DOI: 10.30816/ICONN6/2023/68

Incorrect translation of proper names in covert translations by unqualified translators

Mariann Slíz
ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract: Translations are not only carried out by qualified translators (e.g. unofficial subtitling, news translated by journalists or bloggers). The lack of knowledge of translation studies and onomastics may easily lead to incorrect translations of proper names. The paper proposes a qualitative approach to examine the most characteristic types of errors appearing in covert translation into Hungarian: in news texts that are not obviously translations. Incorrectly translated names in these text types may generate incomprehension or misunderstanding of substantial information with a high probability, since names tend to answer at least two of the five W questions of journalism (*who*/*what*, *where*).
Keywords: translation of proper names, incorrect translation, translation errors, covert translation, news translation.

1. Introduction

Although the idea that the majority of proper nouns cannot and should not be translated is still firmly held by laypeople and part of translation and onomastic literature (e.g. Zabeeh 1968: 69, Newmark 1988: 70, Mańczak 1991, Muñoz Martín 1995: 194). Since the last decades of the 20th century, studies to the contrary have been appearing in increasing numbers. In this paper, I intend to show that proper names are not only translatable but should be translated. Moreover, their incorrect translation can not only cause misunderstanding in the same way as the incorrect translation of common words or larger linguistic units but can be more striking for the recipient of the text. Indeed, in the case of so-called covert translations, this is often the only indication that a text is a translation. The proper name is an identifier of a specific entity. Its incorrect translation makes the identification a failure: depending on the type of translation error, the recipient will either have no chance of identifying the denotatum, i.e. will not understand part or all of what is being said, or, worse still, will misinterpret the name as referring to another entity, i.e. will interpret the text differently from the source text.

Incorrect translations of names may occur in any text types but can be particularly problematic in texts whose primary function is to convey information. In these texts, the ratio of names may account for up to 10% of the total lexicon of the text (Maurel et al. 2007: 58–59) since they denote entities that are the subjects, objects, devices, places, etc., of actions and events. Moreover, a significant number of such texts (e.g. news, content summaries, product descriptions) are often not translated by

qualified translators but by laypeople with a very varied knowledge of the source language or even no knowledge of the language, using machine translation (cf. Klaudy 2022: 18). Additionally, the need for speed in journalism, especially regarding online written media, may lead to the omission or simplification of proofreading (i.e. professional control). Consequently, errors in translating names are common in these types of texts.

In the following, I will demonstrate the most characteristic types of errors utilising the name translation errors found in texts that are primarily used for informational purposes and can be understood as covert translations. The analysis is qualitative: the aim is not to show the frequency with which each type occurs in such texts. A quantitative analysis would require a closed corpus, which is not made possible by the eventuality of error occurrence.

2. Covert translation and the incorrect translation of names

Before introducing the types of errors, it is essential to clarify three fundamental terms to the presentation: *covert translation, the translation of names* and the *incorrect translation of names.* Covert translation is when a text enjoys the status of an original text in the target linguaculture, i.e. it is not pragmatically marked as a translation, not identified as a translation by the recipients (House 2016: 4). This is the case for example, of news taken from other languages. Although translation is an integral part of the news production process, it is rarely apparent as it remains inseparable from the article writing process. Typically, only some of the article is translated but is re-structured according to the expectations and presumed knowledge of the target language audience and the typical news structure of the target culture, keeping some parts, leaving others out or adding others, even rearranging the order and emphasis. (Cf. Scammell and Bielsa 2022: 1434–1435.) It is also not uncommon that in an article which summarise, comment on or react to another article in another language, only the proper names are translated (i.e. the text of the summary article can be considered original, not a translation of the summarised article, but the proper names are translated from the summarised article). For this reason, incorrect translation of names may occur even in an entirely original article, apart from the names, for example, which has no antecedent in another language at the text level.

Concerning the translation of names, it is essential to note that it means not only word-by-word translation but all the possible operations a translator may apply when translating the name from the source text to the target text. These operations can be represented on a scale ranging from no change at all to the most significant, most drastic changes (e.g. omitting a name, replacing it with a common noun or a paraphrase) (cf. Vermes 2005: 112–115, Slíz 2019: 19–21). This broader interpretation is based on the vital point that the choice of the operation used to handle a name (i.e. the unchanged transfer of the name as well as its word-by-word translation) is the translator's decision, based on the consideration of a combination of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. Based on this interpretation, therefore, the question of whether to translate names is

pointless. They are always translated, only sometimes with transference (without any changes), while in other cases, otherwise. Therefore, the real questions to be asked about the translation of names are how to translate names and what factors influence the translator's choice between the operations. It is essential to accentuate that a name can be translated in several ways depending on the context, which contains several intra- and extratextual factors.

