

# Translating 'Queer' Into (Kyrgyzstani) Russian

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As Gayatri Spivak famously wrote, 'In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible' (2007, 263). This chapter contributes to this idea by looking at how a foreign term like 'queer' has been translated, appropriated, and utilised in Kyrgyzstani discourses and practices of gender and sexual 'dissidents'. In particular, I examine the translatability of the term 'queer' and the challenges associated with such an attempt to translate. I contend that far from being derivative, *kvir* in Kyrgyzstan (and beyond – in the post-Soviet space) is utilised in unique ways as part of ideological interventions and debates in activist circles. I explore the intersection between translation, political activism, and global queer politics by looking at the case of the word *kvir* in Kyrgyzstan.

The analysis here stems from my personal experience using Russian-English and English-Russian translations as a form of political activism while living and working in Kyrgyzstan between 2012 and 2017. The Russian language remains a *lingua franca* of the post-Soviet space and has the status of official language in the Kyrgyz Republic, along with the Kyrgyz language, which has the status of 'state language' (having a higher ideological status). I have translated iconic publications of feminist and queer history from English to Kyrgyz – such as Adrienne Rich's famous essay "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence" (1980/2014) and *Queer Nation Manifesto* (1990/2016). I have also translated the Kyrgyzstan-based School of Theory and Activism Bishkek's (STAB) "Queer Communism Manifesto" (2013). Why do I use translation as activism? And what role does translation play in the global politics of gender and sexuality? How can one translate 'queer' into Kyrgyzstani Russian?

It is common in both Russian and English literary translation tradition to praise works that are marked by fluency, creating an illusion that one is indeed reading an original text rather than its interpretation by another author. Traditionally, the task of the translator was understood as that of an invisible medium communicating between discrete and distinct linguistic worlds. Yet contemporary theorists have criticised this imperative for encouraging the invisibility of translation work (Venuti 1995), while advocating for transparency in translation (Benjamin 2002, 260).

The conventional view that valued above all the 'fidelity' of translation, demanding that the translation process be rendered invisible, was also challenged by the feminist school of translation (e.g. von Flotow 1997). Feminist translators sought to make the practice of translation not only visible but also to make it work for the feminist agenda, contesting understandings of translation work as a form of feminine reproductive labour viewed as subservient to the labour of the 'writer' (Wu 2013). Through the use of translation strategies such as supplementing, prefacing, footnoting, and even 'hijacking' of the original text, feminist translators proclaimed an 'anti-traditional, aggressive and creative approach to translation' (von Flotow 1991, 70).

Queer translation theory and practice present sentiments similar to feminist approaches. Much like gender itself, translation is seen as a 'performative practice' rather than a direct reflection of the meaning in the original (Epstein and Gillett 2017, 1). The process of translation is an apt metaphor for queerness: forever oscillating between binaries (fidelity/infidelity, source/copy, original/interpretation), making the familiar strange and complicated, thus revealing the constructed and contingent nature of language, which is normally understood as solid, eternal, and 'natural' (Epstein and Gillett 2017, 1).

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Translation is always a particular re-writing of an original text serving specific ideological and political purposes. A translation may constitute a political intervention, an attempt to re-signify familiar concepts through alternative interpretations of particular words, and/or to introduce new ways of thinking and talking about certain subjects. Translators have real agency and translations are, therefore, significant cultural products in and of themselves, and not mere derivatives (Tymoczko 2010). If any translation means manipulating a text in the service of some power or ideology, then it may also serve an emancipatory agenda of gender and sexual activists. How, then can we translate 'queer' into Kyrgyzstani Russian?

This chapter is organised into three sections. First, I provide the essential background to Kyrgyzstani society and politics with a focus on LGBT issues. Second, I examine the various meanings of 'queer', and the debates that arose with its use in the post-Soviet space. Finally, I compare the two translations of *Queer Nation Manifesto* by ACT UP (1990) to show how competing approaches interpret the 'queer' in post-Soviet space.

