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Challenges and strategies in the translation of proper names

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Abstract. Proper names (PNs) pose significant challenges in translation due to their cultural, historical, and linguistic significance. This study explores strategies for translating proper names across different languages, focusing on empirical data and theoretical models of research. The methodology involves a structured review of academic literature and case studies from Kazakh, Russian, English, and Chinese texts in both literary and formal genres. Our analysis is based on the translation strategy framework proposed by Newmark and extended by Fernandes, including transliteration, semantic translation, adaptation, and substitution. Findings show that proper name translation is highly context-sensitive: while legal and academic texts require standardization and transliteration, literary texts allow greater flexibility through adaptation and localization. Particular attention is given to Kazakh toponyms and anthroponyms, where inconsistencies in rendering affect both meaning and international comprehensibility. This study concludes that translating proper names requires balancing source-language fidelity with target-language readability and cultural relevance. Translators should apply context-aware strategies and align with national transliteration standards and international publication norms. The study concludes that proper name translation depends heavily on textual function, audience expectations, and the cultural load of the name itself.

Keywords: proper names, translation strategies, onomastics, cultural adaptation, equivalence.

Introduction

Proper names are a significant element in any text, especially in literature, historical writing, and geographic descriptions. Unlike common nouns, proper names identify specific individuals, places, or entities and often carry connotative and cultural meanings. Their translation involves a range of decisions that can affect both the semantic integrity and cultural reception of a text.

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Proper names (PNs), including anthroponyms, toponyms, ergonyms, and theonyms, are key elements of human communication. Although often seen as untranslatable, their rendering in target languages may require modification due to cultural, phonetic, or semantic considerations (Zharkynbekova et al., 2024; Mukhametkhanuly & Kanat, 2018).

Problem Statement

Translating PNs poses a dilemma: should a translator preserve the original form or adapt it for target language comprehension and cultural acceptability? In the context of Kazakh, Russian, and global translation studies, this issue remains underexplored in applied settings.

Objectives:

- To categorize and describe major translation strategies for proper names.
- To examine case studies involving Kazakh and international contexts.
- To draw on high-quality literature (Scopus/WoS indexed) for theoretical and practical insights.
- To align findings with Kazakhstani Ministry of Science and Higher Education requirements.

Literature Review

In the Central Asian context, especially Kazakhstan, the translation of proper names has become increasingly relevant due to geopolitical shifts, language reforms, and internationalization. Zharkynbekova et al. (2024), in a Scopus-indexed article, examined the inconsistencies and challenges in the transliteration and translation of Kazakh geographical names. They emphasize the need for standardized approaches, particularly in English and Russian versions of official documents and academic publications.

Mukhametkhanuly and Kanat (2018) explored how culturally significant Kazakh names were translated into Chinese in *Su Beihai's* monograph *The History of Kazakh Culture*. Their findings underscore the symbolic loss that occurs when names are substituted or inadequately explained.

Zarei and Norouzi (2016) conducted a study on Persian-to-English name translation and concluded that names are not universally untranslatable; instead, they should be evaluated based on genre, audience, and narrative function. This aligns with Vermes' (2003) functional typology, which defines strategies from transliteration to omission based on communicative context.

Traditional views on the translatability of proper names were rooted in structuralist linguistics. Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), in their foundational work *Comparative Stylistics of French and English*, argued that proper names are generally untranslatable and should be transferred as they are. This direct transfer model influenced early translation practices, especially in legal, academic, and historical documents.

Peter Newmark (1998) expanded this discussion by suggesting that while most proper names should be transferred, certain categories – such as names with descriptive elements, historical figures, or literary characters – may require translation or modification. He emphasized the importance of context and reader expectations.

Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) suggested that proper names are typically transferred unchanged. However, this is an oversimplification. Later theorists like Hermans (1988), Vermes (2003), and Nord (1997) emphasized the contextual and functional aspects of name translation.

More recent research incorporates cognitive linguistics and reader reception studies. Galewska (2019) analyzed how Chinese proper names are interpreted by Polish and English

readers. Her research highlighted how names evoke mental imagery and cultural associations, which can be lost without strategic adaptation or glossing.

Similarly, Fernandes (2006) analyzed the translation of proper names in children's fantasy literature, concluding that names often perform narrative, symbolic, and stylistic functions. His study categorizes translation strategies such as phonetic adaptation, cultural substitution, and semantic translation, showing how different strategies impact reader understanding.

Methods and Methodology

The research uses several methods:

1. Literature Review

A systematic review of academic publications from 2003–2024 was conducted, focusing on literature, research journals and other materials. Search terms included proper names translation, onomastics, transliteration, and Kazakh toponymy. Sources were selected based on relevance, impact factor, and empirical contribution.

