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ON THE TRANSLATION OF PROPER NAMES

Abstract: The translation of proper names has often been considered a simple automatic process of transference from one language into another, due to the view that proper names are nothing but mere labels used to identify a person or a thing. It has been shown, however, by authors like *Searle* or *Strawson* that this view is faulty: proper names, beyond their identifying function, may carry 'senses'. This will entail, then, that the translation of proper names may be a rather delicate decision-making process, requiring on the part of the translator a careful consideration of the functions the proper name fulfils (is to fulfil) in the context of the source (target) language text and culture. It is suggested that in translating a proper name the translator has three major strategies at his disposal: *transference*, *translation* proper and *modification*.

1 Introduction

In this paper[1] we are going to look at some problems that the translator is likely to face when encountering proper names in the text he is to translate. At first glance it may seem that nothing is easier than finding a satisfactory solution to these problems; or that, in fact, there is no real problem here to resolve at all. This is exactly what *Zeno Vendler* 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" (Vendler: 117). To reinforce this statement he argues that

[1] I wish to express my gratitude to dr. Péter Pelyvás of Kossuth University, Debrecen for his helpful remarks and suggestions. I am also grateful to Beth Wangen for reading the manuscript and correcting my blunders of grammar and style. The responsibility, however, for everything contained in this paper is solely mine.

we do not find proper names listed in dictionaries, which also shows that they are not part of our knowledge of the language. In his view, then, proper names are to be treated as labels, which are attached to persons or objects and the only task of the translator is to carry them over, or *transfer* (we will return to this concept later in Section 4) them, from the *source language* (SL) text to the *target language* (TL) text.

In Section 2 we will show that this view is based on faulty assumptions, as will become clear from contrasting *Vendler*'s observations with those of *Strawson* and *Searle*. We shall see that proper names are not mere labels but may also have some sort of 'meaning' of their own, which will, of course, have consequences in the process of translation.

These consequences will be dealt with in Section 3. Examples from the different classes of proper name will be drawn to demonstrate what kinds of problems the translator is likely to meet in connection with proper names in a TL text.

Section 4 will give a brief summary of possible solutions to the various problems, and in the final section we shall conclude that the translation of proper names is not at all a matter of course, but that it is a subtle decision-making process involving a number of factors ranging from the SL culture and language to the TL culture and language and requires careful consideration of these factors on the part of the translator.

2 Do proper names have senses?

When we hear the word 'flower', it immediately conjures up in our minds certain sensual images: we think of an attractive, fresh, colourful, and nice-smelling thing. When, on the other hand, we hear a proper name like 'Stewart', very probably no such sensual images are awakened – we merely think of some person we know whose name is Stewart (if there is anybody at all whom we know by this name). Thus it would seem that, as *Vendler* put it, proper names lack 'meaning'; that is, they do not have connotations, in contrast with common names, for example, which do.

What happens, however, if you happen to hear about some person whose name is Flower? In this case, you will perhaps think, even

though you may not know that person, that such a nice name must belong to a nice woman too. (Or, as was pointed out to me, that her parents must have belonged to the flower-power generation of the 60's.) In this example, then, the mentioning of the name has invited some expectation on your part as to the personality of the bearer of that name (or to the personality of her parents, for that matter). In other words, it has evoked certain connotations. You might argue that the proper name 'Flower' coincides in form with the common name 'flower' and it is only by virtue of this coincidence that the proper name has a 'meaning'. Let us not go further with the example now; we will return to it later in Section 3.

Nevertheless, the example shows that the question posed as the heading for this section may not be as simple as it first seemed. It may not be enough to say that proper names simply denote a person or an object, or that they refer to, or identify, that person or object without having anything else to do with it. In order to be able to answer this question we must first have a look at the other types of referring expressions that are used to identify objects in the world around us.

As we read in *Strawson*,

> The language contains expressions of several celebrated kinds which are peculiarly well adapted, in different ways, for use with this [identifying] purpose. These include proper names, definite and possessive and demonstrative descriptions, demonstrative and personal pronouns (Strawson: 88).