## Background: Being LGBT in Kyrgyzstan

Non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming people in Kyrgyzstan mostly refer to themselves and others in the community as *tema* (Russian, literally 'theme'). This code-word means people 'in the know' or those with insider knowledge, suggesting secrecy and privacy of identity, and by implication, its apolitical nature. Unlike in the English-speaking world, the tradition of appropriation of homophobic slurs as positive self-designations to be used by LGBT people with both irony and pride does not exist in Kyrgyzstan. The term 'LGBT', associated with transnational activism, started to be used in the early 2000s by some young non-heterosexual and transgender Kyrgyzstanis as a 'neutral' term to manage stigma and become 'sexual citizens', transforming private issues of gender identity and sexuality into political matters (Wilkinson and Kirey 2010). Yet more recently, the term 'LGBT' gained negative connotations through its association with foreign actors and agendas in the post-Soviet space. There is a third term that co-exists with the colloquial *tema* and the activist 'LGBT': *kvir*. Borrowed from the English 'queer', this relatively new term is used mostly within scholarly circles and those associated with contemporary art. I argue that *kvir* is not merely a loan translation, but a term utilised self-consciously and strategically in post-Soviet space as a radical alternative to both mainstream LGBT identity politics and the general conservative turn in society.

Kyrgyzstan's politics of gender and sexuality resonate with global trends and contradictions, especially the politics of translation (understood literally and figuratively), homonationalism and international conservative and neoliberal politics. The small state is influenced by agendas of global politics, such as population control policies, equal marriage debates, HIV and AIDS prevention efforts, development agencies' goals and funding opportunities that shape the conversations and infrastructure of local activism (Hoare 2016). Yet there are also some distinguishing features of LGBT politics that are rooted in Kyrgyzstan's Soviet past.

In the Soviet Union, after a brief period of radical liberalisation of sexuality following the October Revolution, male homosexuality was re-criminalised in European republics in 1934 (Healey 2001, 222). Anti-sodomy laws were introduced across Central Asia even earlier in the late 1920s. They were aimed at eradicating 'crimes constituting survivals of primitive custom' along with polygamy and paying the bride price (Healey 2001, 159). Sexual exploitation of boy-dancers (*bacha bozi* in Uzbek), as well as consensual adult same-sex practices (*muzhelozhestvo* in Russian and *besoqolbozlik* in Uzbek) were deemed 'backward' and at odds with the Soviet emancipation agenda for the 'oppressed peoples of the Orient' (Healey 2001, 160). Female homosexuality was not criminalised, but pathologised within medical discourse (Sarajeva 2001, Stella 2015). Thus, for much of the Soviet period homosexuality was designated as belonging either in prison or in a psychiatric ward. Homosexuality re-entered public discussion during the late perestroika years with the policy of *glasnost*. It was already the late 1980s when the first LGBT-themed publications and organisations appeared in the European republics of the Soviet Union (Healey 2017).

Kyrgyzstan became independent following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Unlike other Central Asian countries, the Kyrgyz Republic has become known for a vibrant civil society and dynamic political life. Kyrgyzstan's early activism started with the creation of organisations dealing with HIV and AIDS. The country's two largest cities, Bishkek and Osh, both had vibrant gay scenes, with queer clubs frequented and patronised by straight celebrities, members of the police and even orthodox priests. According to the account of Vladimir Tiupin, the founder of the first

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Kyrgyz gay organisation, Oasis, the 1990s were a period of hitherto unseen liberation and openness for gay and lesbian communities. Despite this seeming liberalisation, Oasis was registered as a 'youth' organisation in 1995 – three years before male homosexuality was decriminalised in Kyrgyzstan (Kazybekov 2013).

