# Proper Names in Translation: An Explanatory Attempt

Saleh Delforouz Abdolmaleki

Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Iran

**Abstract:** Theoretically speaking, proper nouns are beyond the scope of language and they are to be sought in encyclopedias rather than in dictionaries. Mill, for example, believes that proper names have no meaning or connotations are, therefore, both untranslatable and not to be translated. But, the case of translating proper nouns is not so simple and clear-cut in nature. According to Newmark, proper nouns can be divided into five categories: Proper names, historical institutional terms, international institutional terms, national institutional terms and cultural terms. The primary thesis of this study is that contrary to popular views, the translation of proper names is a non-trivial question, closely related to the problem of the meaning of the proper name. It aims to show what happens to proper names in the process of translation, particularly from English into Persian. However, this study regarding the translational needs of an Iranian community which are mostly limited to translating between English to Persian and vice versa, examines the case under three categories: Names of people including factual and fictitious characters and antonomasia; names of places including factual and fictitious places; names of objects. And in order to make the results of this study more practicable, the study has been enriched with some examples of translated texts accompanied by their source texts. After offering solutions for the translational problems in question, the study concludes that it's not true to simply claim that proper nouns are untranslatable, rather they sometimes need to be translated, sometimes directly transformed and sometimes to be coupled with definitions and/or explanations all depending on their specific characteristics and the context where they have been used.

**Key words:** Factual names, literary works, fictitious names, names of people, names of places, names of objects, proper nouns, translation, translatability

## INTRODUCTION

Theoretically speaking, proper nouns are beyond the scope of language and are to be sought in encyclopedias rather than in dictionaries. Mill, stated in Newmark (1988a), believed that proper nouns have no meaning or connotations and are therefore both untranslatable and not to be translated.

However, taking a brief look on the translated literature and having a comparison between the translated texts and the original ones proves the contrary and supports the claim that the case of translating proper nouns is not so simple and clear-cut in nature.

In this study, researcher will firstly refer to the translating strategies proposed by Peter Newmark for translating proper nouns then researcher will apply those strategies to the case of English-Persian translation and try to find evidences in books translated from English into Persian and vice versa.

Secondly, researcher will examine some new issues recently introduced by later researchers in translation studies where a deeper consideration has been given to the already familiar concepts illuminating some other interesting and at the same time important facets which have been neglected before. Newmark (1988b) has divided proper nouns into five categories:

- Proper names
- Historical institutional terms
- International institutional terms
- National institutional terms
- Cultural terms

However in this study, which is mainly concerned with the case of English-Persian translation and vice versa, researchers investigate the problem under three main categories:

- Names of people (Real and fictitious)
- Names of places (Real and fictitious)
- Names of objects

**Common and proper nouns:** Basically, nouns are classified as common or proper. Common nouns refer to a class of entities (e.g., squirrel) while proper nouns have a unique referent (John, London). Grammatically, proper

nouns behave very much in the same way in the sentence as common nouns. There are however, differences that distinguish them from common nouns. The most important ones are:

Proper nouns do not accept demonstrative pronouns as determiners. One would not normally say this John just bought a car. However, if there are several Johns out of whom we want to choose a particular one, researchers are using John as a common noun meaning any person called John.

Proper nouns do not accept restrictive adjectives or restrictive relative clauses. In the sentence, the old Shakespeare felt the closeness of his death, one is implicitly comparing one of several manifestations in time of the person called Shakespeare with the rest; therefore, one is using the word as a common noun in the grammatical sense.

In other words, a noun's status as either common or proper is ultimately determined by situational factors. If in a given speech situation, there is a possibility of what looks like a proper noun having >1 referents (this John, two Johns), we have to do with a common noun homonymous with a proper noun (Baker, 1992).

## NAMES OF PEOPLE

**Names of real (non-fictional) characters:** Names of historically important figures should be translated or at least their translations should be provided in parenthesis or in glosses (The words between // are the transliterations of Persian names). For instance:

| | |
|---|---|
| Shah Abbas, The Great | /Shah Abbas-e-Kabir/ |
| Tahir the Ambidextrous | /Taher-e-Zol yaminein/ |

However, words like Shah/Abbas/ and /Taher/ should not be translated. And in English to Persian translation, we can refer to examples like:

| | |
|---|---|
| William the Conqueror | /William e Fateh/ Richard, |
| the Lion-Hearted | /Richard e Shirdel/ |

Names of saint people and Biblical or Quranic characters should be translated, for example: John the Baptist:

| | |
|---|---|
| Jhon the Baptist | /Yahya Moammed/ |
| Aaron | /Haroon/ |
| Joshua | /Yushe/ |
| Jonah | /Yunes/ |

