

Contrastive stylistics of toponymic representation in translation: Comments and recommendations

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Povzetek

Raba zemljepisnih imen se pogosto močno razlikuje glede na jezik, obdobje in posameznega prevajalca. V članku avtor primerja rabo slovenskih zemljepisnih imen v angleških in nemških besedilih ter rabo angleških in nemških zemljepisnih imen v slovenskih besedilih. Analiza je pokazala, da kljub nekaterim skupnim vzorcem slogovne značilnosti posamezne vrste besedil (na primer s področja naravoslovja, humanizma in turizma) in posamezne teme (na primer razprave o narodnostnih manjšinah, zgodovini ipd.) zahtevajo različen slog tudi pri rabi zemljepisnih imen. Na odločitve posameznih prevajalcev vplivajo različni teoretični pogledi na rabo zemljepisnih imen, zaradi česar prihaja do velikih razlik med prevodi. Pogosto je težava tudi jezikovni nacionalizem. Čeprav lahko določeno rabo zemljepisnih imen preprosto označimo za napačno, saj več kot očitno krši pravopisna, slovnična ali semantična pravila ciljnega jezika, ne moremo določiti ene same najboljše rešitve. Sklenemo lahko, da je različna raba zemljepisnih imen slogovno bolj ali manj primerna, na kar vplivajo različni dejavniki.

Ključne besede: prevajanje, stilistika, zemljepisna imena, nacionalizem, diahronija

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequently contentious areas in translation practice is how to represent toponyms¹ in a translated text (sometimes known as “names conversion”; Kadmon 2006: 101). Alongside other important issues, such as use of exonyms or orthographic adaptation, the issue most often at hand is whether to translate them. Rather than recommendations that place transparency at the fore, translators sometimes encounter blanket statements such as “do not translate names of places . . . do not translate the names of streets either” (Yaa 1975: 54) or “[d]o not translate place names into English unless an English-language equivalent is found in a standard source” (Baca 2006: 317).² Moreover, blanket statements conveying exactly the opposite are also found: “place names . . . should be translated in accordance with related regulations stipulated by the National Toponymy Committee” (BBC 1987) or “geographical names should be translated” (Kerzhner & Nartshuk 1992: 75).

More nuanced approaches do not debate whether or not to translate foreign toponyms in translation; instead, they consider how to deal with them most effectively. If toponym translation is a solution, these approaches often distinguish between generic and specific elements of toponyms, treating them differently in the translation process. For example, “the *Edwards Limestone* may be called *Caliza Edwards*, and *Formación La Casita* may be called the *La Casita Formation*; or *Redkinskaja Svita* may be called [the] *Redkino Formation* (but no *Redkinskaya Formation*)” (Salvador 1994: 20).

It is apparent that translators may face fundamental disagreements on how to handle toponyms in translated texts. Representative comments include: “Translators . . . have faced the problem of whether these are place names or descriptive terms that should be translated” (Cole 2000: 355) and “The question of whether traditional place names should be translated or not has caused controversy and disorientation” (Paikkala 2000: 135).

The scope of this article does not permit a detailed discussion of translation strategy involving generic versus specific elements, which has been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g., Reindl 2007, 2010a). Some comments on exonyms and orthographic adaptation are made below, but the focus of the discussion is on stylistic factors affecting how toponyms are dealt with in translated texts.

¹ I use the term *toponym* in its broadest sense in this paper, referring not only to settled places, but to any place or geographical feature, including water names (hydronyms), mountain names (oronyms), and so on.

² This particular recommendation suggests a catch-22 situation: a place name must not be anglicized until it has been anglicized.

2 TEXT TYPE AS A STYLISTIC FACTOR

The division between fiction and nonfiction is a major stylistic dividing line. Like fictional personal names, fictional place names are often translated in order to convey their meaning to a reader: “if the name is fictitious . . . it is translated. Thus *Yaopapaquinitzin* becomes *Glad-in-Battle*. Names that play, or pun, on proper names are also translated. Place names are treated in the same manner” (Bierhorst 1985: 129). A good example is Susan Brownsberger’s translation of Saltykov-Shchedrin’s work *The History of a Town*, in which село Недоедово becomes the *village of Underfedovo*, пригород Полоумнов becomes the *suburb of Halfwittov*, and so on, clearly conveying the author’s humorous intent (Kalashnikov 2006). In a work of pure fiction—such as the above, or a children’s story set in no particular real location and where the intent is simply to entertain—there is no need for place names to even correspond between the source and target languages.