Thanks to a political landscape that became increasingly liberal, several LGBT rights NGOs were officially registered in the early 2000s. Labrys, an organisation founded by lesbians and trans people in 2004, was initially registered as a 'women's organisation' in 2006, and was then re-registered as an LGBT rights organisation in 2010. Yet, LGBT activism and existence remain fraught. With a conservative turn in the region and in global politics since the mid-2000s, the 'live and let live' attitude to homosexuality prevalent in the 1990s has been replaced with discourses of traditional values and the preservation of the nation (Wilkinson and Kirey 2010; Boemcken, Boboyorov, and Bagdasarova 2018). Against this backdrop, many LGBT people and activists face homophobic discrimination and violence in Kyrgyzstan as part of a broader similar trend in other parts of the world.

In 2014 conservative members of the Kyrgyz parliament, Kurmanbek Diykanabev and Torobai Zulpukarov of the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) party, initiated a bill "On introducing amendments to some legal acts of the Kyrgyz Republic", otherwise known as the law on 'gay propaganda' (*Labrys.kg*, 22 June 2017). The proposed bill aimed to make it an administrative and a criminal offence to 'engage in propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations'. As of January 2018, the bill was still under revision in the Kyrgyz parliament in its second reading.

The text of the proposed bill was lifted verbatim from a law adopted in the Russian Federation in 2013. The European Human Rights Court ruled in June 2017 that the Russian ban on propaganda of 'non-traditional sexual relations among children' was discriminatory and limited the right to freedom of speech (Rankin 2017). Moreover, a recent study by the Centre for Independent Social Research demonstrates that the number of violent hate crimes against LGBT people in Russia has risen dramatically since the law was adopted (Kondakov 2017). When the state criminalised positive or even neutral representation of LGBT lives and relationships, it gave a licence to discriminate against this group of people. The Kyrgyz draft bill does not limit the ban to 'propaganda' among children, but outlaws any discussion of homosexuality and LGBT rights work. Activists and LGBT allies in Kyrgyzstan also claim that the number of homophobic attacks has increased drastically since the draft law was introduced in parliament and that the general public discourse in the media has become visibly hostile.

Although the draft law remains under consideration in Kyrgyzstan, violence against non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming people is on the rise. In fact, LGBT organisations and activists have come under attack since the draft law was introduced (*Labrys.kg*, 19 May 2015). For instance, in April 2015, unknown persons threw Molotov cocktails over the fence into the courtyard of the office of the LGBT organisation Labrys (*Labrys.kg*, 10 April 2015). On May 17<sup>th</sup> of that same year, nationalist vigilante groups Kalys and Kyrk Choro attacked a private event dedicated to the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) in Bishkek, the capital, by climbing over the fence, kicking in the lock of the gate and physically assaulting a young woman (*Labrys.kg*, 19 May 2015). LGBT people were also subjected to violent assaults when leaving Bishkek's only queer club. Many more cases of violence, harassment, blackmail and extortion, rape, death threats, police brutality, and torture are known to activist groups. Many more remain unreported (HRW 2014).

Non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming people face grave and urgent challenges in Kyrgyzstan. Debates on semantics and critiques of the dominant activist discourse may seem trivial and even counter-productive. Yet I argue that the discussion regarding the adoption of the word *kvir* is key to understanding the present and future of gender and sexual politics in Kyrgyzstan and worldwide.

## Queer, *Kvir* and their Discontents

Like many words in English, 'queer' can be used as several parts of speech – as an adjective, a noun and a verb. As an adjective it means 'strange' or 'odd', referring to all things 'differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal' (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). 'Queer' in this sense designates a quality of departure from the perceived norm.

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As a noun, the word 'queer' today is an example of a practice of linguistic appropriation used as a means of resistance against violence by oppressed groups. Originally used as a homophobic slur to refer primarily to homosexual men, this word started being used by non-heterosexual people more generally for self-identification, self-affirmation, and self-advocacy. In the 1990 *Queer Nation Manifesto*, written by a radical group of New York gays and lesbians called AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), 'queer' is articulated (and subsequently translated) interestingly:

Queer! Ah, do we really have to use that word? It's trouble. Every gay person has his or her own take on it. For some it means strange and eccentric and kind of mysterious. That's okay; we like that. But some gay girls and boys don't. They think they're more normal than strange. And for others "queer" conjures up those awful memories of adolescent suffering. Queer. It's forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best – weakening and painful at worst. Couldn't we just use "gay" instead? It's a much brighter word. And isn't it synonymous with "happy"? When will you militants grow up and get over the novelty of being different? Why Queer ... Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalised in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike **gay**, doesn't mean **male**. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, **queer** can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him (Queer Nation Manifesto, ACT UP, 1990) **[all original emphases]**.