2. Analytical Framework

This study applies the translation strategy typology proposed by Newmark (1988) and expanded by Fernandes (2006), adapted for the analysis of case studies. The strategies include:

- Transliteration
- Semantic translation
- Cultural adaptation/localization
- Substitution
- Omission (rare cases)

3. Case Study Selection

Texts involving translation of Kazakh, Chinese, and English PNs in literary works, government documents, and academic texts were chosen for analysis. Notable sources include:

- Zharkynbekova et al. (2024) on transliteration and translation of Kazakh toponyms.
- Mukhametkhanuly & Kanat (2018) on Chinese–Kazakh cultural name transfer.
- Galewska (2019) on cognitive aspects of translating Chinese proper names, etc.

Results and Discussion

According to the International Council of Onomastic Sciences, proper names are expressions used to refer to individual entities such as people (anthroponyms), places (toponyms), organizations (ergonyms), and even dates (chrononyms).

Proper names in texts serve various functions:

- Identifying: to denote a unique entity
- Descriptive: to imply physical or personality traits
- Symbolic: to carry thematic or allegorical meaning
- Evocative: to arouse cultural or historical associations

The translator's approach should consider which function dominates in the source context.

Translation Strategies

Researchers have identified several strategies for translating proper names (e.g., Newmark; Fernandes, etc.):

Table 1 – Strategies for translating proper names

Strategy	Description	Example
Transliteration	Phonetically rendering the name in the target script	Shakespeare → Шекспир (Kazakh)
Direct Transfer	Keeping the name unchanged	London → Лондон (Kazakh)
Translation	Translating semantic content of the name	Yellow River → Сарыарка
Adaptation/Localization	Modifying the name to suit the target culture	Santa Claus → Аяз ата (Kazakh)
Substitution	Replacing the name with a culturally equivalent one	John → Иван (in some older Russian texts)
Omission	Skipping the name (rare and only if it does not hinder comprehension)	Often seen in children's literature

Cultural Load Challenges

Translation of proper names is one of the largest problems in translation studies (Suzani, 2008). Translation was most challenging when names carried symbolic or historical significance (e.g., *Al-Farabi*, *Turkistan*, *Don Quixote*). Semantic translation risked losing identity, while strict transliteration led to unintelligibility. For example, proper names like *Al-Farabi* or *Turkistan* are not merely identifiers – they encapsulate centuries of historical memory, religious meaning, and cultural pride. For instance:

- *Al-Farabi* is not just a name but a symbolic representation of Islamic philosophy, Central Asian intellectual history, and national identity for countries like Kazakhstan.

- *Turkistan* refers to a historical region central to Turkic heritage, Islam, and Silk Road trade. Rendering it in a simplified or localized form may erase this complexity.

Translating or adapting such names semantically would strip away this symbolic significance and mislead readers unfamiliar with the background.

While transliteration keeps the original phonetics, it can confuse readers in target cultures if the name structure is foreign:

- “Farabi” or “al-Fārābī” (Kaz. *ал-Фараби*) might appear unintelligible to Western readers without explanatory notes.

So, how can an interpreter or a translator solve such issues?

Here are the possible solutions:

- Footnoting or glossing: Explain the cultural context of the name without altering it.
- Standardized transliteration + cultural notes: Maintain form but support reader comprehension.

- Partial adaptation: Keep the root name but adapt suffixes or titles (e.g., “Philosopher Al-Farabi”).

Proper names with deep historical, religious, and cultural connotations – such as *Turkistan*, *Al-Farabi*, or *Khoja Ahmed Yasawi* – present more complex translation challenges than neutral personal or geographic names. These names are not only referential but symbolic signifiers of

identity, heritage, and worldview. Misrepresentation in translation can lead to semantic loss, political misunderstanding, or cultural invisibility.

1. Symbolic and Intertextual Significance

Names like *Al-Farabi* function as cultural metaphors. Al-Farabi is not just a name—it represents a Central Asian polymath whose contributions to philosophy, logic, and ethics are revered throughout the Islamic world. In Kazakhstani discourse, he is also celebrated as a national figure. If a translator attempts to adapt his name semantically (e.g., "The Second Teacher from Farab"), the historical and symbolic weight embedded in the name collapses. Likewise, *Khoja Ahmed Yassawi* is inseparable from Sufism and Turkic spirituality. His name requires preservation and, ideally, contextual clarification.