As we have seen above, the fact that the covert translation is also a translation is not apparent to the recipient, but the incorrect translation of names may reveal it. At this point, it is essential to define the term *incorrect translation.* According to Chesterman (2000: 121), anything in the target text that provokes a critical reaction from the reader can be broadly interpreted as a translation error. Since the judgement depends on the recipients and their expectations, it is a highly relative concept: some people have access to the source text, others do not; some people are familiar with the source culture, others are not; and the decision of what is or is not a mistranslation in a given period also depends on the given time, culture, society etc. Due to its relativity, I disagree with this definition. The fact that a recipient does not recognise a translation as incorrect does not mean the translation is correct. I believe incorrect translation can be identified based on objective criteria, and it is not the same as mistranslation but is a much broader concept. Mistranslation means that the translator incorrectly identifies the denotation of the name in the source text and conveys misunderstood, altered information to the recipient by using a linguistic element (proper name, common noun or paraphrase) that refers to another denotatum in the target culture. However, concerning proper names, not only can those errors be considered incorrect and mislead the recipient, but also every case when the translator improperly chooses or misapplies the translation operation, making it difficult or impossible to identify the meaning of the name in the target text.

3. Sources and method

The sources for the following analysis are name translation errors in articles published on Hungarian-language news websites: they are partly my own collections and partly cited in articles of a Hungarian blog (entitled Leiter Jakab) on mistranslations. Some articles, in which the incorrect translations were found, insert links to their English source articles. An attentive reader can, therefore, infer that a partial translation of the English original is involved. Other articles, however, do not refer to their sources; only the incorrect translation of names reveals that they are (at least partial) translations.

In presenting the types of errors, first, the translated name with a brief context in Hungarian will be cited, and a word-by-word translation into English will be provided, followed by an analysis of the error. Examples were selected to represent as many name types as possible, demonstrating that translation errors may affect both the less typical and the more typical name types. The presentation of the types of errors partly follows Tamás Farkas's studies (2007, in press), which outline the types of errors based on examples from various text and translation types.

4. Typical mistakes in the translation of names

4.1. Categorisation error

One of the most significant errors is when the translators incorrectly categorise the linguistic element to be translated: they mistakenly identify a proper noun as a common noun or vice versa, or a name belonging to a particular name type is identified by them as a representative of another name type. One might think that with a basic knowledge of the source language, this could not happen, but many examples show the opposite. Studies by Kimberly Klassen (2022) have shown that language learners may and do have problems recognising proper names, especially when they come across languages and cultures that are distant from each other and use different writing systems.

Quote (1) is an example of a translator misinterpreting a common noun as a proper name:

> (1) "Azt, hogy András herceget megkereste az FBI, a herceget képviselő amerikai ügyvéd, **Attorney Geoffrey Berman** erősítette meg" (CSFD 2020). ['The fact that Prince Andrew had been approached by the FBI was confirmed by **Attorney Geoffrey Berman,** the US lawyer representing the Prince.']

As it is seen, the translator here has misinterpreted the common word *attorney* as a first name. Moreover, he or she has wrongly positioned the person it refers to from the side of the prosecution on the side of the defence.

In example (2), the opposite is the case, as the translator interpreted a proper name, specifically a surname, as a common noun:

> (2) "Két hónappal az 1986-os gyilkosságot követően egy fiatal atyát, **Russell püspököt** tartóztatták le…" (Bishop 2013) ['Two months after the 1986 murder, a young priest, **Bishop Russell,** was arrested…']

The translator failed to notice that the name in the source text was in reverse order *(Russell Bishop),* nor did he or she find it strange that the "bishop" was 20 years old when the murders were committed. Of course, he was not a priest at all.

It also happens that the translator confuses the subcategories of proper names:

> (3) "A republikánusoknak feltűnt, hogy Antrim megye északi részén több ezer szavazatot tévedésből számoltak Bidenre, és **John GOP** jelölt helyett Gary Peters demokrata szenátusra" (GOP 2020). ['The Republicans noticed that thousands of votes in northern Antrim County were mistakenly counted for Biden and Democratic Senate [!] Gary Peters instead of **John GOP** candidate.']

Apart from the fact that the translator confused the words *szenátus* 'senate' and *szenátor* 'senator', the error to be highlighted here is that he or she interpreted *GOP,* which is an abbreviation of the informal name of the Republican Party *(Grand Old*

Party), as the candidate's surname – although the linguistic element was written in all capital letters, which is not typical for surnames, and the source text (Nelson 2020) also included the candidate's real surname: *John James*. This strongly raises the suspicion that machine translation was employed.

