

ON PROPER NAMES TRANSLATION METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

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Translation has many challenges, one of which is the problem of translating proper nouns, a term used here interchangeably with the term “proper names”, adequately from one language to another. The focus of this study lies within translation of personal names, which are a subclass of proper nouns.

Notwithstanding the fact that a challenge that translators often encounter in their work comes from personal names, this report presents some translation techniques proposed by various researchers in this regard. It should be mentioned that this report does not intend to prescribe any special rules [1, p. 40].

“Proper names are never translated” seems to be a rule deeply rooted in many people’s minds. Yet looking at translated texts we find that translators do all sorts of things with proper names: non-translation, non-translation that leads to a different pronunciation in the target language, transcription or transliteration from non-Latin alphabets, morphological adaptation to the target language, cultural adaptation, substitution, and so on. It is interesting to note, moreover, that translators do not always use the same techniques with all the proper names of a particular text they are translating. Unlike generic nouns, proper names are mono-referential, but they are by no means mono-functional. Their main function is to identify an individual referent. It has often been claimed that proper names lack descriptive meaning: “An ordinary personal name is, roughly, a word, used referring, of which the use is not dictated by any descriptive meaning the word may have. In the real world, proper names may be non-descriptive, but they are obviously not non-informative: If we are familiar with the culture in question, a proper name can tell us whether the referent is a female or male person (Alice – Bill), maybe even about their age or their geographical origin within the same language community or from another country, a pet (there are “typical” names for dogs, cats, horses, canaries, etc., like Pussy or Fury), a place

(Mount Everest), etc. Such indicators may lead us astray in real life, but they can be assumed to be intentional in fiction. Titles and forms of address can also be problematic in translation. The translation of proper names has often been considered as a simple automatic process of transference from one language into another, due to the view that proper names are mere labels used to identify a person or a thing". This is exactly what James Catford purports when he writes that "proper names have no meaning (in the sense of "sense" and not of "reference")", which is borne out by the fact that they do not require translation into another language [2, p. 38].

All languages have particular personal names, some of which are deeply rooted in the culture of the speakers of the specific language; consequently, they can pose unique difficulties in the comprehension of culture-specific texts. It is interesting to note that some personal names have specific connotations, and omitting this implied information results in unacceptable translation. For example, in the Persian culture, Hatam Taaei – the name of a very generous man in Iranian stories – is a symbol of generosity; accordingly, if a translator, who unaware of this fact, encounters this sentence "My father is Hatam Taaei" in a conversation of two friends talking about their fathers' characteristics, the translator may erroneously assume that the speaker introduces his or her father's name, not his personality. There is no doubt that translating personal names should not be assumed to be an easy issue inasmuch as it can turn out to be very troublesome in practice and needs very sensitive decision-making on the part of the translator within the translation process. A growing body of research shows that different translation procedures are applied in the process of translating personal names.

In general, it should be noted that translators do not always use the same strategy for translation of all personal names in all kinds of texts. For example, Gillian Cohen believes that translators should use transcription and transliteration techniques when translating personal names; however, translators of religious texts must use the most common existing equivalent of a personal name in the TL even if these equivalents do not follow the foregoing translation strategies [3, p. 101]. The common meaning of the word or words constituting a proper noun may be unrelated to the object to which the proper noun refers. For example, someone might be named Tiger Smith despite being neither a tiger nor a smith. For this reason, proper nouns are usually not translated between languages, although they may be transliterated.

For example, the German surname Knudel becomes Knodel or Knoedel in English (not the literal Dumpling). However, the transcription of place names and the names of monarchs, popes, and non-contemporary authors is common and sometimes universal. For instance, the Portuguese word Lisboa

becomes Lisbon in English; the English London becomes Londres in French; and the Greek (Aristotelēs) becomes Aristotle in English [4, p. 12].

Theoretically speaking there appears to be at least four ways of transferring proper names from one language into another. They can be copied that is reproduced in the target text exactly as they were in the source text. They can be transcribed, that is transliterated or adapted on the level of spelling, phonology, etc. A formally unrelated name can be substituted in the target text for any given name in the source text and in so far as a proper name in the source text is enmeshed in the lexicon of that language and acquires “meaning”, it can be translated.

Combinations of these four modes of transfer are possible, as a proper name may, for example, be copied or transcribed and in addition translated in a (translator’s) footnote [5, p. 89].

Peter Newmark asserts that: “The translation of proper names has often been considered as a simple automatic process of transference from one language into another, due to the view that proper names are mere labels used to identify a person or a thing. Contrary to popular views, the translation of proper names is a non-trivial issue, closely related to the problem of the meaning of the proper name” [6, p. 61].

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It is interesting to note that some personal names have specific connotations, and omitting this implied information results in unacceptable translation. There is another point relevant to a peculiarity of personal names of some languages; translators must consider the fact that the order of first name and surname is not the same in all languages. In the Korean, Japanese, and Hungarian languages, for example, surname comes before first name, whereas this order is reversed in English, French, and most other Western languages [7, p. 34].

Having briefly discussed some of the translation procedures in this respect, we should strongly recommend that whatever strategies translators use, especially in scientific texts, they should mention the original name with the source language alphabets in the footnotes or endnotes in order to facilitate further research for readers in the target language.

To sum up, proper names can be treated in a number of ways in translation. The choice between the various alternatives is determined by pragmatic factors, paramount among which are the overarching purpose of the text and the translator's assessment of his/her intended audience.

References:

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