However, in nonfiction one must be more cautious because this involves real places, with real names, on real maps. Thus there is often a need to ensure that the places mentioned in a particular text can actually be located on a map or on the ground. This need does not obviate the utility of anglicizing place names, although it makes recoverability of an anglicized name important. That is, even readers with a solid knowledge of Russian will likely fail to reconvert *Halfwittov* into *Полоумнов*, but this is unimportant for the stylistics of fiction. In contrast, for nonfiction, it is vital that *Lake Bled* be understood as *Blejsko jezero* to Slovenian readers (and it almost surely will)—and, if *Salt Mud Slide* is not automatically understood as *Slano blato* (and it may well not), some cue should be provided to resolve any doubt.³

For the hard sciences, it is vital for readers to understand what a particular feature is, be it as mundane as a hill or valley, or as technically precise as a rock shelter, cirque, or peneplain. Even if this level of precision is less vital in the humanities (e.g., it is generally not necessary that a reader understand that a particular cave is, say, a fracture cave or an anastomotic cave, etc.), the need for basic clarity remains: simply referring to a feature as *Potočka Zijalka* in an English text will not be as clear as calling it *Potok Cave*.

The stylistics of tourism imposes a special burden because the purpose of tourism texts is, frankly, to sell a location. If a potential sight is presented in an opaque or uninspiring way, it will not attract visitors and will not generate income. An English-speaking tourist would probably be more motivated to visit the omi-

³ Generally, a parenthetical is a sufficient cue when recoverability is required; for example: “the Salt Mud Slide (*Slano blato*) is”

nous-sounding *Devil's Bridge* than the completely opaque *Ajdovski Gradec Hill*⁴ (see Figure 1).

**NARAVNE IN KULTURNE ZNAMENITOSTI:
NATURAL AND CULTURAL SIGHTS:**

- 1 *slap Savica, WATERFALL SAVICA*
- 2 *korita Mostnice, CANYON MOSTNICA*
- 3 *Ajdovski gradec, HILL AJDOVSKI GRADEC*
- 4 *Hudičev most, DEVIL'S BRIDGE*

Figure 1. Tourism sign (detail), Bohinjska Bistrica.

Despite these different stylistic factors in fiction, the humanities, the sciences, tourism, and so on, I am unaware of any text type in which it would be an advantage for a translation to obscure or not convey a meaning that is clear in the source language.

3 TEXT CONTEXT AS A STYLISTIC FACTOR

In addition to the type of text a translator is working with, the context of that text may dictate certain choices when dealing with toponyms. This is especially true when dealing with areas that have mixed ethnicities or where the ethnic character (and thus the associated toponyms) have changed across history.

Generally speaking, in the absence of an established English exonym (e.g., such as *Vienna* for German *Wien*, or *Rome* for Italian *Roma*), authors will default to place names as used by the official (or dominant) language in the country where the place is located (e.g., as in Magocsi 1993: xi–xii).⁵ Thus, it would be typical in English to refer to Klagenfurt, Austria (and not *Celovec*, its Slovenian name), Bolzano, Italy (and not *Bozen*, its German name), and Košice, Slovakia (and not *Kassa*, its Hungarian name).

In English texts that involve enclaves of ethnic minorities, it may nonetheless often make a sense to present minority endonyms (at least in a secondary manner); for example:

⁴ *Pagan Fort Hill* would be an evocative way to label such a feature; in this case, the root *ajd* refers to the pre-Slavic settlers that built the hill fort rather than to giants, a secondary meaning of *ajd*.

⁵ In a thoughtful written introduction, Magocsi goes to considerable length to explain that, as in other reference works, he has used “the criterion of present-day political boundaries” to create consistency in how place names are presented in his atlas.

