Some Theoretical Aspects of the Translation of Proper Names

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Abstract

The common view seems to be that proper names do not need to be translated – with the exception when the etymological (motivational) meaning is translated (*Crna Gora > Montenegro*, *Wa-Sha-Quon-Asin > Grey Owl*). Although it is common to transfer proper names of some specific language to some other language, this transference is mostly called rendering (*New York >* Latv. *Ņujorka*) or probably considered to be a linguistic incrustation (Germ. *Einstein >* Engl. *Einstein*). However, it seems appropriate to consider the rendering as a kind of translation.

Translation is the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of a target-language text. Thus, the name must have a meaning to be translated. There has been a very long and passionate discussion about the existence of the conceptual meaning of proper names, and we can probably agree names used in a text have a meaning (proper lemmas do not) (a meaning is not identical with the explanation of a meaning!). If some name is included in a text to be translated, this name must be translated, too, and one of the possibilities for the translation is the rendering (and the rendering is sometimes seemingly identical with incrustation).

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The common view seems to be that proper names do not need to be translated – with the exception of relatively few cases when the etymological (motivational) meaning is transferred to some other language as by translating of the country name Montenegrin *Crna Gora* to the Italian *Montenegro*, Lithuanian *Juodkalnija*, Latvian *Melnkalne*, Russian *Черногория*, Albanian *Mali i Zi*, Greek *Μαυροβουνιο(ν)*, or by translating the lake name *Great Salt Lake* to the German *Großer Salzsee*, Latvian *Lielais Sālsezers*, Catalan *Gran Llac Salat*, Azerbaijani *Böyük Duzlu Göl*, Finnish *Iso Suolajärvi*. As an example for a translation of personal name the cryptonym and pen name of the Canadian writer *Grey Owl* can be mentioned, based on the Ojibwa Indian (simplified) *Wa-Sha-Quon-Asin > wenjiganooshiinh*, meaning 'great horned owl' or 'great grey owl'. Although the First Nation identity of the writer, born as Archibald Belaney in England, was fictitious, however, this circumstance should not form an obstacle for the using of his pen name as an example, and this pen name, which is a translation itself, has been translated, e.g. to Russian as *Серая Сова*, to Polish as *Szara Sowa*, to Latvian as *Pelēkā Pūce,* to Lithuanian – *Pilkoji Pelėda*, etc. These cases are called *translation of proper names* probably by all onomasticians and non-onomasticians.

Although thousands and thousands of other proper names are transferred from one specific language to some other language, this transference, on the whole, is not usually called *translation.* Sometimes it is still closer to translation in the traditional sense of this term, when the name in the target language has nothing in common in its form with the respective name in the source language, e.g. English *Germany* as the translation of German

Deutschland, or Swedish *Finland* as the translation of Finnish *Suomi*, or Latvian *Igaunija* as the translation of Estonian *Eesti*. Among the examples of this kind of translation of proper names, we have mostly country names.

In the cases when a foreign proper name is transliterated or transcribed to be used as a word in some specific target language (e.g. *New York* to Latvian *Ņujorka*, Lithuanian *Niujorkas*, Azerbaijani *Nyu York*, or German *Zwickau* to Latvian *Cvikava*, Lithuanian *Cvikau*, Czech *Cvikov*), the corresponding process is usually called *rendering*.

Sometimes – especially when transferring a proper name from one language using Roman script to another language using Roman script without any changes of the spelling of the transferred proper name (e.g. German personal name *Einstein* > English *Einstein* or the already mentioned German place name *Zwickau* without any changes in French, Spanish, Finnish, Estonian, Polish, etc.) – this transferred name could be probably considered a linguistic incrustation of a word (proper name) of some specific (foreign) language in some other language. However, regarding all other kinds of transfer of proper names from one language to another mentioned previously, we should probably consider the possibility of treating all kinds of this transfer as a translation – just like the transfer of meaning of a common noun from one language to some other language is called translation. Only the linguistic incrustation both of proper names and common nouns and other words does not belong to the category of translated items. That means even the **rendering** of proper names should be, most probably, treated as a process of translation.

