DOI: https://doi.org/10.46991/TSTP/2024.4.1.109

METHODS OF TRANSLATING NON-RUSSIAN PROPER NOUNS EMPLOYED IN RUSSIAN TEXTS

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Abstract: The present article deals with proper noun (PN) translation concentrating on the issue of non-Russian PNs employed in Russian texts. While the Italian translation tradition has in general opted for the method of transliteration of all PNs from Russian Cyrillic regardless of the name origins, a decolonizing approach would be that of considering non-Russian PNs as 'translated' terms from a third language. This approach will prove useful in expanding our understanding of how translation (and transliteration) may influence the perception of specific cultural and ethnic contexts embedded within source texts. In this article, examples of Kyrgyz, Armenian, Georgian, Azeri, and Belarusian PNs (from Victoria Lomasko's *The Last Soviet Artist*) are provided. Avoiding intermediary translation (transliteration) from Russian Cyrillic, the translator (and author of this article) decided to reconstruct the original PNs encountered in the source text. The article thus discusses the reasons for the employment of such method when approaching PNs that are 'mediated' in the context of the source text, showing how this helps in decolonizing translation.

Keywords: proper nouns; Russian translation into Italian; transliteration; Victoria Lomasko; intermediary translation

1. Introduction

Proper nouns (PN) have attracted growing attention within the field of translation studies. However, scholars have not treated 'translated' (domesticated or foreignized) names employed in source texts in much detail yet. These 'mediated' PNs can be easily found in Russian texts, and so far, the translation praxis (with regard to the Italian context in particular) has generally approached these names as regular Russian PNs regardless of their origins. However, the result is that of a mediated (and thus Russified) translation of the PN in question. This article, drawing on concrete examples from a recent translation experience of its author, sheds new light on the methods of translating non-Russian PNs employed in Russian texts, advocating for a decolonizing approach to translation also beyond the specificity of this language.

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Received: 13.11.2023
Revised: 07.06.2024
Accepted: 14.06.2024

2. Review of Previous Studies

Even though as early as in 1981 Peter Newark noted the complexity of proper nouns (PN) when translating literature, the issue has been growingly discussed by scholars in particular since the 2000s. In the last twenty years translation studies has attached even greater attention to the issue of translating PNs (Vinogradov 2001; Ballard 2001; Lozano Miralles 2001; Salmon 2002; Viezzi 2004), underlining that PNs represent relevant signs in any text:[1] the use of a specific PN in a text is never the result of a random or arbitrary choice, but of a specific selection made by the writer. It is not by chance that many literary novels or poems are titled with a PN (usually that of the main character: Anna Karenina, Oliver Twist, Effi Briest, etc.) (Salmon 2004: 72-73).

The translation praxis has traditionally adopted one of the two possible strategies when dealing with PNs: either "functionally" translating them (Salmon 2004: 72) – and that is what fables, comics, movies, cartoons have made us accustomed to over centuries (e.g. *Eng.* Cinderella – *It.* Cenerentola, from *cenere*, cinder – *Ru.* Zolushka, from *zola*, cinder), or non translating them (or, in the case of other alphabets, transliterating them), which has been the main strategy adopted in literature and non-fiction.

However, in many cases the choice of 'non-translating' PNs (in any case, a translation strategy) deprives the target text reader of the opportunity to understand "what's in a name." Laura Salmon exemplifies this problem providing the case of Dostoevsky's character Raskol'nikov (from the novel *Crime and Punishment*, 1866), whose speaking name says nothing to a non-Russophone reader. Given the fact that *raskol* means *schism*, and *raskol'nik – schismatic* (with a direct reference to the Schism of the Russian Church and the so-called Old Believers), Salmon further proposes a possible translation into Italian of this PN as *Skizov* as a result of the "hybridization" strategy: while *skiz-* suggests the idea of the *schism* (*It. scisma*), the suffix *-ov* maintains an estranging element (2004: 74).

Besides that of "hybridization," Laura Salmon has summarized the different strategies that may be adopted by the translator when approaching PN translation: "compensation" (effective, for example, when dealing with diminutives), "explicitation" (useful to add, for example, information about the ethnic origin of a character when it is evident from the PN used in the source text), "foreignization" (that is, non-translation of the PN, which may however result in a misleading mechanistic approach[2]), "domestication" (a strategy that was applied, for example, in Italy during the Fascist regime) (2004: 74-76).