- (1) The Slovenian secondary school at Klagenfurt (Slovene: *Celovec*) had 424 pupils in 1970. (Stephens 1976: 10)

However, presenting minority endonyms as primary—or as the only option—is at best unclear because they typically cannot be found in any English reference work. At worst, the practice may be nationalist or chauvinist (cf. Section 4.5 below). For example:

- (2) Likewise *Völkzeitung*, a German nationalist paper published in Celovec (Klagenfurt) ... (Bevc 2008: 28)
- (3) There was fog in the Alps which made it impossible to land in Celovec or any other field of the Austrian Alps. (Cekota 1968: 350)

Historical contexts also demand special stylistic treatment of toponyms. For example, Magocsi's maps of the Roman and Byzantine empires (1993: xii, 6) use classical Latin or Greek names (thus *Vindobona*, *Emona*, *Singidunum*, etc. rather than *Vienna*, *Ljubljana*, *Belgrade*, etc.). Efforts to avoid anachronism need not go back as far as classical times; for example, a study on Jews in nineteenth-century Hungary deliberately uses the names *Pressburg* and *Ungvár* for today's *Bratislava* and *Uzhhorod* because the latter names were not created until the twentieth century (Lupovitzch 2007: xxvi). The existing body of historiography for a topic also determines choices. For example, even though the Slovenian name *Soča* appeared in print at least a century (and probably earlier) before the First World War,⁶ the site of the battles there is invariably known as the *Isonzo Front*. Likewise, the *Congress of Laibach* (held in Ljubljana in 1821) is rarely cited as the *Congress of Ljubljana*.⁷ Such stylistic concerns for place names apply to a wide range of historical issues, also including names of castles, estates, industrial sites, and more.

4 THEORETICAL ISSUES

Text type and context are informative for stylistic choices in individual situations, but stylistic cohesiveness requires some theoretical considerations. These perspectives—which should serve as overarching guidelines when choosing how to deal with place names—include seeking transparency and consistency, avoiding fossilization, discounting reciprocity, recognizing relativism, and being wary of nationalism.

⁶ Cf. Valentin Vodnik's 1809 poem "Brambovska dobrà volja": *Drava čigáva je / Soča čigáva je . . .* 'Whose is the Drava / Whose is the Soča . . . ' (Vodnik 1840: 85).

⁷ Statistics from Google Books search (23 April 2014): *Isonzo Front* vs. *Soča Front* = 326:32; *Congress of Laibach* vs. *Congress of Ljubljana* = 188:17.

4.1 Transparency

Transparency—or the clear conveyance of information from the source language to the target language—is generally one of the primary goals of any translation. An example from geography is eloquent testimony to this:

. . . a Russian-speaking person familiar with the Latin alphabet, or an English-speaking person knowing Russian, would immediately know that an expedition to *Chukotskiy Poluostrov* would not be an expedition to the moon, but for that matter neither would be dismayed if the original Cyrillic alphabet had been used. On the other hand, the reader who has not had the benefit of training in the Russian language is in no way enlightened by the word *Poluostrov*, nor has he any way of knowing that the jaw-breaking *Chukotskiy* is merely the Russian adjectival form of Chukchi, the name of the tribe inhabiting the region. (Sinclair & Topchy 1960: 244)

Regarding the failure to adapt toponyms to the target language, Sinclair and Topchy commented: “The reason . . . is not far to seek. It is the simplest way to avoid the problems of adaptation. . . By the same token it is also the crudest manner . . . It is a way of dodging an issue instead of facing it” (1960: 244–245) and “the consumer is being neglected for the convenience of the producer” (1961: 164–165).

4.2 Consistency

Consistency of solutions is also a desirable feature in any translation. For example, it is disturbing to read an unbalanced phrase such as “the Herkova jama and the Repolust cave” (Frischauf 2013: 13) when the elegant and simple solution “Herk Cave and Repolust Cave” is available.⁸ However, just as blanket rules cannot be applied, there is no need to insist on iron-clad consistency in anglicization if this would somehow damage the cohesiveness of the text. Even the best translators encounter problems with no neat solution, but will generally succeed in resolving in a manner that is natural for the reader and the target language. Translators may be reassured by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (1841: 47).