2. Politicization and Risk of Misinterpretation

Certain names, such as *Turkistan*, carry geopolitical connotations. While in Kazakhstan the name refers to a revered city and historical region, in international contexts it may evoke associations with separatist movements (e.g., East Turkestan in China). Translating or interpreting *Turkistan* without clarification may result in political bias or confusion. In politically sensitive regions, such names are heavily regulated, and their translations are often ideologically loaded.

To avoid these problems, translators should:

- Use standardized transliteration (e.g., Turkistan, not Tūrkestan or Turkestan unless in historical context).
- Avoid semantic substitution or phonetic distortions.
- Add footnotes, endnotes, or glossaries for clarification, particularly in academic or literary contexts.

3. Literary and Religious Depth

In literature, names are often loaded with intertextual references. For example, the name *Don Quixote* alludes to Cervantes' novel and connotes idealism, madness, and romantic heroism. Translating this name literally would obscure these associations. Similarly, *Al-Farabi* and *Turkistan* appear in literary texts as more than locations or individuals – they embody ideologies, historical epochs, or spiritual values. Their translation must account for these layers.

4. Recommendations for Translators

To maintain cultural fidelity and semantic transparency:

- Prioritize transliteration over translation when names are symbolic or historical.
- Provide contextualization in accompanying text (e.g., "Al-Farabi, the renowned Islamic philosopher born in present-day Kazakhstan...").
- Consult international transliteration standards (e.g., UNGEGN) and national guides (e.g., those issued by Kazakhstan's Ministry of Culture or Institute of Linguistics).
- For publications targeting international audiences, include glossaries or introductory notes on key names.

5. Impact on Academic and Cultural Communication

For Kazakh scholars and translators seeking to publish in Scopus or Web of Science-indexed journals, these issues are particularly important. Misrendered names can reduce the clarity and credibility of the work. For example, an article discussing *Turkistan* without distinguishing it from broader Turkic or Uyghur contexts may confuse reviewers unfamiliar with Kazakh history.

Standardization and cultural explanation are not only best practices in translation – they are essential for intellectual decolonization and cultural diplomacy. They ensure that national heritage is represented fairly and comprehensibly in global discourse.

Akizhanova et al., having studied translation issues of toponyms, state that they “...are lexical units that exist only in a language. Being a part of onomastics, toponymy studies toponyms as units of language with their own features, semantics, structure and functions. Interlanguage transfer of place names is the process of adapting geographical names of one language to another language” (Akizhanova et al., 2024). Thus, when translating toponyms, it is critically important to take into account the etymology and history of the toponym formation, since they carry the main meaning of the name.

To sum up, the names of geographical localities are valuable monuments for the cultural heritage of mankind. The translation of proper names presents a complex interplay between linguistic, cultural, and functional factors. While some names demand preservation for the sake of authenticity, others require adaptation to ensure clarity and resonance within the target culture. Translators must navigate these challenges with a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, employing a flexible range of strategies – such as transliteration, calque, substitution, and annotation. Ultimately, successful translation of proper names hinges not only on linguistic accuracy but also on cultural sensitivity and the translator’s ability to mediate meaning across borders. As global communication continues to expand, so too does the importance of this nuanced aspect of translation studies.

Conclusion

The translation of proper names is not a simple mechanical transfer but a nuanced decision-making process that must weigh semantic, phonetic, cultural, and functional elements. As globalization and cross-cultural communication expand, the translator’s role in mediating name-based references becomes increasingly critical.

Translating symbolically charged proper names is far more than a mechanical process of substituting one linguistic unit for another – it is an act of cultural negotiation and identity mediation. These names – whether they belong to historical figures like Al-Farabi, places like Turkistan, or literary characters like Don Quixote – carry embedded layers of meaning that span centuries, civilizations, and ideologies.

Unlike generic names or terms, symbolic proper names often function as cultural icons. They embody the memory of historical events, religious identities, philosophical schools, or national legacies. As such, the translator becomes responsible not only for linguistic accuracy but also for preserving cultural integrity. This task requires a functional approach, where the translator evaluates the purpose, audience, and genre of the target text to determine how much of the original meaning can – or should – be retained, adapted, or explained.

In some cases, transliteration may be sufficient, particularly in academic texts or formal writing, where the aim is to preserve historical precision. In others, such as children’s literature or popular media, cultural adaptation may be more appropriate to ensure emotional and narrative resonance. The key lies in the translator’s ability to balance semantic preservation, phonetic accessibility, and reader comprehension without compromising the deeper connotations of the original name.

Furthermore, symbolically loaded names often operate as intertextual markers. They link texts across time and space, drawing on the reader's prior knowledge or cultural literacy. When these names are mistranslated or oversimplified, their symbolic and aesthetic functions collapse, leaving a gap in meaning that may alienate or mislead the target audience.