However, another issue is represented by the translation of 'translated' PNs from a source text that has either domesticated or foreignized them (in some cases adapting the loan names to the phonetics and alphabet of the target language). A well-known example from Russian literature is Lev Tolstoy's novella *Hadji Murad* (written between 1896 and 1904 and published posthumously in 1912). The original title,

[1] According to Salmon, anthroponyms in particular constitute a "subcode" within the natural language in which they exist (2003: 279).
[2] In this regard, Salmon openly criticizes Lawrence Venuti's approach (1998).

carrying the PN of the Avar rebel commander, is *Хаджи-Мурат* (*Khadzhi-Murat*), that is a foreignized PN transliterated into Russian Cyrillic. How have translators dealt with this PN? The Italian tradition generally opts for 'non-translating' PNs in literature: in the case of Russian, PNs are simply transliterated according to the Scientific transliteration system. This is true also for non-Russian PNs contained in Russian literature:[3] the result is that Lev Tolstoy's novella is titled *Chadži-Murat* in Italian. The English translator instead decided to move away from the Russian transliteration of the Avar name and 'reconstructed' the original PN as *Hadji Murad*. It is interesting to notice that in the Italian Wikipedia pages related to Tolstoy's novella and the historical figure of the Avar commander two different graphic renderings are used: Tolstoy's hero is named *Chadži-Murat*, while the historical figure is *Hadji Murad*. As a result, a non-expert reader may get confused.[4]

PNs include not only anthroponyms, but also toponyms. Recently, after February 2022, many media outlets all over the world were faced with the urgency to use Ukrainian toponyms for cities that traditionally were called by their Russian names (e.g. Kiev/Kyiv, Kharkov/Kharkiv, Chernobyl/Chornobyl,' Odessa/Odesa, etc.). In the case of the Italian language, such 'mediated translation' of toponyms takes place not only when we deal with Russian: Maurizio Viezzi has, for example, observed that Dutch and Flemish cities are generally 'translated' into Italian through French:

> For Belgian toponyms, where there are no established Italian-language forms (Antwerp = Anversa, Liège = Liegi, Leuven = Lovanio), French-language forms are regularly used, and this applies not only, understandably, to the Walloon region, and therefore French-speaking localities (Mons, Namur), but also to Flanders (Malines and not Mechelen, Gand and not Gent, Bruges and not Brugge); and applies to the capital, an officially bilingual city (Bruxelles and not Brussels) (2017: 106).

When translating PNs, a translator must be very careful, since in a PN "all morphological elements (roots, prefixes, suffixes and endings) are ethnically sensitive"; "the demarcation line between translation and change of names is vague" (Azhniuk, Azhniuk 2014: 260). Bohdan and Lesia Azhniuk provide, for instance, the example of Russified Ukrainian anthroponyms in Soviet passports: *Bilokin* to *Belokon* (this last name can be literally translated as 'White Horse,' and the Russian calque was created on this basis); *Olena* to *Elena*; *Petro* to *Pyotr*. These are not results of a 'translation' in terms of alphabet, but rather of a morphologic adaptation and calque formation which indeed changes the PNs in question.

In their socio-linguistic aspect PNs are culture specific (for Russian PNs see Superanskaya 1973; Uspensky 1989), they are never unmarked and their multilayered "evocative potential"[5] relates to shared "encyclopedias" among groups of speakers

[3] Exceptions are represented by "European" PNs in Russian literature: Kitty and Dolly from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, for instance.

[4] One may argue that the Avar language uses Cyrillic letters, so transliterating from this alphabet could be a viable strategy. However, Avar officially uses Cyrillic only since 1938. At the time of the historical events Tolstoy depicts in his novella the alphabet used was the Arabic one (Crisp 1985).

[5] At the etymological, phonological/graphic, morphological, antonomastic/parodic, geo-ethnic, intertextual, pragmatically marked levels.

(Salmon 2006: 81-82). Languages in this regard are asymmetric, and "the anthroponymic system of a given language never fully coincides with the system of another language" (Salmon 2003: 289). What a translator should demonstrate when approaching a PN is a passive (grasping the implicit) and an active competence (recoding it) when moving between the source and the target texts, as well as consistency in terms of hierarchical choices with regard to the different functions of the text (Salmon 2004: 73-80).

If the source text contains a PN which has in its turn been subject to translation, the translator should face the problem of 'reconstructing,' 'retrieving' the original, 'archetypical' name. Otherwise, in the case of a Russian source text containing a non-ethnically Russian PN, the translator would end up involuntarily Russifying the PN in question if they were just to transliterate it. It is high time that we decolonialized our translation approaches to PNs as well (Batchelor 2009).