In a rejoinder to Sinclair and Topchy’s article, Armstrong rightly pointed out that some non-anglicized names have become established in English usage. However, he then asked where it would lead, and complained that “[l]ogically, this should then be extended to all other place-names in languages with which English speakers are unfamiliar, so that in effect world cover of anglicized names is required.”

⁸ Or, alternatively, “Herk Cave (*Herkova jama*) and Repolust Cave (*Repolusthöhle*)” if there is a need to supply the reader with the endonyms. Herk Cave is named after the Herk farm 3.5 km northeast of Radlje ob Dravi.

Obviously, this is not a translator's concern; no text contains all the place names in the world, and very few contain so many that an effort at consistency would be a burden.

Inevitably, accepting some inconsistency is also part of the translation process. As Páll and Matthews point out, “translation of generic terms is often so widespread that it seems that this must be part of the standard rules. However . . . it becomes quickly obvious that the translation of generic terms cannot be fully standardized and applied to all names” (78).

4.3 *Institutional fossilization*

Translators—especially those working with small languages in which a small number of people have disproportionate influence on phraseological standards—should beware of the trap of applying certain stylistic solutions simply because “that’s the way it is done” or “that’s the way I learned to do it.” Under the worst circumstances, the result is adherence to rules that have been created, often by nonnative speakers, seemingly without adequate reference to target-language patterns or norms—for example, widespread Slovenian avoidance of established English names for regions of Slovenia such as *Carniola* (Reindl 2010b: *passim*). Violating these norms can lead to censure with moral overtones (e.g., accusations of disrespecting Slovenian nationhood or historical victimhood) within the very small community that such translators operate in. Such “institutional pressure” has been cited by David Limon (2010: 32 ff.) as a reason why some Slovenian translators fail to effectively serve as cultural mediators, choosing instead to conform to an “ethics of sameness” (cf. Venuti 1998: 82) to avoid criticism.

4.4 *Reciprocity and relativism*

Two concepts regarding relations between languages should be thoroughly considered by translators: linguistic “reciprocity” (which certainly does not exist) and linguistic “relativism” (which is certainly often overlooked).

Languages do not have diplomatic relations. Unlike countries, which adopt tax treaties on a bilateral basis, or expel diplomats in tit-for-tat exchanges, languages do not engage in reciprocity. It is a misconceived notion that, if Language A extensively adopts material from Language B, then the reverse should also be true. One encounters statements such as “Če se lahko mi Slovenci naučimo izgovoriti

New York, se lahko tudi Američani naučijo izgovoriti ... Gorenjska”⁹ (Marko 2014). In fact, relations between languages are governed by a complex interplay of power, status, and other sociolinguistic factors. The fact that German now uses, say, *New York* instead of archaic *Neuyork* (Brockhaus 1911: 264) has no bearing on whether English will (ever) use *München* instead of *Munich*.

Languages also differ in their mutual accessibility, which influences stylistic choices when dealing with toponyms. For example, languages like French, Spanish, German, and Italian are culturally familiar or accessible to English, at least at a rudimentary level, and it is thus unremarkable to read “trenches in the Bois de Melancourt” (“Operations” 1915)¹⁰ or “the large expanse of the Lago de Maracaibo” (Stephens 2013: 78)¹¹ in general texts. Such toponyms are generally accepted as part of the “comfort zone” that English readers can operate in. In contrast, it seems unlikely that *Hutan Wehea* (Indonesian) or *Liepājas ezers* (Latvian) would ever really catch on in English at the expense of the *Wehea Forest* or *Lake Liepaja*. As a dominant global language, English is in a position that puts it into the “comfort zone” of most other languages, often resulting in frequent direct use of English place names in other languages. However, this in no way constitutes evidence that English is equally comfortable with unadapted foreign place names.

4.5 Nationalism

It occasionally happens that some variety of nationalism overrides any considerations of text type or context, transparency, or consistency. A translator may forge ahead on the conviction that the dictionary or normative guide for his or her language prescribes a particular name, spelling, or other orthographic convention, and that this norm therefore also governs any other language when his or her culture is represented in it.

Such nationalism is reflected in maps of border areas, which almost without exception present bilingual names for the “other” side of the border and monolingual place names for their own side of the border.¹² This fosters the idea that one’s own country is ethnically pure, whereas the neighboring country is occupying

⁹ “If we Slovenians can learn to pronounce *New York*, Americans can also learn to pronounce *Gorenjska* [‘Upper Carniola].”

