
Research Note

Is it "Lévin" or "Lëvin"?

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The issue addressed in the present note concerns the pronunciation of the surname of Tolstoy's semi-autobiographical character in *Anna Karenina*. The form "Lëvin" or "Lyovin"—in contrast to the more traditional "Lévin"—has come to be used with increasing frequency in both Russia and the English-speaking West in recent decades, with this particular pronunciation featured, for example, in the 1967 Soviet film version of the novel¹ and in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Russian Literature*, published in 1981. An earlier instance of this usage can be found in Francis J. Whitfield's 1949 edition of D. S. Mirsky's classic *A History of Russian Literature*, where the two dots over the "e" in "Levin" have apparently been inserted by Whitfield.²

To the best of my knowledge, the most explicit attempt to attribute the "Lëvin" type of pronunciation directly to Tolstoy is contained in a brief comment by N. Lerner³ published in 1921. Lerner reports here that in one of Petrograd's used book stores he had chanced upon, and acquired, a notebook containing Konstantin Leont'ev's handwritten corrections to his celebrated 1890 essay on Tolstoy.⁴ Many of these emendations, Lerner informs us, were taken into account in the subsequent editions of this work (1911 and 1912), but some were not, and Lerner cites several instances he deems significant. The last item in his listing relates directly to the question at hand, and I quote the entire passage:

Еще одна интересная деталь. Всюду в статье толстовской Левин пишется "Лёвин." Так,

несомненно, произносил и Толстой, с которым Леонт'ев не раз встречался и беседовал, и так слышал это имя от самого автора "Анны Карениной." (120)

[[Eshche odna interesnaia detal'. Vsiudu v stat'e tolstovskoi Levin pishetsia "Lëvin." Tak, nesomnenno, proiznosil i Tolstoy, s kotorym Leont'ev ne raz vstrechalsia i besedoval, i tak slykhal eto imia ot samogo avtora "Anny Kareninoi."]]

(One other interesting detail deserves notice. Throughout the essay, Tolstoy's Levin is everywhere spelled "Lëvin." This is undoubtedly also the way it was pronounced by Tolstoy, with whom Leont'ev met and talked on a number of occasions, hearing the name in this particular form directly from the author of *Anna Karenina*.)

Lerner's use of the adverb "undoubtedly" [nesomnenno] reveals the hypothetical nature of the case he makes for the "Lëvin" format. Because Leont'ev must have heard Tolstoy pronounce the name in that particular way, Lerner argues, he must have reproduced it in Tolstoy's manner. Both propositions surely invite scepticism, especially in view of the fact that the meetings between Tolstoy and Leont'ev were both rarer and less friendly than Lerner's formulation suggests. The massive two-volume chronology of Tolstoy's activities compiled by N. N. Gusev records only a single meeting, dating it in 1890 (I: 752-3), and while there is evidence of two earlier visits of Tolstoy by Leont'ev, the novelist has given us a rather sour comment on them.⁵ It of course re-

mains perfectly possible that the name Levin/Lëvin could have been mentioned at one or more of these occasions, but there is absolutely nothing in the available record that could give credence to Lerner's conclusions.

Attempts to derive the pronunciation from the textual history of Anna Karenina as well as from various linguistic considerations have also proved inconclusive. Thus N. N. Gusev in his *Lev Tolstoi: Materialy k biografii s 1870 po 1881 god* points out that the surname of Tolstoy's protagonist evolved from "Ordynsev" to "Lenin" before taking final shape.⁶ Might not the interim "Lenin" appellation have been an abridgement of "Olenin" (the protagonist in Kazaki), Gusev wonders. In that case, he suggests, the form "Levin" would require the substitution of only one letter (296).

If Gusev is correct in positing "Olenin" as a phonetic forebear of "Levin," then the traditional pronunciation, featuring "é," not "ë," would seem to be the logical result, since the stressed syllable could be expected to be perpetuated. One could further argue that the idea of a link between "Olenin" and "Levin" is given support by the similarly strong autobiographical traits with which Tolstoy has endowed both characters.

Yet the very fact of this thematic kinship also provides grounds for the opposite phonetic conclusion, given the conspicuous orthographic echo between the forms "Levin" and "Lev" (Tolstoy's Christian name). The point here is that Tolstoy preferred to pronounce his first name as "Lëv," following the popular [narodnoe] Russian pronunciation (Gusev 296).⁷ The form "Lëvin" could then be seen—in parallel with the connection between "Lev" and "Lévin"—as a consequence of Tolstoy's desire to acknowledge the link between the fictional character and himself. Vladimir Nabokov in his *Lectures on Russian Literature* follows this line of thinking in choosing to write "Lyovin," except that he willfully ascribes this decision to himself, not Tolstoy. I quote:

Tolstoy wrote "Levin," deriving the surname of this character (a Russian nobleman and representative of a young Tolstoy in the imaginary world of the novel) from his own first name "Lev." [. . .] Tolstoy pronounced his first name . . . "Lyov"

instead of the usual "Lyev." I write "Lyovin" instead of "Levin," not so much to avoid any confusion (the possibility of which Tolstoy apparently did not realize) with a widespread Jewish surname of a different derivation, as to stress the emotional and personal quality of Tolstoy's choice (216).

Nabokov is tacitly acknowledging that Tolstoy's own pronunciation had probably been "Lévin," but he asserts—with typical Nabokovian hubris—that "Lëvin" ("Lyovin") is a better choice. The possibility of mistaking "Levin" for a common Jewish surname that Nabokov brings up here is addressed more directly in the handwritten note reproduced as an illustration in *Lectures on Russian Literature*. "Lyovin," Nabokov writes (incidentally contradicting the implication of the words quoted above), is a name typically "misspelt by translators" who insist on making it "Lévin," a fact that "creates some confusion. It has nothing to do with the Jewish name Levin or Levine" (139).