In the context of postcolonial or national identity formation – as seen in Kazakhstan, for example – the translation of proper names takes on an additional political dimension. Translators are not merely converting texts; they are actively participating in the shaping of cultural narratives for international audiences. Misrepresentation of names like Turkistan or Khoja Ahmed Yassawi can perpetuate external misunderstandings or erase important cultural distinctions.

To address these complexities, translators must move beyond rigid “rules” of translation and adopt a strategic, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded approach. This may include the use of footnotes, glossaries, explanatory commentary, or the preservation of original forms with minimal interference. Academic institutions and publishing standards – such as those enforced by Scopus and Web of Science – should also support this level of nuance by allowing supplementary tools that protect cultural specificity.

Ultimately, the translation of proper names is not just about language – it is about voice, history, and identity. A name carries with it a worldview, and the translator's role is to ensure that this worldview survives the journey across linguistic and cultural borders.

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Жалқы есімдерді аудару мәселелері мен стратегиялары

Аңдатпа. Мәдени, тарихи және лингвистикалық ерекшеліктерге байланысты жалқы есімдер аудармада айтарлықтай қиындықтар тудырады. Мақалада эмпирикалық мәліметтер мен теориялық модельдерге назар аударып, әр түрлі тілдерден жалқы есімдерді аудару стратегиялары қарастырылады. Әдістемеге академиялық әдебиеттерге құрылымдық шолу және әдеби және ресми жанрлардағы қазақ, орыс, ағылшын және Қытай мәтіндеріне жағдайлық зерттеулер кіреді. Біздің талдауымыз Ньюмарк ұсынған және Фернандес кеңейткен аударма стратегиясының тұжырымдамасына негізделген, оның ішінде транслитерация, семантикалық аударма, бейімделу және ауыстыру. Зерттеу нәтижелері жалқы есімдерді аудару негізінен контекске байланысты екенін көрсетеді: құқықтық және ғылыми мәтіндер стандарттау мен транслитерацияны қажет етсе, көркем мәтіндер бейімделу және локализация арқылы үлкен икемділікті қамтамасыз етеді. Қазақ топонимдері мен антропонимдеріне ерекше назар аударылады, мұнда аудармадағы сәйкессіздіктер мағынасына да, халықаралық түсінікке де әсер етеді. Зерттеу жалқы есімдерді аудару түпнұсқа тіліндегі аударманың дәлдігі, аударма тіліндегі оқылым және мәдени маңыздылық арасындағы тепе-теңдікті сақтауды талап етеді деген қорытындыға келеді. Аудармашылар контекстті ескеретін стратегияларды қолдануы және Ұлттық транслитерация стандарттары мен халықаралық жариялау нормаларына сәйкес келуі керек. Зерттеу жалқы есімді аудару көбінесе мәтіндік функцияға, аудиторияның күтуіне және атаудың мәдени жүктемесіне байланысты деген қорытындыға келеді.

Түйін сөздер: жалқы есімдер, аударма стратегиялары, ономастика, мәдени бейімделу, эквиваленттілік.

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Проблемы и стратегии перевода имен собственных

Аннотация. Ввиду культурных, исторических и лингвистических особенностей имена собственные представляют значительные трудности при переводе. В статье рассматриваются стратегии перевода имен собственных с разных языков с акцентом на эмпирические данные и теоретические модели. Методология включает в себя структурированный обзор академической литературы и тематические исследования казахских, русских, английских и китайских текстов как литературных, так и официальных жанров. Наш анализ основан на концепции стратегии перевода, предложенной Ньюмарком и расширенной Фернандесом, включая транслитерацию, семантический перевод, адаптацию и замену. Результаты исследования показывают, что перевод имен собственных в значительной степени зависит от контекста: в то время как юридические и научные тексты требуют стандартизации и транслитерации, художественные тексты обеспечивают большую гибкость за счет адаптации и локализации. Особое внимание уделяется казахским топонимам и антропонимам, где несоответствия в переводе влияют как на значение, так и на международную понятность. В исследовании делается вывод о том, что перевод имен собственных требует соблюдения баланса между точностью перевода на языке оригинала, удобочитаемостью на языке перевода и культурной значимостью. Переводчики должны применять стратегии, учитывающие контекст, и соответствовать национальным стандартам транслитерации и международным нормам публикации. В исследовании делается вывод о том, что перевод имени собственного в значительной степени зависит от текстовой функции, ожиданий аудитории и культурной нагрузки самого имени.

Ключевые слова: имена собственные, стратегии перевода, ономастика, культурная адаптация, эквивалентность.

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