¹⁰ But cf. “holding the Germans back in the Melancourt woods” (“Naval” 1916).

¹¹ But cf. “the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo” (Lucas De Grummond 1983: 202).

¹² An anonymous reviewer suggests that some sort of exceptionalism may apply in the Slovenian case due to ethnically mixed territory on one side of the border but not the other. In fact, ethnically mixed border areas are anything but exceptional in Europe. The fact that there is no longer, say, a German minority in Slovenia is the result of twentieth-century ethnic cleansing, compared to the more benign assimilation processes still taking place in Italy, Austria, and Hungary (where the Slovenian population has declined substantially, and where it is often difficult or even impossible to find Slovenian speakers in many places with bilingual labels on Slovenian maps). To suggest that this justifies the use of bilingual names in *English texts* for places outside Slovenia, but not inside Slovenia, is unwitting endorsement of cultural and linguistic genocide.

one's ethnic territory, representing some sort of revanchism. (Here I do not single out Slovenia vis-à-vis its neighbors. The phenomenon is surely global, but Slovenian maps are conveniently available to me.)

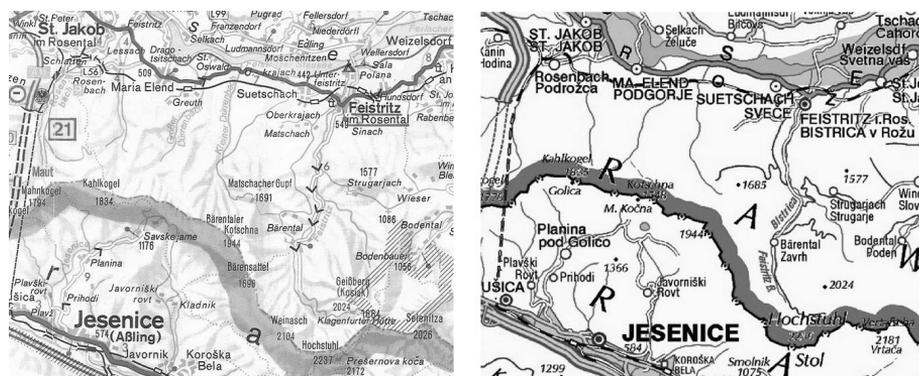


Figure 2. Austrian-Slovenian border, detail (Dürnsteiner 1994; Geopedia).

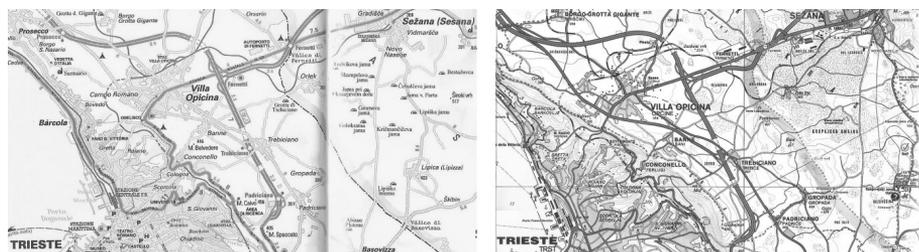


Figure 3. Italian-Slovenian border, detail (Touring Club Italiano 2004; Kos 2000).

For example, the Austrian map in Figure 2 shows Jesenice/Aßling in Slovenia but no Slovenian names in Austria, whereas its Slovenian counterpart shows Suetschach/Sveče, Feistritz/Bistrica, and other settlements in Austria, but no German names in Slovenia. Similarly, the Italian map in Figure 3 shows Sežana/Sesana and Lipica/Lipizza in Slovenia but no Slovenian names in Italy, whereas its Slovenian counterpart shows Trieste/Trst, Villa Opicina / Opčine, and other settlements in Italy, but no Italian names in Slovenia.