Names of philosophers, scientists and sages which have an already accepted translation should be replaced with their accepted equivalents. These equivalents which

are now-a-days acceptable for Persian speakers are in fact the result of the process of Arabicization performed on the names of important figures during the age of Islamic Translation Movement. For example:

| | |
|---|---|
| Aristotle | /Arastoo/ |
| Socrates | /Soghrat/ |
| Plato | /Aflatoon/ |
| Thales | /Taales/ |

The procedure is the same for Iranian and Islamic figures which have already accepted equivalents in European languages, for example:

| | |
|---|---|
| Avicenna | /EbneSina/ |
| Algazel | /Ghazali/ |
| Alfarabius | /Farabi/ |
| Rhazes | /Razi/ |

In translating the titles of real characters, titles like Mr., Mrs., Miss., Monsieur, etc., should be directly transferred or translated.

It should be noted that such titles are used only with surnames and not like Persian where they are used with first names. Titles denoting the profession of characters or the royal titles like e arl, countess, graf, duke, duchess, professor and doctor should be translated. Since, the French equivalents of these titles have pronunciations which are more familiar and more readily pronounceable according to Persian phonetic system, they are used more frequently. For example: Duchess is translated as/dushes/and Marchioness as/maarkeez/.

**Names of fictitious characters:** By fictitious characters researchers mean the characters used in literary works like poetry, novel or drama. Such names in literature often carry a connotational meaning with themselves of which the translators should be aware and try to convey in their translations (Kalashnikov, 2006a).

For translating proper names in serious literature where both the connotation and nationality of the names are significant, Newmark proposes a method. His method; however, is mostly applicable to cognate languages like English and German and not that much useful for language pairs of English and Persian which are from quite different language families.

Newmark suggests that in such cases where both connotations (rendered through sound-effect and/or transparent names) and nationality are significant, researcher have suggested that the best method is first to translate the word that underlies the source language proper name into the target language and then to naturalize the translated word back into a new SL proper name.

Researchers use an example to clarify what Newmark meant by these words. Suppose we want to translate the proper name Miss Slowboy from English into German. To follow this suggestion, we should first translate it into Flaubub which is the underlying meaning of the family name Slowboy translated into German then naturalize it back into English as Miss Flowboob.

Newmark; however, stipulates that the translator is allowed to use this method only when the character's name is not yet current amongst an educated TL readership.

Proper names in fairy stories, folk tales and children literature are often translated on the grounds that children and fairies are the same all over the world. But, there is an important point about the names of heroes in folk tales. Newmark argues that if those heroes represent national qualities they should not be translated.

In novels and allegorical dramas like Pilgrim's Progress, Everyman, etc., where the characters are not specifically English, their names should be translated. Examples from Pilgrim's progress are:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mr. Malice | /Aghaye Kiineh Joo/ |
| Mr. Love-lust | /Aghaye Shahvatran/ |
| Mr. Liar | /Aghaye Kazeb/ |
| Mr. No-good | /Aghaye Bisamar/ |

It should be emphasized that the researchers of such literary works have not chosen the names of characters randomly rather they have taken into consideration many nuances. Thus, before rendering such names the translators should first study the dialogues and scene directions in dramas and pay their ultimate attention to the characterization methods the novelist has employed to depict his or her characters (Sarkka, 2007).

Some novelists try to characterize their figures through the words they put in their mouths and others reveal their personalities by describing their appearance, their dwelling and the place where they research or live.

One of the characterization methods which is frequently used by Persian literary men is revealing the characters' personality, social class, level of literacy and even their place of residence by attributing to them special names. For instance names like: /Mash Ramezun/,Amoo Ghazanfar/ and /Karbalaee Hassan/ will automatically evoke in Persian readers of Persian literature a feeling of rural setting with a warm and friendly atmosphere ruling over the people's behaviors.

The effect of these delicate nominating of characters is sometimes so great that a same sentence when uttered by /Mash Ramezun/ may be understood quite differently from what is grasped by the reader when /Nosrat Khan/

(a name belonging to higher social classes of Iranian society) or /Siamak/ (a name used in modern Persian connoting a sense of a person living in city with some delicate or even fastidious behaviors) says the same sentence. For example; when /Mash Ramezun/ says come over to my place the Persian reader may imagine in his/her mind a kind person inviting him to his little house for a glass of tea but when /Nosrat Khan/ says the same sentence a picture of a large house with expensive furniture and a luncheon may occur to the mind of the reader.

Therefore when some one wants to translate a research of literature from Persian into English he/she must be completely familiar with the processes of characterization as well as literary devices used in the ST (Persian) and have a command of their counterparts in the TL in order to be able to present an effective translation.

In Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies where the message is more important than the culture, it can be said, according to Newmark that the remoteness of the period justifies a translation of the proper names.

## NAME OF PLACES

In this study researchers divide the names of places into two groups:

- Names of real places (Geographical names, addresses, names of streets, squares, etc.)
- Names of fictional places

**Names of real places:** Translation of geographical names is less challenging than the translation of character names. It is because of the fact that geographical names rarely carry a connotational meaning. However in those rare cases, the translator must explain them either in parenthesis or in glosses. For example Dachua, Belsen and Vel (Town and villages of Nazi Horrors) or /Deyre Yasin/ and /Kafar Ghasem/ (The places where Palestinians were slaughtered by Israelis).

When the nature of a place is unknown to the target text reader, the translator should provide it with a classifier. For example for Thames the translator should write /Rude Taimz/ or for Naghsh-e-Jahan /Meidan e Naghshe Jahan/ is the best equivalent.

Another point in translating the geographical names is paying attention to the cases where a place name means something more than simply a name locating a place in the world. In such cases that name accompanied by its surrounding words imply an idiomatic meaning.

For example when some body says I am from Missouri, he does not mean that he originally comes from Missouri, rather he/she wants to show that he/she is skeptic and not sure about a given situation or when a person talks about /Zire be Kerman Bordan/ he wants to refer to taking goods to a place where there are already plenty of them available.

Thus for translating expressions like this the translator should have their idiomatic meanings in mind. For example; I am from Missouri, he should write /Man Shakkakam/ and for the expression /Zire be Kerman Bordan/ the acceptable equivalent will be to carry coals to Newcastle.

The next point is about the increasing metaphorical function of proper nouns in the media. Now-a-days, the media are referring to the governments by the name of their respective capitals or locations and institutions or ministries by their residences or streets. For example:

| | |
|---|---|
| White house | The USA Government |
| Tehran | The Iranian Government |
| Fleet street | The British press |
| The Pentagon | US military leadership |

In such cases, the translator should provide a translation. However, when these names are familiar for the target text readership they can simply be transferred.

Names of firms, streets, private institutions, schools, universities, hospitals, etc., are in principle not translated since they are related to the source language culture and the authors aim has been introducing and locating them and not describing their characteristics.

For instance if you translate /Khiaban e Nazare Sharghi/ as the Eastern View Street in a tour guide booklet, you are totally misleading that poor tourist to nowhere! And this translation may impose an additional meaning on the name of the street for which you can not find any counterpart in the original name of the street. The translation Eastern view conveys a notion of the views the Eastern people have as opposed to the views of the Western people.

Names of newspapers, journals, magazines and periodicals are always transcribed. Famous works of art are usually referred to by their established translated titles including the authorized titles of literary works.

**Names of fictitious places:** In translating names of fictitious characters in serious literature, the procedure is like translating names of characters as it is suggested by Newmark.

While in translating place names of serious literature we must convey the nationality of the names, there is not such an obligation in translating place names in comedies, fairy tales and children literature. Examples taken from George Orwell are the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| Humiliation Valley | /Darreh Khozu/ |
| City of Destruction | /Kharab Abaad/ |

## NAMES OF OBJECTS

Researchers divide the object names into two groups: Brand names, object eponyms.

In the case of brand names if those names are familiar for the target text readership we do not translate them and simply resort to transferring those brands which Newmark believes tend to monopolize their referent first in the country of their origin, then internationally.

For example brand names like Aspirin and Walkman are almost known in our Persian culture and there is no need to have additional descriptive terms. However if they are not known to the TT readership we as translators are supposed to describe in short the nature of that brand name.

Researchers should treat object eponyms (Eponym is one for whom or which something is or is believed to be named) the same as brand names, if they are familiar for the TT readership we transfer them, otherwise we should provide a descriptive term.

## CHARACTONYMS

Charactonym is a name expressing the characteristics of the bearer. Proper names play an important role in a literary research. They point to the setting, social status and nationality of characters. The names containing in their stems components of common nouns and of other parts of speech can along with their nominal function, carry out the function of characterizing a person or a place (Hatim and Munday, 2004).

Normally charactonyms are transcribed or transliterated but if their stems contain additional information of their bearer or even create in a literary work, a system of its own their transcription deprives a foreign reader a lot of nuances and vividness of description.

It is suggested that translators should try to find characteristics codified in the name by means of the elements of context called motivators.

In addition to their nominal function, given names and family names often perform a descriptive or characterizing function. Such meanings are an integral part of the total meaning in many books. Names performing a characterizing function are called charactonyms or significant names.