We can thus distinguish three classes of such expressions: *proper names*, *identifying descriptions*, and *pronouns*. As to this latter class, it contains grammatical words, which are clearly only tools for referring and thus bear no relevance to the problem. But what can be said about identifying descriptions and proper names? To be more precise, what is the relationship of these two classes of expressions? If we can establish that proper names are in some way similar to identifying descriptions, this will prove that they do not merely refer to, but also provide some sort of description about the referent, which

amounts to saying that they do have 'senses'[2]. *Searle* puts the problem the following way:

> 'Do proper names have senses?' What this question asks, as a start, is what, if any, similarity is there between the way a definite description picks out its referent and the way a proper name picks out its referent. Is a proper name really a shorthand description (Searle: 134)?

As a first step to answer this question we must introduce the *principle of identification*, which may be formulated as follows:

> A necessary condition for the successful performance of a definite reference in the utterance of a description is that the description must be an identifying description or the speaker must be able to produce an identifying description on demand (Searle: 134).

In accordance with this principle, *Searle* argues, when somebody uses a proper name, he must be able to substitute an identifying description of the referent of the proper name, otherwise he would violate the principle of identification and, consequently, would fail to perform a definite reference. These considerations lead *Searle* to say that "a proper name must have a sense, and that the identifying description constitutes that sense" (Searle: 138).

His conclusion, then, is that although proper names are not descriptions themselves, they are in a "loose sort of way" connected with the characteristics of the referent (Searle: 139). Thus a proper name can be said to have a sense, but this sense is radically different to that of definite descriptions insofar as in the latter case the sense is definite and precise, whereas in the case of proper names it is imprecise. Moreover, this imprecision of sense is a necessary

[2] It has been pointed out to me that the difference between the denotation and the connotation of a proper name may be treated, perhaps in a more elucidating way for the purposes of translation, as a difference between the referential and attributive *uses* of that name, as demonstrated by Donellan (1975). This takes us from the (loosely understood) *semantics* of proper names to the *pragmatics* of proper names, the consequences of which move may well be worth another paper.

criterion for proper names, otherwise they would be nothing more than shorthand descriptions and would consequently lose their pragmatic convenience in enabling us to avoid having to provide a precise description of the characteristics of the object we are referring to when we do not want to. He finishes:

> They function not as descriptions, but as *pegs* on which to hang descriptions. The looseness of the criteria of proper names is a necessary condition for isolating the referring function from the describing function of language (Searle: 140).

Thus we are now able to say that proper names are not empty marks for reference, they do not have only denotation, they may also have connotations and that these connotations are necessarily imprecise but nonetheless an important and inalienable part of the meaning of the proper name. To quote *Searle* again, the "utterance of the name communicates a proposition to the hearer" (Searle: 140). This has to be kept in mind when translating, because this will have certain consequences with regard to the decisions concerning the translation of proper names. These consequences will be examined in the next section.

3 Problems in translating proper names

In this section we shall see that the fact that proper names may occasionally have connotations will pose a number of interesting and non-trivial problems to the translator, and that these problems require a lot of attention and consideration from him in order to be able to find a good solution. We shall select some typical examples from three different classes of proper names without claiming that the list is in any way complete.

Let us begin with the names of persons. Four cases stand out here: 1. names of famous historical figures; 2. markers concerning the gender of the person; 3. markers of family relations; and 4. names in imaginative literature.

Some famous historical personages have a constant epithet attached to their names, e.g. *Richard the Lionheart*, or *James the Lackland*. Here the epithet is clearly a description of some characteristic of the person and is to be treated as such: it needs to be

translated into the TL. Accordingly, in Hungarian we talk about Oroszlánszívű Richárd and Földnélküli János. Another case is when a historical figure is so well-known in the TL culture that his name has become 'naturalized': *Martin Luther* must be translated into Hungarian as *Luther Márton*, because this variant has established itself as the standard form; but *Martin Luther King* is never referred to in Hungarian as *Király Luther Márton.*

In certain languages the gender of the person is represented in the name by a particle. For example, in Vietnamese *Nguyen-van-An* is the name of a man, whereas *Nguyen-thi-Tuet* is the name of a woman. The infixes *-van-* and *-thi-* are markers for the male and female sexes, respectively (examples taken from Elman: 27). Thus, in a way, they are similar to the personal pronouns of languages like English, where these are marked for gender. When these pronouns are rendered into a language like Hungarian, which lacks gender distinction in the pronoun system, we usually do not bother to preserve the reference to gender, unless it is made necessary by the context. Similarly, the most reasonable solution in the case of such names would be to leave them as they are, since the context will probably provide clues as to whether the person in question is male or female. Or, alternatively, the translator may remark in a footnote on the structure of names in Vietnamese if he feels that an explanation is in order.