In my own translation experience, I have encountered cases of colleagues failing to realize that certain towns and villages are, in fact, not in Slovenia and are not known in the English-speaking world by their Slovenian names. Ethnographic texts with statements like “On the mountain near Dobrla Vas” (Kropej 2012: 128) and

“a giant named *Robavs* lived in Borovlje” (Kropej 2012: 136) become much less meaningful when even well-educated readers cannot infer that they refer to places in Austria (specifically, to Eberndorf and Ferlach) and therefore cannot assign any sense of place to them.¹³

I have also encountered clients that have responded with surprise when I have used Italian names for settlements in Italy in English texts. When I once suggested that any insistence on bilingual pairs such as Trieste/Trst (in Italy) should be paralleled by pairs such as Sežana/Sesana (in Slovenia), the reaction was shock—accompanied by a lecture about the suppression of Slovenian culture by Fascist Italy in the 1930s.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations for dealing with toponyms in translated texts seem self-evident, but should nonetheless be spelled out. Obviously, place names should conform to the orthography, grammar, lexicon, and semantics of the target language. As Sinclair and Topchy (1960: 245) put it, “wherever the aims of clear geographical identification will permit, established and linguistically correct anglicized names and derivatives in their shortest form should be preferred” (1960: 245).

To offer a few concrete Slovenian-English examples: orthographic adaptations such as *Novo Mesto* and *Vavta Vas* (cf. Slovenian *Novo mesto* and *Vavta vas*)¹⁴ are preferable because English conventionally capitalizes last words in headline style, which is used for place names (cf. *Chicago* 2003: 8.167). Grammatical conventions such as specific elements preceding generics should be followed: thus, *Lucija Primary School* and not *Primary School Lucija*¹⁵ (cf. the syntactically equivalent Slovenian *Osnovna šola Lucija*). Natural and proper lexical choices should be made, thus *Savica Falls* and *Ribnica Creek* (and not *Savica Waterfall* and *Ribnica Stream*).¹⁶ Finally, proper semantic choices should obviously be made; for example, the *Karst Rim* and not *Karst Edge* (cf. Slovenian *Kraški rob*).¹⁷ But these recommendations are simply “good English”; that is, patterns that any competent user of English ought to automatically follow.

¹³ According to the colophon, this particular work was written by a Slovenian, translated into English by two Slovenians, and copyedited by a Canadian; blame for the incorrectly represented toponyms would lie with the translators and copyeditor rather than the author of the Slovenian text.

¹⁴ As in Toporišič (2001: 206).

¹⁵ As in Pečar and Beškovič (2002).

¹⁶ As in Fallon (2010: 137).

¹⁷ As in Bogataj (2007: 397).

Much more difficult to define are the stylistic choices involving when and how to anglicize or gloss toponyms, or to offer exonyms alongside endonyms. At best, these choices can only be informed by text type, text context, and theoretical guidelines, not dictated by them. Sinclair and Topchy comment that “it is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules that are applicable in all conceivable instances. . . . linguistic as well as geographical considerations, and wherever possible the convenience of readers, should govern the choice of an ‘approved’ form for any name in this area.” Failure to anglicize “should not be allowed to prevail merely because it represents the easy way out” (1960: 245).

Not taking the easy way out—that is, acting as a cultural mediator and serving the interests of the reader of the text—also demands extra responsibility from translators. Translators must apply caution to avoid pitfalls such as “false generics” (e.g., assuming that the village of Lake Placid, New York, is a lake; cf. Kadmon 2006: 105), false etymological meanings (e.g., assuming that *Otoška jama* ‘Otok Cave’, Slovenia, refers to an actual island¹⁸ rather than the village of Otok), or outright errors of ignorance (e.g., forgetting that the Slovenian adjective *cerkljanski* may refer to places named Cerklje or the town of Cerkno).¹⁹

All of this requires that, in addition to solid linguistic knowledge, competent translators be sensitive to the particular stylistic demands of a text, have cultural and historical competence, and possess the curiosity and skills to research names that they may be unfamiliar with.

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¹⁸ For example, “other caves such as Island Cave” (*E.U. online* 2009: 49).

¹⁹ For example, “the Idrija and Cerklje Hills” (Kmecl & Žnidaršič 1987: 262), “the Idrija and Cerklje Hills” (Longley 2007: 171) as a mistranslation of *Idrijsko-Cerkljansko brbovje* ‘the Idrija–Cerkno Hills’.

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