Translation – according to the definition – is the communication of the meaning of a source language text by means of a target language text. Thus, to be translated the name should have a **meaning**, and the target language should have its **own means** to express the meaning of the proper name used in the source language. If we have these two preconditions – the **meaning** of a proper name and the **means of the target language** expressing this meaning – we have a **translation**.

As we know, there has been a very long and passionate discussion about the existence of the conceptual meaning of proper names, and the end of this discussion is still far away. Although many onomasticians would probably agree that names used in a text have a meaning (proper lemmas probably do not), as clearly shown, e.g. by Willy van Langendonck (2005), however, regarding the existence of the **conceptual meaning** of proper names a lot of skepticism still prevails among the researchers of this part of lexicon. In the last decades of the last century, only few German onomasticians (such as Gerhard Wotjak (1974), Ernst Michael Christoph (1991)) as well as some other researchers (e.g. Bengt Pamp (1994), Ojārs Bušs (1985)) fully accepted the conceptual meaning of proper names as a reality. Probably the development of cognitive linguistics has been one of the factors stimulating a more positive attitude to recognizing the conceptual meaning of proper names as a reality in the last decade; e.g. Ernst Hansack in his studies of cognitive onomastics argues that there is not a fundamental difference between the meaning of a proper name and the meaning of a common noun; the single difference between proper names and common nouns is the following – proper names are naming objects from classes consisting of only one item, while common nouns are naming objects from open classes (Hansack 2004: 56), and that means – from the point of view of semantics – that common nouns have one denotatum and many referents, while the denotatum of the proper name is **identical** to the referent of this name.

Thus, each proper name has only one referent, each proper name names only one item, and that is why the meanings of most proper names, especially the meanings of the majority of personal names, are not widely known. Apart from the question about very popular people and the names of these people, the meaning of a personal name in use is known mostly only by some dozens of people (here, it should be mentioned that identical names of different persons can be treated as homonyms; this idea was already proposed by Alan Gardiner (1954: 16) and supported by, among others, Charles Hocket (1958: 312), Willy Van Langendonck (1974), Klaas Willems (1996: 244, 249, 252), Silvio Brendler (2005)).

What are the main peculiarities of the conceptual meaning of proper names? There have been attempts to describe this meaning by decomposing them and describing separate semes or semantic elements, e.g. Gerhard Wotjak, forty years ago, explained the meaning of the German place name *Berlin* as consisting of semes 'a capital; the biggest city in Eastern Germany; more than one million inhabitants; metro; by the river Spree' (Wotjak 1974: 34), concluding this enumeration by *etc*. The author of this paper made an attempt to formulate explanations of quite great length describing some most fundamental marks of the denotatum of a proper name, thus, explanations describing the marks forming the notion about the content of the respective proper name, e.g. (Latvian) *Amerika* 'a continent localized on the opposite (for Latvia) side of the globe and consisting of three relatively independent parts (North America, Central America, South America), inhabited by successors of immigrants speaking mostly English or Spanish, while the native inhabitants are almost exterminated' (Bušs 2002: 120) (it must be underlined that this explanation tends to reflect the **meaning of the word** *Amerika* in the Latvian language, it does not pretend to describe the exact scientific knowledge about the denotatum of this word). Such an explanation consisting of 42 words (or 33 in Latvian) is, of course, not easy to grasp and to use. Later a second attempt was made to give a more plain structure to the explanation, dividing it into the explanation of the basic meaning ('a continent situated on Earth opposite of Europe') and three secondary meanings (1. 'a continent, consisting of three subcontinents: North America, Central America, South America'; 2. 'a continent, inhabited by people, speaking mostly English or Spanish'; 3. 'a continent, where most of the aboriginal people have been exterminated') (Bušs 2008: 479-480). Especially the second, as well as the third, secondary meaning shows clearly the difference between encyclopaedic and linguistic meaning of a proper name: the encyclopaedic meaning of the notion *America* would include at least the information about speakers of French, Portuguese, and native aboriginal languages, as well as the knowledge about the existence of many millions of aboriginal people in Latin America, while the linguistic meaning reflects a mental picture, which is not always fully and exactly harmonized with the objective reality. Of course, the above mentioned proposal for the explanation of the conceptual linguistic meaning of the name/word (Latvian) *Amerika*, is not ideal, too, and an ideal explanation of the meaning of proper name seems not to be possible at all. There are two main reasons why such an ideal explanation seems to be utopian: firstly, in the consciousness of each speaker, the meaning of each proper name tends to have far more **individual** peculiarities, as it is in the case with the meanings of common nouns, and, secondly, the meanings of proper names usually consist of many semes.