3. Translating Proper Nouns in Victoria Lomasko's *The Last Soviet Artist*

I have practically encountered the issue of 'translated' non-Russian PNs in a Russian source text when translating a volume by the graphic artist Victoria Lomasko into Italian. After authoring the translation of her first book, *Other Russias*, in 2022 (*Altre Russie. Un reportage illustrato*, published by BeccoGiallo), in 2023 I worked on her second volume, *The Last Soviet Artist*:[6] while in the first case I did not have to face any problem with non-Russian PNs as all characters involved were Russian citizens, this time I had to deal with the problem of PNs, as this work is a reportage from other post-Soviet countries, namely Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Georgia. Due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, she did not manage to travel to all the fifteen post-Soviet states, but still these four countries posed a challenge for me as translator.[7]

Since the 2000s, Victoria Lomasko has documented trials, protests, arrests, and right violations both in her country and in the post-Soviet space through her peculiar drawing. Lomasko's illustrations do not conform to the criteria of sequentiality typical of comic strips, but rather constitute a gallery of portraits – "witness portraits" (*portrety svidetel'stva*), as I defined them elsewhere (Napolitano 2021) – that invite the viewer to take part in a process of denunciation of uncomfortable and often silenced social contexts in Russia and beyond. Lomasko conducts interviews, catches key events and gathers everything she observes in her on-site sketches. Her works display a huge gallery of figures, about whom the reader (and the translator) knows little except for their name. And this name, when non-ethnically Russian, comes 'Russified' as it is presented in Russian Cyrillic letters.

As for Caucasian names encountered in *The Last Soviet Artist*, namely Armenian, Georgian and Azeri, what I decided to do was to retrieve the original PNs avoiding

[6] The translation will be published by BeccoGiallo in summer 2024.

[7] In this volume Victoria Lomasko includes chapters devoted to Dagestan and Ingushetia, two specific regions of the Russian Federation where she investigates ethnic issues. The people she interviews in these chapters are Russian citizens, even though non-ethnically Russian; in this case PNs are transliterated from Russian Cyrillic according to their passport.

transliteration from the Russian variants of the source text. Among Armenian names there were, for example, *Martiros Saryan* and *Minas Avetisyan*, the prominent Armenian painters: instead of transliterating these names according to the Scientific system from Russian (*Сарьян – *Sar'jan*, *Аветисян – *Avetisjan*), I transliterated them from the original Armenian (ISO 9985): *Մարտիրոս Սարյան* and *Մինաս Ավետիսյան*, respectively. As for Georgian PNs, Natia, Irak'li and Nuk'ri were transliterated from Georgian (Georgian national system, 2002), and not as they come in Russian (Натия – **Natija*, Ираклий – **Iraklij*, Нукрий – **Nukrij*): ნათია, ირაკლი, ნუკრი, respectively. Finally, since in Tbilisi Victoria Lomasko interacted with a group of Azeri immigrants who had left Baku as a result of persecution for their political activism, I had to reconstruct some Azeri PNs, too. In this case, once identified, I did not have to transliterate them since the Azeri language employs Latin letters: so Сеймур Байджан was not rendered as **Sejmur Bajdžan,* but as *Seymur Baycan*, Гюнель Мовлуд is not **Gjunel' Movlud,* but Günel Mövlud, nor Хаджи Хажиев is **Chadži Chažiev,* but *Hacı Hacıyev*.

Kyrgyzstan and Belarus represent a different issue, as for now both countries not only use Cyrillic as the alphabet, but also recognize Russian as official language together with Kyrgyz and Belarusian.

Since the chapter devoted to Belarus depicts, in particular, the 2020 protests during which the use of Belarusian turned into a political tool (starting from the slogan *Žive Belarus – Long Live Belarus*), I propose to the Italian reader the transliteration of PNs from Belarusian. However, in certain cases, I also add in brackets the corresponding Russian PN, since this may still be more familiar to the Italian reader: *e.g. Svjatlana Cichanoŭskaja (Svetlana Tichanovskaja)*.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the distance between ethnically Russian names and ethnically Kyrgyz names is more evident, but the real issue is that there is no internationally recognized system to transliterate from Kyrgyz Cyrillic. What I decided to do in this case was 're-reading' each Kyrgyz name through the International Phonetic Alphabet. Therefore, along with the ethnically Russian names *Marija (Мария)*, *Darija (Дария)* and *Sofija (София)*, the reader will find the Kyrgyz PNs Bahtijar and Baktıgül: the former is the transliteration of the name *Бахтияр*, with the grapheme 'x' rendered as 'h' (not 'ch') since it corresponds to the IPA symbol [χ], voiceless uvular fricative (different from the Russian voiceless velar fricative 'x'); the latter is the transliteration of *Бактыгул*, where the Kyrgyz 'ы' (ı) corresponds to the IPA symbol [ɯ] (close back unrounded vowel) and not to the 'Russian' (y) [ɨ] (close central unrounded vowel), and where 'ү' corresponds to ü, close front rounded vowel [y].

