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'Poetry in the raw': Defining and translating proper names in literature

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Abstract

The paper starts with the discussion of the distinction between proper and common names, and then moves on to examine the specific nature of the names in literature and the mistakes that are often made when translating them. Among other things, it is argued that proper and common names may both have a reference and a meaning, but that they refer and mean in a dissimilar way. The translator should be aware of these differences, as well as understand that literature creates an alternative reality, and hence the task of the translator is to read the name as an intertextual fragment and analyze the associations – linguistic and literary – in order to see the system of that fragment and render it in the TL accordingly.

1. Introduction

Onomastics has struggled for centuries to define its subject: there is a wide range of contradictory definitions of a proper name, but neither seems to give a definitive answer about its essence and relation to the referent. A Hellenistic grammarian Dionysius Thrax is credited to be the first to distinguish between proper and common nouns in his treatise *The Art of Grammar*, saying that a proper noun signifies "a peculiar substance" (1874, p. 333). However, the paradox of a proper noun is such that its definition became problematic even before it had been defined. Plato did not distinguish between proper and common nouns, but, in *Cratylus*, written a few centuries before *The Art of Grammar*,

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he had called this distinction into question by raising an important issue of whether a proper noun can have a meaning.

2. Common and proper nouns

A common noun is used both to designate a concrete object or notion as well as imply some attribute that is shared by all the objects or notions called by it.[1] A proper noun, on the contrary, is used only to name a specific living or non-living thing, place, or idea. In other words, a proper noun is, as Mill claimed, a meaningless mark used to distinguish one thing from another (1967, p. 17). Let us take, for example, the common noun 'chair'. Chairs can be different, but, whatever their design, they share the attribute of having a back, a seat and legs. If we compare this with the proper noun 'John', then all people under the name 'John' seem to have nothing in common and are called by such a name purely arbitrarily. Therefore, a proper noun is usually said to have a reference, while a common noun may have both a reference and meaning.

2.1. Meaning of proper names

The arbitrariness of a proper name, however, seems problematic. Theoretically, you can call your daughter 'John', but mostly Johns are male and of Anglo-Saxon background. Therefore, 'John' has a certain meaning, and in this it does not differ from common nouns, such as, for instance, 'chair'. In an influential monograph dedicated to defining the proper name, John Algeo states that "a word's meaning is the set of conditions under which it can be used appropriately" (1973, p. 51) – it hence would be inappropriate to call a piece of furniture with a back, a seat and legs a 'lamp', as the word 'lamp' is used to designate objects that produce light, i.e. this word has a different meaning. At the same time, it would also seem inappropriate to call a girl by the name 'John', as this name is usually used under a different set of conditions. Would it not, therefore, be legitimate to say that as the words 'lamp' and 'table' have different meanings, so the names 'Mary' and 'John' imply different things and thus have different meanings even if we do not know the people they refer to?

Since Plato raised this question for the first time in his Cratylus, onomastics, philosophy, logic and semantics have attempted to answer it in two distinctive ways. Some say that such proper names as 'John' and 'Mary' are 'incorrect' or 'less pure', while others claim that 'John' and 'Mary' are not names at all (see Hramova, 2009, p. 11–22). In 'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism', Bertrand Russell states that a proper name is the only kind of word "capable of standing for a particular" (1918, p. 523) and, as a result, its meaning is a particular. According to Russell and some other logicians, such as W. V. Quine (1960), "you cannot name anything you are not acquainted with" (Russell, 1918, p. 523; see also Russell, 1940, p. 37), and if you do, you do not name but describe. In other words, 'John' is a name only if it denotes a certain John who exists, and then this particular John is the meaning of the name. On the other hand, if we talk about John Donne, Sir John Falstaff or John Bull, 'John' in such cases is not simply a meaningless name – it is not a name at all because no object corresponds to it (Quine, 1960, p. 180), and hence it is a description.

Criticizing Russell's failure to distinguish between meaning and reference, R. J. Nelson states that "names mean, even though they might not refer" (1992, p. 13), and gives Cerberus as an example of a name that "does not name anything, although it means a three-headed dog" (4). Nelson is certainly right in stating that by using 'meaning' where most would prefer to use 'reference', Russell creates confusion. However, he himself does not take into consideration that for Russell, Cerberus would not be a name, because, though he did not make a distinction between meaning and reference, a name for him, as for Mill, is obviously a word that refers to a particular or, using Mill's terminology, denotes something particular but does not have a connotation. Thus Cerberus, despite designating a unique entity, cannot be a name since we are not acquainted with a three-headed dog it describes.

Nevertheless, Bertrand Russell's reasoning is not without fault, as it does not explain how a name can refer and at the same time have a meaning. Whatever terms we use, it is clear that my neighbor's name 'John' is something Bertrand Russell would call a name, while John Donne's name is something he would claim to be a description. It is not important whether my neighbor is a referent or a meaning of 'John', as it is rather a question of preferring one

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of this see Hramova, 2009, p. 11-22.