As the second step to the more exact notion of the nature of the meaning of proper names, there should probably be a clear understanding that the **meaning** of any word – should it be a proper name or a common noun – is almost never identical to the **explanation of the meaning** of this word. The meaning of the word, thus, the cognitive notion about the content of the word does not consists of the verbal definition alone, it consists of different images, especially of visual images (visual images as even the main component of the meaning of the word were already analyzed, however, probably with some exaggerations, e.g. by American psychologist Edward Bredford Tichenor more than a hundred years ago (Tichenor 1909, see Aitchison 1990: 43)). Let us look more closely at the Latvian word *Latvija* as an example: the meaning of this word in Latvian consists both of the wording 'a state, the native country of (ethnic) Latvians, localized between Baltic See, Estonia, Russia and Lithuania [a short stretch of the border with Belarus probably does not have an influence on the basic linguistic meaning of the word *Latvija*],' as well as of the visual image of the outline of Latvia on the geographical map and of some typical Latvian landscapes.

The meaning of different proper names in the consciousness of different speakers would be very interesting to analyze more thoroughly, however, from the point of view of the translation of proper names, the most important conclusion is that the meaning of proper names seems to be an absolutely real phenomenon.

Further – about the second precondition for the translation, namely, about the existence of **elements of the target language** we can use to express the meaning of the source language's proper name. It is obvious from the translation of *Crna Gora* to Latvian *Melnkalne* or Italian *Montenegro* that we have used elements of Latvian or Italian (however, English *Montenegro* is a word in English, as we will see next). It is probably not less obvious that the translation of Russian *Россия* to Latvian *Krievija* or Finnish *Venäjä* has been made using a Latvian or a Finnish word respectively, and just in the same way German *Deutschland* can be translated using the Latvian word *Vācija* or the English word *Germany*, or the Finnish word *Saksa* and so on. However, this kind of translation differs already fundamentally from the previous one, because in order to translate the word we do not use here the onymization of common noun or nouns semantically related to the common noun, or nouns used to create proper name in the source language. Now – by translation of *Россия* and *Deutchland* – we translate the proper name of the source language immediately to the proper name of the target language – without any associations with some common noun.

The next step to the more peculiar or more onomastic kinds of translation of proper names leads to the cases when the translated name in the target language differs only slightly from the name in the source language, e.g. Latvian *Somija* as translation of Finnish *Suomi*, English *Russia* as translation of Russian *Россия*, or English *Poland* as translation of Polish *Polska*. Do we still have a translation here? Yes, because the word *Russia* is a word in English, the word *Somija* is a word in Latvian. From the point of view of native English speakers, there should not be **linguistic** differences between the names *Germany* and *Russia* or even between *Russia* and *Montenegro*, all of them are **English** names, namely, elements of the toponymic subsystem of foreign country names in English. This subsystem – subsystem of foreign country names – consists of approximately two hundred proper names in English, as well as in Latvian and in many other languages. We are probably sure that such elements of this English subsystem as *Germany*, *Russia*, *Sweden*, *Spain*, *China*, etc. are words in