In terms of Russian onomastics, however, Nabokov is only partially on target. In his monograph on Russian surnames, Boris Unbegaun includes "Lévin" in a section on "Names of Hebrew origin," but appends a crucial qualifier to the effect that this same surname could also be produced within the Russian linguistic system as a form "derived from suffixless diminutives." Unbegaun depicts this mechanism as follows: Lévin < Lëva < Lev (71, 344). And while Unbegaun also notes that the surname "Lëvin" would in fact be a more natural Russian formation than "Lévin" (344), it is clear that he considers "Lévin" to be a possible and authentic non-Jewish Russian surname, even though this form most commonly signals Jewish identity. The confusion cited by Nabokov is therefore real and understandable, although his manner of avoiding it is open to challenge on linguistic and textual grounds.

In general it would seem that the form "Lëvin" has been preferred mainly for its ethnically unproblematic nature. This surely explains its adoption in the film produced during the Soviet 1960s, and probably also the desire of the arch-conservative Leont'ev to promote this particular

version. And the case of Nabokov bespeaks a sensitivity or perhaps insecurity about the Jewish theme that seems to have been simply absent in the author of *Anna Karenina*.

The evidence supporting the traditional pronunciation, meanwhile, is considerable, and I will cite just two examples. Aylmer Maude was a British biographer and translator of Tolstoy who knew the writer intimately and took extraordinary pains to get his facts right (he had persuaded Tolstoy to look over sections of his biography in the draft stage and then checked out much of the rest with Sof'ia Andreevna) and who was equally meticulous about providing accurate pronunciation aids for the Russian names included in his texts. Thus he writes "Lyóf," "Ogaryóf," "Syómka," etc. in *The Life of Tolstoy: First Fifty Years* (9, 209, 272), but "Lévin" in the companion volume, *The Life of Tolstoy: Later Years* (2). Using a more modern transcription system in his translation of *Anna Karenina* some years later, Maude once again distinguishes "Koznyshëv," "Matrëna," etc., from "Lévin" (x).⁸

But the most convincing evidence of all was provided to the present writer by Alexandra Tolstoy, the author's youngest daughter who was also one of his most loyal followers and collaborators in the turbulent later years of his life. In the summer of 1968 I was teaching Russian grammar in the Yale Summer Language Institute, and one of my responsibilities was to invite an outside speaker who could address a general audience on a theme related to Russia or the Soviet Union. It was, I must confess, on something of a whim that I decided to invite Aleksandra L'vovna, about whom I knew very little at the time except that the headquarters of her charitable and resettlement organization (the Tolstoy Foundation) was situated in Spring Valley, New York, slightly more than an hour's drive from New Haven. To my delight Aleksandra L'vovna accepted the invitation, and on a hot July evening she addressed an overflow crowd in one of Yale's larger auditoriums. The title of her talk, predictably enough, was "Tolstoy My Father." The event was a huge success, aided, no doubt, by the extraordinary sight of a vigorous 84-year-old woman who disdained the

microphone-equipped podium that had been prepared for her, stepped forward on the stage, and delivered an hour-long speech fluently without notes, all the while standing in a posture that was hauntingly familiar to anyone who had ever seen photographs of Tolstoy—hands tucked under her belt.

Later, over a cup of tea, I mentioned to Aleksandra L'vovna the uncertainty that seemed to surround the pronunciation of the name of Tolstoy's protagonist. She was surprised to hear of it. "U nas doma vse govorili 'Lévin' [In our home everyone pronounced it 'Lévin']," she said, emphasizing the initial two words in a way that suggested a touch of annoyance.

For at least one admirer of Tolstoy's art, this response has seemed definitive.

Notes

1. A Mosfil'm production directed by Aleksandr Zarkhi, with Tat'iana Samoilova in the title role.
2. In D. S. Mirsky's original publication (1927), stress is indicated only for the names of authors, and then only at the point of their first full mention (as well as in the index), but not for the names of literary characters; in the 1927 edition, accordingly, the name in question appears simply as "Levin" (339). The Whitfield edition, in contrast, affixes stress marks on all Russian names without exception and adds two dots over the "e" in Levin's surname (262; 274 in the Vintage edition).
3. This seems to have been Nikolai Osipovich Lerner (1877-1934), a prominent Pushkin scholar.
4. Leont'ev's "Analiz, stil' i veianie" was first published in three consecutive issues of the journal *Russkii vestnik* (1890, Nos. 6, 7, and 8). After Leont'ev's death the essay appeared under separate cover in 1911, and, in a more complete form, as part of volume VIII of Leont'ev's *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1912). The last-named version of the text was reissued in the Brown University Slavic Reprint series in 1965.
5. One of Tolstoy's long-time friends, Gavriil Rusanov, reports the following comments made by the writer in 1883 in response to a question about Leont'ev:

I do know Leont'ev; he visited me a couple of times in Moscow, but I don't believe that we took much of a liking to each other. He is not stupid, but I could not carry on a conversation with him. He monopolizes the conversation and keeps jumping from topic to topic without giving a person a chance to express himself. And my own preference is to speak in a meaningful way so that I can express my thoughts fully (301).

6. One is tempted to speculate about the many potential consequences, e.g. for Soviet topography, if Tolstoy had settled on "Lenin."

7. This is also confirmed by non-Russian acquaintances of the writer such as Aylmer Maude, who states in his *The Life of Tolstoy: First Fifty Years* that the proper pronunciation of Tolstoy's first name in Russian is "Lyóf" (9).

8. Maude's translation, together with his guide to the pronunciation of the Russian names in the novel, has been adopted in the *Norton Critical Edition of Anna Karenina* edited by George Gibian in 1970.

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