4. What's in a (Transliterated) Name?

The attention I have drawn to my translation and transliteration reflects the importance devoted to this topic in Victoria Lomasko's text; it is one of the intrinsic, implicit keys of her volume *The Last Soviet Artist*. Instead of a 'touristic' wandering through former Soviet countries, Lomasko provides the reader with variegated, colorful encounters

with differentiated, specific, self-conscious Others, reluctant to cultural homogenization. It is the reportage itself that pushes readers to reconsider and weigh their approaches to other languages, alphabets and cultures.

The volume opens with Victoria Lomasko's arrival in Kyrgyzstan; her very first dialogue proceeds on the way from the airport to Bishkek and her interlocutor stresses the need to pay attention to the proper use of language and to pronunciation.

> **Кыргызстан/Киргизия**
> Моё исследование постсоветского пространства началось в 2014 году с поездки в Бишкек по приглашению Бишкекской феминистской группы. «Неужели в Киргизии есть феминистки?» – удивлялась *(sic)* московские активисты перед моим отъездом.
> Уже по дороге из аэропорта в Бишкек лидерка группы Сельби несколько раз поправила меня: «Говори не «Киргизия», а «Кыргызстан», не «киргизский», а «кыргызский." Вообще-то, местные русские говорят, как привыкли, и на их «и» не обращают внимания. Но когда кыргыз называет себя и других «киргизами», это значит, он совсем обрусел и забыл традиции своего народа.

The English translation of this chapter,[8] apart from evident mistakes and paraphrasing, may appear confusing to a reader who does not know Russian and who ignores the implicit content of Selbi's point (the difference between the term 'Kyrgyzstan' and 'Kirghizia' and their use, the value of suffixes *-ia* and *-stan*):

> ***Kyrgyzstan/Kirghizia***
> I had come to visit Bishkek Feminist Collective SQ.
> "Are there really feminists in Kirghizia?" my mom had wondered before I left.
> On the way from the airport to Bishkek the collective's leader, Selbi, corrected my speech several times.
> "It's not Kirghizia, but Kyrgyzstan, and Kyrgyz, not Kirghiz."
> In fact, the local Russians speak the way they are used to, and no one pays any mind to their use of "Kirghiz." But when a Kyrgyz says it, it is insulting and even offensive. It means someone who is Russified and has forgotten the traditions of their people.

This is why I felt the need to convey all this into Italian. If I were to transfer my own Italian translation into English, the result would (approximately) be as follows:

> **Kırgızstan**
> My research in the post-Soviet space started in 2014 with a trip to Bishkek as I was invited there by a local feminist group. "Are there really feminists in Kirghizia?," surprised activists in Moscow would ask me.
> As soon as I landed, on the way from the airport to Bishkek, the leader of this group, Selbi, repeatedly corrected me: "Don't say 'Kirghizia' like Russians do, but 'Kırgızstan' as we do, and the correct adjective is Kırgız, not Kirghiz." Actually, Russians who live here speak as they are used to, and people do not pay attention to the way they pronounce the "i." However, when a Kırgız defines himself and others as Kirghiz, then it means that they completely got Russified and forgot about their people's traditions.

[8] It is available online on "Left East" e-magazine: https://lefteast.org/trip-to-kyrgyzstan/.

Apart from further explaining why Selbi asks not to say 'Kirghizia,' I also decided to insert into my translation an estranging element that would recreate the stirring effect that Selbi's reasoning arouses in a Russian reader accustomed to the use of the toponym without much thought. This element is the use of the vowel 'ı' which is typical of the Turkic languages and renders the sound [ɯ] of Kyrgyz. The strategy that I adopted is, therefore, a variation of foreignization: this choice is quite appropriate to the functional and pragmatic markedness of the source text, which requires the reader to be aware of what it means to adapt a PN. As a rule, "the translator decides (bets) how the recipient will read the target text" (Salmon 2004: 74); in certain texts, transliteration choices can represent a valid translator's bet.

5. Conclusion

This article has discussed the reasons for a reconsideration of the methods translators may employ when approaching non-Russian 'translated' (domesticated or foreignized) proper nouns that can be found in Russian texts. Rather than treating them as regular Russian names and transliterating them from Cyrillic regardless of their origins, a translator can avoid 'Russifying' these ethnically sensitive elements, demonstrating instead a competence in 'retrieving' the original name in question, grasping thus its implicit value and significance within the text.

Based on concrete examples, this study argues that such a careful approach contributes at once both at decolonizing the traditional translation praxis and at offering target text readers more accurate information regarding the names of characters and places.

The area explored in this article would prove fruitful for further work both regarding texts in Russian and texts in other languages, given the situation of coloniality that has characterized and still characterizes the global arena, and which impacts the specific issue of proper nouns too. Also, new translations of classics may employ these strategies and thus open new perspectives on how we read them.

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Conflict of Interests
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.