4.2. Undertranslation

The name of the following type of error, given by Tamás Farkas (in press), reflects the nature of this error well: the proper name is transferred unchanged from the source text to the target text, although the translation norms of the target language would require some other, stronger operation.

> (4) "A királyi család a közösségi oldalakon tette közzé **Louis herceg** bemutatkozó fotóit, amelyeket, mint korábban György hercegét és **Charlotte hercegnőjét** is, az édesanyjuk, Katalin hercegnő készítette" (Louis 2018). ['The royal family has posted **Prince Louis'** debut photos on social media, taken by their mother, Princess Katalin, as were those of Prince György and **Princess Charlotte**.']

The translation of the names of the members of the English royal family, as can be seen, is applied inconsistently: two of them were translated by substituting the target language equivalent, as is the custom in Hungarian for members of ruling dynasties, certain religious leaders and saints, but the two highlighted names were translated by transference, which is against the translational norm mentioned above. The problem here, therefore, is not only the deviation from the norm but the inconsistency, the total lack of demand to treat names of the same type uniformly.

The error may also occur when translating place names:

> (5) "A fő helyszínek európai és közel-keleti nagyvárosok lesznek úgy mint Párizs, Köln, Bécs, Dubrovnik, **Acre** plusz Korfu szigete" (Benke 2021). ['The main locations will be major European and Middle Eastern cities such as Paris, Cologne, Vienna, Dubrovnik, **Acre** plus the island of Corfu.']

Since the English source name *(Acre)* has a Hungarian equivalent *(Akkó),* inserting it would have been the correct operation. For the other names, this operation was used by the translator (cf. e.g. *Cologne* > *Köln*) thus the reason for the error is presumably the translator's lack of knowledge of the Hungarian equivalent of the name (or, more precisely, the lack of knowledge of its existence).

4.3. Semantic translation instead of substitution

According to Tamás Farkas (in press), this method is "a translation in the stricter sense, usually instead of the substitution of a target language equivalent previously created with the similar method". Such is the case of example (6), in which the translator apparently failed to recognise an English translation *(the Virgin of Dolores)* of the Spanish name *(La Virgen de los Dolores)* for the Virgin Mary in the English source text

(MND Staff 2021), and created a non-existent saintly name instead, in which *Doloróza* appears to be a first name:

> (6) "A **Szűz Doloróza** templomát a közeli El Zangarro településsel együtt még 1979-ben, a Purísima gát építésekor borította el a víz" (D'Anger 2021). ['The church of the **Virgin Doloróza,** along with the nearby village of El Zangarro, was flooded in 1979 during the construction of the Purísima dam.']

The correct Hungarian equivalent of this name would be *Fájdalmas Szűz*. It is quite possible that a part of the Latin name *Mater Dolorosa* ('Mother of Sorrows'), relatively well-known among Catholic and/or educated people in Hungary, confused the translator.

4.4. Incorrectly selected equivalent

Polysemous and homonymous names in the source language can also cause problems for the translator if the target language equivalents do not have either of these relationships. In such cases, if the translator misidentifies the denotatum of the name because of the identical source language form, he or she will inevitably confuse the target language equivalents, as in the following example:

> (7) "Letartóztattak egy **grúziai** házaspárt az amerikai Georgia államban, miután a rendőrség megállapította, hogy halálos mennyiségű alkohollal itatták meg 4 hetes gyermeküket" (Grúzia 2022). ['A **Georgia** couple have been arrested in the US state of Georgia after police found they had given a lethal amount of alcohol to their 4-week-old child.']

The misunderstanding was caused by the fact that in English, the name *Georgia* is homonymic: besides the American state, it is also the name of a state on the border between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. However, the Hungarian equivalent of the former is *Georgia,* born by transference, while the latter is called *Grúzia* in Hungarian. More recently, initially mainly in diplomatic texts and sporadically in news, *Georgia* [gɛorgiɒ] has also been used at the state's own request (Gercsák 2019: 85–86). The translator's mistake raises the suspicion that he or she did not even try to interpret the text or left it to machine translation. Namely, some clues in the English source text (Egan 2022) indicated that the arrested couple belonged to the American state; these clues should have been realised and understood by even a moderately attentive and unqualified human translator. For instance, the American state is mentioned in the same sentence where the incorrectly translated name appeared. Additionally, the parents' names sound not Georgian but rather American (*Sydnei Moran Dunn* and *Marquis Simon Colvin*).