In the English language and among LGBT+ activists, the term 'queer' has come to be used as a more compact synonym to the ever-expanding abbreviation designating the diversity of the community (the LGBT+). Some people also choose to identify themselves as queer because they find it impossible to identify with traditional labels for gender and sexuality such as 'gay' or 'female'. In this sense, the term 'queer' is consciously gender-neutral and inclusive.

The word 'queer' can additionally be used as a verb. To queer something means to 'spoil' or to 'ruin' it (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). This is the way the word is most commonly used by critical scholars, who are collectively called the school of 'queer theory'. Scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 'queer' conventional categories for talking about gender and sexuality. Such queering is not exclusive to the fields of gender and sexuality studies. Queer optics have been applied in spheres as diverse as ecology, politics, and international relations (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Weber 2016).

By emphasising 'queer' as something that one *does* rather than something one *is*, we can resolve a seeming paradox of 'queerness': whether it is based on one's identity or affinity. When identities are queered, a worry arises that the subsequent loss of differences (for identity is always articulated in relation with and opposition to the other) will render the oppressed groups invisible and further oppressed. Thus, many LGBT activists and feminists feel ill at ease with queering, and have debated the concept of *kvir* in the post-Soviet space (Sozaev 2015a and 2015b; Kharitonova 2014).

Despite the international popularity of the word 'queer', and its Russian rendition – *kvir*, its meaning remains vague because it is so all-encompassing, and some activists in post-Soviet countries have contested this 'empty signifier' as a harmful negative term that 'needs to die' (Sozaev 2015a and 2015b). A discussion on whether Russian 'queer' is possible took place within the post-Soviet Russian-speaking space in 2010 at a queer festival in Saint Petersburg. The results of this discussion were published as an edited volume on LGBT studies (Sozaev 2010). No definite answer is given to the question posed in the title of the volume, yet a few misgivings are voiced by several authors citing queer theory's foreign origins rooted in a different historical and socio-political context, its elitism and incomprehensibility and its supposed apolitical nature (Sozaev 2010, 17). For instance, Sergei Mozzhegorov calls to 'Forget Queer', arguing that the social constructivist approach behind queer theory when translated into activist practice is harmful for the LGBT movement (2010, 90). Similarly, Olga Gert (also known as Olgerta Kharitonova, the editor of the longest existing Russian-language lesbian feminist magazine *Ostrov*) writes that Russia is not ready to

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accept queer theory and politics due to their complexity and suggests that the social movements focus on feminism first (2010, 97).

Valerii Sozaev, a well-known Russian LGBT activist, points out that the concept of 'queer' has emerged out of a specific historical context of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States in the face of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. 'What is the history of *kvir* in Russia? And does 'queer' mean the same thing in the United States as *kvir* does in Russia? Is the performative power and the consequences of using the word *kvir* in Russian equivalent to the use of 'queer' in English?', he asks (2015b). Sozaev asserts that the word *kvir* entered the Russian language through academic studies of gender and sexuality, as a euphemistic replacement of the potentially compromising word 'homosexuality'. It was thus hollowed out of all subversive and protest potential from its birth.

