https://doi.org/10.37193/BSFF.2019.28.22

PRESERVING THE INTEGRITY OF THE SOURCE TEXT AND THE FUNCTIONAL AND SEMANTIC EFFECT IN TRANSLATING NAMES OF CHARACTERS IN DRAMA

Ligia TOMOIAGĂ[*]
Alexandr COTAR[**]

Abstract: Charactonyms are very difficult to translate in a foreign language, especially due to their cultural, semantic and functional load. Especially in dramatic texts, names of characters carry a very important such load, which not only helps at the understanding of the message, but is crucial in the decoding process. Literary onomastics has to be taken as a separate field of study by translators of literature, because it is through names that some authors reveal very important keys to the text. The multi-referential character of names in the dramatic genre can be illustrated with the English translation of a Romanian play, Cornel Teulea's play *Marx's Capital is Back as a Quantum Event and Kills Schrődiger's Cat*, in which we considered that it was of utmost importance that we translate the names of characters, as well as of some titles of organizations, institutions and parties. Much of the decoding of the text depends on the understanding of the names of the characters, as we argue.

Keywords: charactonyms, multi-referential texts, translating literary onomastics

Being a negotiation between author, narrator, narratee, source text reader, translator, target text and target reader, any translation will have to take into account all these variables. In translating literature, there is obviously a need to observe both linguistic factors, as well as features that have to do with narratology, pragmatics, culture and inter-culturality, as well as a basic understanding of historical and social background. Before starting to translate, any translator of literature conducts her research regarding the period when the text was written, the person and the persona of the writer, the cultural background, language particularities, historical, social, psychological factors of the 'then' and how these can get a close equivalent into the 'foreign now'.

When it comes to proper names in literature, there are a series of factors that need to be taken into account, such an issue is part of the general translating strategy of the translator. The translator will have to favor either

[*] Assistant Professor PhD, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, The Baia Mare University Centre, 76 Victoriei Street, Baia Mare (ligiatomoiaga@gmail.com).
[**] University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures (cotar.alexandr@gmail.com).

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

a translation that seems familiar to the reader of the target text that is easy to read and does not require too many notes that might prevent the reader from immersing in the literary universe proposed by the author; or, she might favor a translation that has the same flavor with the source text, preserves its historical, social, temporal and stylistic characteristics, and tries to clarify any ambiguities by introducing translator's notes.

Proper names, though, are even more difficult to manage, as the difference between languages and cultures can be so considerable, that the reader in the target language cannot have access to important pieces of information like geographical places, semantically charged names of organizations, and last, but not least, names of characters.

Literary onomastics has been in the attention of both linguists and translators for a long time, and they revealed the fact that proper names in literature have four dimensions: semantic, sociolinguistic, graphic and phonetic. The graphic and phonetic dimensions are particularly relevant between languages that use different alphabets and have a very different phonology. The sociolinguistic dimension is also important, especially in translating between different cultures, in which social systems, family and work relations, social strata, as well as other such factors are extremely and relevantly different. As for the semantic aspect, it is most relevant in texts in which proper names are semantically loaded.

> Literary onomastics and the four-dimensional nature of Pn (semantic, sociolinguistic, graphic and phonetic), the place given to proper names in different paratexts and cultural references sometimes require paratextual explanations or "re-active" translation creations. Thus, the (in)translatability of literary proper names created by writers refers not only to different levels of translation analysis, but also to the matter of proper name semantics (descriptive, modified, mixed etc.). (Lungu-Badea, 2013:444)

Literary texts, by re-contextualizing non-literary names, charge such names with meaning, sometimes referring to other literary texts or cultural instances, which make sense in the source language, but less in the target language. Consequently, as Lungu-Badea show, the semantics of the proper names in literature comes as a study in itself, which is part of the process of translation.

> Relevant translations demand the noting and understanding of the designation function of Pn, which, at a semasiological level, serve to identify an entity or a very precise concept, but also of the connotations and meaning that can be activated in a given context. (2013:444)

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

Names of characters in fiction are multi-referential, in the sense that they point not only to the character to differentiate him/her from other characters, but also to point to such characteristics as class, social status, origins, nationality, identity, and, what is more, 'inner characteristics'. Consequently, these are "significant proper names", or charactonyms:

> Charactonym (significant proper name) is a name expressing the characteristics of the bearer. Partial or complete similarity of the common stem of the name to the bearer will be referred to as *significance*. Common stem is a name or tis part which resembles in its form an "ordinary" word, e.g. *Blockhead* (common stem "blockhead"), *Halfkin* (common stem "half"). (Kalashnikov, 2006)

Obviously, some names can be just transferred from one text to another – especially when it comes to Biblical names, and the source language is related to the target language – at least they are both Judeo-Christian and use the same alphabet. The decision that the translator has to make is whether the name needs to be just adapted to the new linguistic environment, as it is not charged or loaded semantically, or if it needs to be translated (or explained by adding information to the text).

