrality either. Nor does the translator's footing: as the analyzed segment demonstrates, there is a variety of means available to the interpreter for keeping the presumed neutrality of the repeat provider. The discussed example shows one such resource, the second-person speech that allows for alternative assessments within the frame of the translated interaction. Neither affiliative nor disaffilitive in themselves, smuggled assessments can perform an affiliative/disaffiliative action when instigated by a specific interpersonal context. Neutrality is thus an ethical enterprise. Consequently, we may theorize that affiliation is a relational action dovetailed into a pragmatic action, and that it is precisely a combination of the two that orients the interpreter to neutrality.

In turn, the first-person speech can be considered as a formal prerequisite for the affiliative action. Speaking in the first person confines the interpreter to veracity not because she intends to be impartial and not because of the accurate rendition of meaning from one language into another, but precisely because she is situated in the first person speech enacting the other in the most personal way. However, even as a formal condition, first-person speech cannot guarantee neutrality of interpreting the other: the mode of performance is important to consider here, for, clearly, even the first-person speech can be given in the ironic tonality expressible non-verbally. Therefore, I would like to conclude by suggesting that we might want to consider the neutral benefits of literality. Approached as an umbrella concept, "literality" could shed light on the possibility of conceiving of interpreter's neutrality as a structural constraint enacted in the performance of the other. I believe that considering literality in the interactional register may yield profound theoretical insights.

NOTES

1. There are several terms that identify consecutive interpreting: oral translation, bilingual interpreting, liaison interpreting, community interpreting, and translation-in-interaction. All of them refer to different facets of the same phenomenon; however, for this study, only the latter term is operational.
2. I borrow the concept of "syncretic analysis" from Polkinghorne (1983).
3. According to Ricoeur (1978), Emile Benveniste should be held responsible for the distinction.
4. A conversation analyst will argue that these objectives are inscribed in the CA program. Mandelbaum, for example, states that both types of analysis, "describing the structure (practices of conversation) and describing interaction (practices in conversation)," are intrinsic to conversation analytic understanding of context (1990: 347).
5. Self-reference: removed for blind review.
6. All the translations outside of the recording are mine. I found it necessary to offer them for a cross-comparative analysis of the linguistic material. In making my re-translations, I placed extra emphasis on the literal rendition of previous utterances.
7. By calling C "the Colonel," R upgrades C's actual rank, which is Lieutenant Colonel. The upgrade is clearly ironic: in the Russian military ranking there is a vast distance between Lieutenant Colonel and full Colonel. The difference between the two ranks manifests itself in both salary and status.

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