4.5. Incorrect transcription or transliteration

Names used in texts written with non-Latin alphabet should be transliterated or transcribed into Hungarian. For these operations, each language has its own standards and sometimes, for example, in Hungarian, its own rules (cf. OH. 246–275). Deviating from these rules is also considered incorrect translation since, although it does not necessarily mislead the interpretation, it at least makes identifying the denotatum and pronouncing the names more difficult. In today's Hungarian, for example, it is a typical error that names from languages using the Cyrillic alphabet are taken from English articles with English orthography (although English transcription rules differ significantly from the Hungarian ones), while the English transcriptions should be traced back to the Cyrillic forms and that transcribed into Hungarian.

> (8) "A felvételen **Sergey Aksyonov,** Krím kormányzója látogatja meg a mini Velencévé változott **Kerch** városát" (PZs 2021). ['**Sergey Aksyonov**, the Governor of Crimea, is pictured visiting the town of **Kerch,** which has become a mini Venice.']

In example (8), the correct Hungarian transcriptions would have been *Szergej Akszjonov* and *Kercs.* The reason for the frequency of this typical error is a political change followed by a cultural change. During the socialist period, learning Russian was compulsory in Hungary from primary school onwards, so anyone who completed at least the fourth grade could read the Russian letters. After the regime change, Russian ceased to be compulsory. Since then, the learning of 2 foreign languages has been compulsory: among them, English dominates, while the share of Russian learners has decreased to a minimum (in 2021/2022, 54.6% of all schoolchildren studied English and only 0.4% Russian, including all types of schools from primary to higher education, cf. KSH. 1–4). Consequently, even if translators who make such mistakes know the rules of transcription (which is also doubtful), they have little chance of transcribing the names correctly without even recognising the letters to be transcribed.

4.6. Failure to recognise the nominative form of the source language name

If the form of the name differs from the nominative in some grammatical cases in a source language, it may happen that the translator mistakenly considers the declined form to be nominative (for this error see e.g. Horváth 2008: 36). This can be seen in the following example:

> (9) "Jiří Menzel **Vladislava Vancury** hazánkban is megjelent regényéből forgatta 1989-es filmjét" (Vancury 2020). ['Jiří Menzel made his 1989 film from **Vladislava Vancury's** novel, which was also published in Hungary.']

The Czech writer's name is *Vladislav Vančura.* The translator misunderstood the Czech possessive case and even omitted the diacritic. However, we cannot be sure that the direct source text was Czech. It is quite possible that the mistake was made when

translating from Czech into English, for example, and that the Hungarian translator took it from an English text. Of course, even if this was the case, it does not excuse the Hungarian translator since he or she would still have had to look up the unknown name. The fact that this did not happen can best be explained by the time factor on the one hand and the fact that the translator was not qualified on the other.

4.7. Incorrect name use

The following error concerns not the name stock but name use: sometimes it is not the finding of the target language equivalent that causes the translator problems but the distinction between formal and informal variants of the name, the knowledge of the norms of their use, i.e. an insufficient level of competence in the target language, as in the case below:

> (10) "Julien Tardieu, a **Toulouse kutatója** szerint a hangszert vélhetőleg szertartásokon használták" (Molnár 2021). ['According to **Toulouse researcher** Julien Tardieu, the instrument was probably used in ceremonies.']

The English-language paper cited in the article (Kornei 2021) states: „This shell might have been played during ceremonies or used to summon gatherings, said Julien Tardieu, another **Toulouse researcher** who studies sound perception." That it is not simply about the city is clear from an earlier point in the text, in which the *University of Toulouse* is mentioned as a research site. However, in Hungarian, there is no informal use of the name of a university named after its seat, in which the mere name of the city metonymically designates the institution. On the other hand, football teams, for example, are typically referred to in this way (e.g. *győzött a Barcelona* 'Barcelona conquered'). For this reason, the phrase *a Toulouse kutatója* 'the researcher of Toulouse' in the Hungarian text may lead astray the identification of the denotatum of the name.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis of the examples, it can be concluded that there are several reasons behind incorrect translations of names: insufficient knowledge of the source language on the part of the unqualified translator, lack of knowledge of the target language equivalent of the source language name, lack of knowledge of the structure of source and target language names, insufficient knowledge of the source culture, lack of knowledge of the target language translation norms and rules, and lack of time and demand to understand the text in depth. The mistakes made by laypeople in translation also highlight several aspects connected to the translation of proper names that should be included in translator training, such as the possible operations and the factors that influence their choice by a translator.

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