If names in a literary work have such functions, it is better to translate the functions in some way but unfortunately they are often ignored even in the translations of outstanding works and have simply been replaced by transliteration.

However, why some translators simply resort to transliteration? The tradition of transliterating proper names in literature may be explained by the wish to keep the nominal function simple to transmit the nationality of the character and to avoid excessive expressive coloring.

One of the signs of a characteronym is its common stem. A common stem is a part of a name or an entire name that resembles in its form an ordinary word: Smith (Smith-a worker in metal), Sawders (Sawder-flattery, blarney), Hennie (Henny-hen-like). If this common stem characterizes the bearer of the name, the stem becomes a significant (meaningful) element of the name and this name may be called a charactonym.

The presence of a common stem itself does not necessarily imply the presence of a characteristic meaning. The relevance of the significant element must be suggested by means of motivators.

## MOTIVATOR

Motivator is a part of text, expressing by the means of synonyms, homonyms, confusables and words with similar semantic fields resemblance with the meanings of a morpheme or morphemes of the proper name and giving the name its characterizing function. For example, for the family name of Mr. Parakeet, an incidental character in the novel by E. Waugh Decline and Fall, the motivator is bird-like:

> By half-past two the house was quiet; at half-past three Lord Parakeet arrived, slightly drunk and in the evening clothes, having just escaped less than one second ago from Alastair Trumpington's 21 birthday party in London. The party or some of it reassembled in pajamas to welcome him. Parakeet walked round bird-like and gay, pointing his thin white nose and making rude little jokes at everyone in turn in a shrill, emasculate voice

## EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MOTIVATOR

Motivators may be divided into two groups, explicit and implicit. The explicit motivators are usually situated in a narrow context and are expressed either with a word or a word combination. Rather stable motivators can be the words pointing to the resemblance in appearance: Little Mr. Finch (motivator little for the family name Finch); what wrath Mr. Scowler was in (motivator wrath for the family name Scowler (Scowl).

The implicit motivator characterizes a person on the basis of a broader context. An example of a charactonym

with an implicit motivator can be the family name of Grimes from Decline and Fall by E. Waugh. The school teacher, Captain Grimes who symbolizes moral degradation, hard drinking and ill breeding is given the family name with a stem grime-a surface of thick black dirt.

He is always drunk because he lost his leg when he was run over by a tram in Stoke-on-Trent. This character is not given a clearly and compactly expressed characteristic by any specific word or pun with his name, but from a broader context you can size him up and compare him with dirt that is impossible to get rid of.

An important point to be mentioned here is about expressive names, names that are expressive in terms of their lexical meanings but have no motivators; for example, Blunt may be defined as a person obtuse in understanding or discernment, a fool. However such names must be treated as conditional charactonyms until they are justified by the context in literary works.

In real life, it is not correct to associate the lexical meaning of an expressively colored family name with its bearer. If the meaning of an expressive name is not reinforced by a motivator researchers may assume that the meaning is at least somewhat less important than it would be otherwise and that its translation is not obligatory (Kalashnikov, 2006b).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, proper nouns can be treated in a number of ways in translation:

- They can be imported unchanged from the SL text
- They can be modified to fit the phonological/graphological system of the TL
- They can be expanded with a gloss to provide for the TL reader the world knowledge he/she lacks in his/her own culture
- Sometimes they might be omitted altogether (Perhaps replaced with a paraphrase) if they are considered peripheral and not much important in terms of the central message of the text. Or if retaining them would be more likely to cause the reader to get confused

The choice between the various alternatives will finally be determined by pragmatic factors, the most important among which are the purpose of the text and the translator's assessment of his/her intended audience.

Therefore, we can not simply say that proper nouns have no meaning or connotations and are therefore both untranslatable and not to be translated as Mill belived.

## REFERENCES

Baker, M., 1992. In other Words: A Course Book on Translation. Routledge, London, ISBN-13:9780415030854, Pages: 304.

Hatim, B. and J. Munday, 2004. Translation: An Advanced Resource Book. Routledge, New York.

Kalashnikov, A., 2006a. Proper names in translation of fiction. Translation J., Vol. 10.

Kalashnikov, A., 2006b. Translation of charactonyms from English into Russian. Translation J., Vol. 10.

Newmark, P., 1988a. A Textbook of Translation. Prentice Hall, New York, USA., ISBN-13: 978-0139125935, Pages: 402.

Newmark, P., 1988b. Approaches to Translation. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall International Ltd., New York, USA.

Sarkka, H., 2007. Translation of proper names in non-fiction Texts. Translation J., Vol. 11.