The word travelled into the LGBT activists' vocabulary as a convenient disguise to hide their homosexuality. Sozaev, for instance, narrates an anecdote of how LGBT activists decided on the name *Kvir Fest* for a festival in Saint Petersburg in 2008/2009. They wanted to organise an event that would attract the right audience, but would not give rise to unwanted attention from authorities and homophobes. Since the word *kvir* was virtually unknown to anyone outside the community, it was chosen as the 'safest' word. Sozaev (2015a) feels that *kvir* is hostile to both lesbian feminism and gay male liberation because it prevents the politicisation of LGBT communities around their identities as oppressed groups. As such, he argues, it is destructive for the movement and the community and detrimental to "gay pride", because, according to *kvir*, there is no such thing as "gay" (Sozaev 2015a).

In Sozaev's and Kharitonova's objections to *kvir* we can discern their doubts regarding the word's emancipatory potential. They both object to the label as a noun (as a way of labelling oneself and as a set of substantial philosophical ideas). I contend that this contradiction can be resolved if we think of 'queer' as a verb. Queering categories does have an emancipatory effect. Rather than erasing oppressed identities, it queers them, makes them ambiguous, complex, multidimensional and intersectional. Queering identities creates grounds for solidarity and coalition building based on affinity, not complete identity with another human/non-human being.

### Translating 'Queer' into Russian: The Story of One Manifesto

*Queer Nation Manifesto*, originally distributed at the 1990 Gay Pride parade in New York by ACT UP, is a historical text of the LGBT movement. This inflammatory text was created against the backdrop of a raging AIDS epidemic and the homophobic policy of neglect by the United States government. The manifesto expressed a sense of urgency, desperation, and defiance with statements like 'I hate straights!' (ACT UP 1990). *Queer Nation Manifesto* sparked a short-lived, but extremely effective and influential political campaign, with chapters all across the USA (Stryker 2015). This text marks a turning point in LGBT politics in the US and globally.

Two recent translations of this text into Russian illustrate the competing visions of the meanings and uses of 'queer' in post-Soviet space. The manifesto was only translated into Russian in 2016 when two groups decided to translate it independently of each other. The first translation was mine, and appeared in the Bishkek-based queer feminist zine (self-published magazine with small circulation) *Weird Sisters*, edited by Oksana Shatalova (2016). The issue was dedicated to Queer feminism and built on a debate taking place between our group and a feminist group in Kazakhstan (Kazfem), that publishes a feminist zine called *Yudol*. 'Weird Sisters' collective first responded to an article published in *Yudol* (2016) which argued that human sexuality is predetermined by biological factors, such as exposure to certain hormones while in utero, and is therefore inborn (Aprel'skaia 2016, 34). Our group responded with a polemical text entitled 'Heterosexual in the womb, or constructivists' response to essentialists', questioning the need to appeal to 'nature' that even the most progressive social justice movements succumb to at times (*Weird Sisters* 2016). We then dedicated the following issue to 'queering feminism' and titled it 'Nature Won't Stop the Queer!' (Priroda kviru ne pomekha!). This issue contained two translations of feminist and queer activist classics – *The Transfeminist Manifesto* by Emi Koyama (2001) translated by Maria Vilkovsky and edited by Ruth Jenrbekova (Creole Centre, Kazakhstan) and *Queer Nation Manifesto* (1990) translated by me.

The decision to translate the text of *Queer Nation Manifesto* was contextual to the discussions taking place within/across the Central Asian feminist and LGBT activists' communities. Translation in this case was a significant

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intervention to introduce a cultural change. This translation is a record of ideological contestation. 'Queering' gender and sexuality, and even the idea of 'nature' itself, was our answer to essentialist tendencies within the community of activists around us.

I translated the title of the *Manifesto* as 'Manifest kvir-naroda', meaning, Manifesto of Queer People. Consistent with how we previously used the word *kvir* in our projects, I chose to use *kvir* to translate 'queer' in most of the text. In some cases, however, I used *izvrashchenets* ('pervert', masculine) and/or *izvrashchenka* (feminine). Nouns in the Russian language have three genders (masculine, feminine, and neutral). Therefore, it was a challenge to find one single word that would include both feminine and masculine-identifying individuals as well as those who identify with both/neither. Discussions among Russian-speaking feminists on the use of feminines and gender-neutral/inclusive language have produced a number of now widely used forms. For instance, using punctuation, one can write *izvrashchen\_ka/ets* to include both genders and allow for the possibility of neither – the underscore sign signifying the tentativeness of gender – which is what I did. Also, when translating, I used both masculine and feminine first-person gender to convey two voices that I detected in the *Manifesto* – one of a gay man and another of a lesbian woman. The transition between two voices in the text is not clearly marked thus producing a queering effect.