An endless number of examples could be drawn of markers of family relationships in the different languages. Here, however, we will be satisfied with two of them.

In the Icelandic language, *Olaf Hilmarson* is the name of Olaf, who is the son of Hilmar. His father, Hilmar, is the son of Vigus, so his name is *Hilmar Vigusson* (examples from Elman: 27). The consequences of this case are very much like those of the above mentioned Vietnamese example. Here, too, it is up to the translator to chose from among the possible solutions.

It is a well-known fact that in most (if not all) Indo-European languages the given name comes before the family name. In some other languages, however, this order is reversed, as in Hungarian, or Japanese. The translator has to be aware of this in order to avoid misinterpretation of some situation.

It could be noted that most of the examples mentioned above have more to do with denotation than with connotation. I would argue,

however, that knowing the gender of the person, or knowing what sort of relationship that person has with others is more than just knowing that he or she is the referent of a certain name. In fact, it is stating something or 'communicating' something about that person: it is giving a description of some characteristic of that person. We are certainly not suggesting that this sort of information about a person is relevant in all contexts; there may, however, be cases when disregarding such information would lead to losses in the TL text.

And we have not yet touched the field of imaginative literature. This is an area where the translator can really exhibit his creative abilities. The so-called telling names offer themselves as the most obvious example. Now we can return to the example given in Section 2. If somebody in a work of art has the name Flower, it well may be that it is not by pure chance, but that the author had intentionally chosen this name for that figure, because he wanted to communicate something about that character, and the translator has to consider this possibility.

A very good example of this is found in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* The craftsmen's names in this play all make reference to the person's profession or to his personal characteristics, or to both at the same time (Nádasdy: 38). Here the translator had to face a rather difficult problem: in some cases he had to make a choice as to which segment of the connotations in the name he should preserve. The name of *Bottom,* the weaver, for instance, is a double-bottomed reference to a part of the loom and to a part of the human body (with obvious connotations). In this case Nádasdy translated the name as *Tompor,* which makes reference to the aforementioned body part but not to the tool of the trade. The tinsmith's name, *Snout,* is again a simultaneous allusion to the spout of a can and to the size of the character's nose. Here the name is rendered as *Lavór,* which simply means washbasin.

In this play, then, names are not mere tools of reference (in the technical sense of the term), they also convey information about the referents' characteristic features. In a non-imaginative text, of course, the chances for this state of affairs would obviously be far less. All this goes to show, then, that the type of text is also an important factor in making decisions about the rendering of proper names into the TL.

Another example, which is probably the most famous in the Hungarian literary tradition is the name of the teddy bear protagonist in *Milne*'s classic children's book, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, which was translated by *Frigyes Karinthy* as *Micimackó*. In the technical sense of the word, it is not a translation of the original at all. What the translator did here was change the original SL name to a TL name which is not a literal equivalent of the SL item, but evokes the image of a funny and lovable teddy bear just as the SL name does in the SL text. Furthermore, the translation also preserves the contradiction which arises from the fact that although Pooh is a male teddy (or, at least, considered as such by Christopher Robin), the names he bears (*Winnie* and *Mici*) are girls' names in both languages.

We shall now move on to consider a few problems in connection with geographical names. One is that they are subject to alterations due to the ever-changing political and social situations, and therefore the translator has to be extremely careful in selecting the appropriate TL item. It is very much a matter of taking a political stand, for instance, whether a translator chooses to render the Slovak name *Kosice* into Hungarian as *Kassa* or decides to leave it in its original SL form. Or, to take another infamous example, it is not the same if we write *Auschwitz* or *Oswiecim* (example taken from Newmark: 216), though both refer to the same location in Poland, since the two words have very different connotations. Then there are also geographical names which have become 'naturalized' in the TL, like *Bécs*, the Hungarian equivalent of the German name *Wien*. Here the translator has usually no choice, unless for some very good reason concerning the cultural halo of the word, but to use the form that is conventional in the TL.