Vermes (2003) gives an entire list of strategies that the translators use when it comes to translating proper names: *transference, substitution, translation, modification, omission, addition, generalization, transference plus phonetic adaptation*. The proper strategy depends on de different types of texts and, of course, the languages implied.

The translation strategy also depends on the understanding of the process by which the author gave a certain name to a certain character. According to Lutterer, there is a process in name-giving in fiction, which depends on a number of factors. There are three major factors that need to be taken into consideration: "the name-giver", "the name given", and "the object named", where the first is "the initiator of the naming act and author of its final produce", the second is "the result of the naming process", and the third "a distinct geographical entity" (cf. Gibka, 2019:49). Lutterer generally concentrated on geographical names, but the same functions with characters' names. In the model that Martyna Gibka proposes, the author, influenced by "the situational context of the author" becomes "the namer", who gives the name of the character in the fictional world; the "denoted character" also depends on the "situational context of the namer". All of these are parts of what the author considers "the frame fictional world". Within the same world the name also refers to a "user". The name, then, reaches "the reader" who is outside the fictional world. From a

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

narratological perspective, the "namer" would be the narrator, and the "user" would be the narratee.

Even if such constructions seem to be a little far-fetched, in the sense that th Gibka is trying to provide translators with a kind of 'handbook' for naming and translating names, she brings a very important aspect into discussion, and the details and analysis can be really helpful; this aspect of the characters in fiction refers to the functions that characters have, which are "identified on the basis of the naming in a novel" (51)

In fact, the function of a character is an important feature to add to its 'meaning'-load. Charactonyms would, then, refer not only to the inner and outer description of a character, but also to the function of the character within the grammar of that text. If names of characters are important in fiction, and sometimes critics consider that translating them is useful and recommendable, when it comes to drama, the process of decision-making regarding this aspect is even more painful on the part of the translator, especially in what we may call 'symbolic dramas', where not only the action and the purpose of the events are symbolic, but also the characters' names.

Consequently, their names will also carry a symbolic meaning. Sometimes the translation of such names is not possible, not because there is no linguistic equivalent of the name in the target text, but because the symbolic reference is alien to the target audience. For instance, if we were to translate names in old Indian theatre from Hindu into Italian – ancient Indian theatre is known to be highly symbolic – a translation might prove to be impossible; firstly, because there is no equivalent in the target language; and secondly, because even if some meanings could be translated according to the function of the characters, such translations will not have the same connotations. In this situation, the best alternative is to just leave the names in their original form, except, of course, that they will undergo a process of transliteration.

Nevertheless, when both source and target texts come from the same cultural and linguistic area – like the case is with Indo-European languages and Judeo-Christian cultures – translation of charactonyms seems not only easier, but also desirable, or even necessary with symbolic texts.

To illustrate the gains that translation of charactonyms may bring to the understanding of the symbolic meaning of a play, we chose to work with the charactonyms in our own translation of Cornel Teulea's play *Marx's Capital is Back as a Quantum Event and Kills Schrődiger's Cat*, defense of the translator's choice to translate some of the names of characters, considering them charactonyms.

*

The translator is, first of all, a researcher. In a way, his job resides in translating his research to the reading public, absolving the latter from any

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

difficulties of interpretation. A good translation is regarded as such due to many features. When we refer to fiction, quite often, even such apparently small details like proper names carry a crucial 'meaning'-load of the whole, and the immediate involvement of the translator is a necessity for the conveyance of text's full understanding.

In our case, dealing with a translation of the symbolic theatre requires special attention to what Kalashnikov called "charactonyms". There are quite a few of them in Cornel Teulea's *Marx's Capital Comes Back as a Quantum Event and Kills Schrődinger's Cat*. But before going to the actual translation of those proper names, it is important to mention that a general knowledge of (Romanian) history, geography, politics, and science goes hand in hand with comprehension of this text. Before reading Mr. Teulea's play, one should know, or at least be familiar with Marxism, quantum mechanics, Schrődinger's thought experiment, the bloody past of the Communist Romania. While this kind of knowledge helps exploring the play's atmosphere, the representative charactonyms are no less than keys to the play's heart.

As they are highly representative for the SL readership, omitting their translations into the TL becomes equal to decapitating the play. (Kalashnikov)

Marx's Capital Comes Back as a Quantum Event and Kills Schrődinger's Cat by Cornel Teulea is a symbolic, reflective, satirical play, which exposes the Communist dogmas and past horrors in retrospection, with the addition of bitter humor and absurdity. Dealing with such a dramatic work requires major focus on the name of characters, and not just because of their multi-referential nature, but also because being a few, they stand for the many. There are characters representing Homo Sovieticus, others representing former Communist leaders, and of course, those representing the people. Let us immerge into the analysis of the translation of those names, and try to prove their characteronymy.