The other translation of *Queer Nation Manifesto* into Russian was undertaken by Gulnara Kurmanova, an activist based in Bishkek. Published in December 2016 on the website of the Russian initiative group *Deistviie*. A commentary to the publication attributes the original idea to translate the text to Sozaev – the very person who previously advocated death for the concept of *kvir*. The *Manifesto* title appears in this translation as *Manifest Natsii Pidarov*. Here 'queer' is replaced with the Russian homophobic slur for a male homosexual man – *pidar*. An explanation from Sozaev follows:

It is our conscious decision to use *pidar* instead of *kvir* in the Russian translation, because we think that the extrapolation of the largely unknown to the wider public English word 'queer' will reduce the deconstructive potential of the text. Moreover, there is a tendency in the Russian language to use the word *kvir* in the meaning of 'genderqueer', that is why we strove to avoid such confusion. However, the difficulty with replacing the word *kvir* with *pidar* is also in the fact that the English word is gender-neutral and its use was initiated among other considerations in order to avoid the androcentric 'gay', which the authors of the manifesto discuss. Unfortunately, despite all our attempts to find an adequate equivalent for a gender-neutral word in Russian, we did not succeed. We decided not to use the word *izvrashchentsi* (perverts), because it does not carry the emphasis on sexuality, which is important when translating the word 'queer' (forward to Kurmanova's translation by Sinel'nikov and Sozaev).

The choice of *pidar* as a more subversive and deconstructive equivalent to 'queer' in Russian rings true to the original intention in ACT UP's *Manifesto*: 'Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world' (ACT UP 1990). After all, as Valerii Sozaev rightly pointed out, when someone is attacked on homophobic grounds, the bashers are not likely to shout '*Kvir!*', but homophobic slurs like *pedik* (fag), *pidaras* (pederast), *gomik* (homo), *lezbukha* (lesbo) (Sozaev 2015b). Yet, when choosing *pidar*, the authors of the translation also pick one particular story of queer experience (that of a gay man) and universalise it.

What is remarkable in this story is that the *Deistviie* initiative group translated *Queer Nation Manifesto* into Russian despite Sozaev's aversion to the term, which he had openly voiced (2010, 2015a, and 2015b). Could this be interpreted as an LGBT activist's attempt at 'hijacking' *kvir* and appropriating it for his struggle in the form that feels authentic and politically productive? Some activists' anxiety regarding 'foreign' concepts as inauthentic, imposed, or even colonising is quite understandable and justified. Yet this anxiety about using *kvir* in a post-Soviet context is based on the traditional understanding of language and translation. Within this paradigm, language is seen as separate and corresponding to reality, while a translation seeks to match that correspondence perfectly in another language.

## Conclusion

I contend that we need to think of the use and translation of 'queer' in the Wittgensteinian sense of 'language games' (2009). By this, I mean his idea that concepts do not need to be clearly defined to be meaningful. His analogy

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between a language and a game demonstrates that words have meaning depending on the uses made of them in the various and multiform activities of human life. The multiple uses of 'queer' across languages bear a 'family resemblance', but are not in a relationship of one-to-one correspondence of equivalence and identity. Each utterance and translation of 'queer' hides a particular story of political and ideological resistance and struggle.

While some part of LGBT and feminist activists in Kyrgyzstan have embraced *kvir* and queering as a practice of resistance, the concept still remains confusing for many in the community/ies. So, to rerun our opening question, can 'queer' be translated into Kyrgyzstani Russian? I must confess: the answer is that it has been and will continue to be translated in multiple ways and there can be no one 'correct' translation.

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