English (each name is a word, and each word is a word of some specific language, thus, if the above mentioned are not words in English, the question would be: words of which language are they?). Some country names are written in many languages identically to the spelling in the source language, e.g. (English, Latvian, German, etc.) *Moldova*, *Nauru*, *Tuvalu*. However, even these names are elements of the subsystem of foreign country names of each respective language, and thus, translations into these languages (translations without spelling differences from the translated word of the source language are nothing special, e.g. English *radio* is translated to Latvian as *radio*, many similar examples can be find by translating common nouns from one closely related language to the other, e.g. Latvian *diena* 'day' would be translated to Lithuanian as *diena*, Finnish *kala* 'fish' would be translated to Estonian as *kala*, etc.).

Translation of country names is probably the most obvious example for the translation of proper names. Quite similar to this kind of translation is the translation of the names of capitals (e.g. German [from the point of view of the language] *Wien* to English *Vienna*, Azerbaijani *Vyana*, Croatian *Beč*) and the translation of the names of other big cities (e.g. France *Marseille* to Italian *Marsiglia*, Spanish *Marsella*, Azerbaijani *Marsel* or Lithuanian *Marselis*). It is really true that in many of the Roman script languages only some names of foreign cities are usually translated, as most of the names of foreign cities are used as linguistic incrustations, thus, they are taken from some foreign language just in the form existing in the source language, and treated as words/names of the source language (see e.g. Paikkala 2013: 4). However, linguistic incrustations of foreign **proper names** (with exception of some ergonyms) are not common at all for at least some of the languages using Roman script, first of all for Latvian (as well as for the Azerbaijani using relatively newly Romanized script), and incrustations of foreign **place names** are not commonly used in the Lithuanian, too. Thus, in Latvian, Lithuanian and Azerbaijani most foreign place names are rendered according to the pronunciation in source language, the results of the rendering are Latvian, Lithuanian, or Azerbaijani names of foreign geographical objects, these names are elements of Latvian, Lithuanian, or Azerbaijani; the meaning of rendered names reflects, at least to some extent, the meaning of respective names in the source language, and thus, they are translations of foreign place names to Latvian, Lithuanian, or Azerbaijani. We have the same kind of translation of proper names in languages using other (non-Roman) scripts, e.g. the Cyrillic script – Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Serbian, etc. For instance, only one example: Italian *Napoli* is translated to Russian and Ukrainian as *Неаполь*, to Bulgarian as *Неапол*, to Serbian as *Напуль*, and these translated names are Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Serbian words.

One small specification of the process of the translation of proper names is probably needed. One does not always have existing words in the target language for the translation of some foreign name one has probably never seen before. However, this is not a reason to abandon translating this name, everyone creates a **new** word and name in target language for their needs, just as everyone would create a new common noun to translate some newly created term or designation of some exotic animal that has not been heard or seen before. As an example we can mention the name of our colleague, German onomastician *Christian Zschieschang*; in order to translate, some years ago, this name from German to Latvian we

have used the word/name, which already existed in Latvian, *Kristians*, while the surname *Čīšangs* as a Latvian word has been created *ad hoc*.

Why is it **important** to treat the rendering of foreign proper names as a kind of translation? First of all, the use of **appropriate** terms helps to understand better the reality, the nature of the onomastic processes connected with the transferring of proper names from one language to the other. The popular and wrong conviction that proper names (especially personal names) are not at all translated should be disproved to prevent quite a lot of conflicts and even legal proceedings; it is true that many proper names are transferred as such, as linguistic incrustations from one language using Roman script to **most** other languages using Roman script, and there we really do not have a translation, however, this kind of transfer of proper names is not universal, e.g. it is used only partly in Lithuanian and **is not used at all** in Latvian and probably in Azerbaijani, as well as in many (probably most) of the languages using non-Roman scripts.

And last, but not least, in connection with standardizing of names of foreign geographical objects the interpretation and definitions of exonyms and endonyms should be harmonized with the existence of languages in which **all** foreign place names tend to be translated.

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