Finally, let us consider the names of objects. These include names of institutions, periodicals, proprietaries, etc. These are generally left in their original SL forms. Occasional exceptions can be justified on the ground of the connotations a particular SL word may evoke in the TL culture if left unchanged. Newmark mentions the interesting case of 'Mist' hairspray (Newmark: 215), the name of which translates into German as 'filth'. Not a really lucky name for a hairspray, one would think. In this case, therefore, it would seem desirable to change the name when introducing the product in Germany. The irony of the example is that in actual fact the hairspray was introduced in Germany with the original name 'Mist' and still it is

alleged to have been a success. In another case[3], however, failure to realize the unfavourable connotations of the original name in the TL culture did lead to financial loss. In the 70's, Chevrolet Nova was a successful car in the United States. It came as a surprise, therefore, that it did not sell nearly as well when it was introduced into the Mexican market. The reason was simple: 'va' is a form of the Spanish equivalent of the English word 'go', and thus 'no-va' would suggest that something does not go, which is not what is expected of a car.

Another interesting situation is when a brandname is turned into a common name by means of a metonymic process, or when this same name further comes to be used as a verb by the process of conversion. This is the case in English with names like *Hoover, Xerox* or *Kleenex.* The problem is that in the TL, for reasons of cultural differences, the same process(es) may not have taken place. So, for instance, whereas it is possible *to hoover the carpet* in English, it is impossible to *kihúverozni a szőnyeget* in Hungarian.

Many more examples could be listed, of course, but the few mentioned here will suffice to illustrate the vast range of potential problems with regard to the rendering of proper names into another language. The next section will give a short account of the strategies that the translator can employ in dealing with these problems.

4 Strategies for the translator

In the footsteps of *Elman*, we will distinguish three different strategies for the rendering of proper names (although using a different terminology): the translator can choose to *transfer*, *translate* or *modify* an SL name when rendering it into the TL. We have seen examples of all three, so let us just briefly summarize here what we mean by these terms.

Transference, as *Newmark* puts it, is "the process of transferring a SL word to a TL text as a translation procedure" (Newmark: 81). This is essentially the same as *Catford*'s definition (see Catford: 43). This is the case when we decide to leave the SL proper name unchanged in the TL text.

By *translation* we mean the "rendering (of) the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text"

[3] For this example I am indebted to Don Mulder.

(Newmark: 5). This was the case, for example, with the epithets attached to the names of historical personages.

And finally, *modification,* or *total transformation* (Klaudy: 141), we understand as the process of choosing a linguistically unrelated substitute for the SL word in the TL, which, evokes a similar reaction in the reader of the TL text to that evoked by the original in the reader of the SL text. The example for this was the case of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Micimackó.* Another case is when a low-prestige Christian name in the SL is not rendered by its immediate TL equivalent but by another name which has similarly low social prestige in the TL. For example, the diminutive form *Maris* in Hungarian is commonly associated with maids. In the English translation of a short story by *Géza Csáth* this name is rendered as *Rosie,* which is not the closest equivalent, but probably gives rise to similar associations in the reader of the TL text (Klaudy: 144).

5 Conclusions

In the light of all that has been demonstrated in this paper, we can now conclude that the translation of proper names cannot be regarded as a simple automatic process of transference, as was suggested by *Vendler.* On the contrary, it is a subtle decision making process, which is influenced by a complex array of factors. The first of these to take into consideration is, of course, the role (the 'meaning') of the proper name in the SL culture, and in the SL text. The translator has to examine whether the proper name has connotations relevant in the context of the SL culture and the SL text which have to be preserved in the context of the TL culture and the TL text. If it does, then again the translator has to make a decision as to which of the possible devices at his disposal will be the most suitable for his purposes; in other words, he has to decide whether he wants to keep the name in its original form (*transfer*), to substitute an equivalent TL form (*translate*), or to *modify* the original SL form in order to ensure that it will function in the TL text in the same way as it does in the TL text.

In this process there are no automatic solutions. The decisions made are the result of a careful weighing of the arguments of the three individuals cooperating inside the translator's mind: the author

of the SL text, the reader of the TL text, and the mediator between them, the translator himself.

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