There are several names with significant load in the play: *Jerky O'Fartyk* (*Onel Pârțok*), *Tintina O'Fartyk* (*Tintina Pârțok*), *Marxinus the First* (*Marxina Întâiul*), *Marxinus the Second*, which later becomes *Marxinus Supremus the One* (*Marxina al Doilea/Marxina Supremul Ca Atare*), *Adam-Woman* (*Femeia-Adam*), *Adam-Man* (*Bărbatul Adam*), *Adam-Grandson* (*Adam Nepotul*), *The Regulating Controller* (*Controlorul Regulator*), *The Supervisor* (*Supraveghetorul*).

The name *Jerky O'Fartyk* mirrors the meaning and form of the same name in the SL. The Romanian '*Onel*' is a hypocoristic form of *Ion* (the English *John*), but it receives an embarrassing aura in the play, since the statute of the bearer is that of a professor (of whom the reader finds out that he pours famous quotations while presenting a cook book). Given the circumstances, the 'silly' *Onel* is translated as *Jerky*, by addition of the

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

diminutive suffix *–y* to the act of j**king-off. Hence, both the humor and humiliation in the original text is preserved. By moving on to the family name of the character – *O'Fartyk* – we can witness a calibration or equivalence between the Romanian construction and the English one. *Pârțok* is basically formed by the addition of the last name suffix *–ok* (which could be a Russian one in the play's context) to the folk interjection denoting the act of f*rting. The rendering of the invented Romanian name into English is also creative: to the Irish name prefix *O'*- (denoting "the descendant of") is added the translated interjection, which becomes the noun "*f*rt*", and the supposedly Russian name suffix *–yk*. Therefore, the translation preserves the identity and the inner characteristic of the bearer from the SL text. A hypothetical inconvenience may appear with the Irish readership, who could be less enthusiastic about the usage of the Irish prefix. Another possible translation of the last name could be Fartovich, in which case an obvious Russian patronymic suffix is added to the main body.

The name of *Jerky*'s wife – *Tintina* – is transferred into English. As there is no trace of such a word in Romanian language, we can presume that it is a phonetic allegory, as if the clinking sound which it represents appears because of the inner emptiness of the bearer. The name is significant in its ridiculousness, and it stays true in both SL and TL texts. The context of the play allow speculation on the origin of such a name. Contextually, it could very likely be that such *Tintinas* were conceived in the Communist canteens, by their activist parents. The transference of this name into English makes it equally ambiguous, giving birth to previously-mentioned speculations. A possible association with a metal tin could arise, but it doesn't really spoil the name's charm.

Another set of names are *Marxinus the First*, and *Marxinus the Second* (*Marxinus Supremus The One*). The chosen approach of translation – that of modification, confers these names a Roman (imperial) shade. The root of the word remained intact (*Marxin*), but the suffix was changed through the addition of the Roman suffix *–us*, which gives the name a shape of former imperial power. The decision of this procedure becomes obvious while reading the play, because of the megalomaniac and totalitarian issues of the Communist uncle and his nephew. In other words, the names correspond to their bearers' function in the text, they are descriptive on many levels: class, metaphorical origin and identity, and - why not – inner characteristics. As the stress falls on the first syllable, the pronunciation of the name *Marxinus* reminds the reader of some sort of 'Maximus'. Another possibility that could have been chosen was to slightly change the order of letters towards the end of the name – *Marxianus*. Unfortunately, that decision would not have respected the original design of the name. One way or another, the dictatorial stem becomes quite obvious in the chosen variant of translation (especially when the superlative Supremus comes into play).

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

There are three symbolic names in the play, which are translated into English in almost the same way in which they appear in the original text: *Adam-Woman* (*Femeia Adam*), *Adam-Man* (*Bărbatul Adam*), and *Adam the Grandson* (*Adam Nepotul*). Normally, the first two of them do not make any sense in either Romanian or English; they are at least too ambiguous. However, the usage of these names in context brings the light upon their meaning: this is a metaphor. Once again, the reader comes across the in-context function of the name bearer. What the reader usually thinks of after reading the names, is the Biblical figure Adam, exiled from Heaven, together with Eve. Therefore, a part of the hidden meaning relies on the parallel of falling. This perpetual circle of the men's decadence through the lens of history makes the three characters prototypes of the manhood, viewed from a contemporary perspective.

There is a name of a profession, which had gone far from its primal purpose in the reality of the play – *The Supervisor* (*Supraveghetorul*). One more 'profession' from the play seems to have borrowed its name from an electronic device meant to measure something, for example the temperature in the room – *The Regulating Controller* (*Controlorul Regulator*). Of course, both names are highly satirical in the play, and their analogue denomination is that of 'Security' in the Communist Romania, or NKVD in the Soviet Russia. The translation of those characters may not seem striking at first, they even may seem ordinary, but their humbleness or harmlessness can be deceiving.

Usually, the names of political parties are not very sophisticated, and can meet no obstructions in translation. That is not really the case with the *REAR Party* from this play – *The Revolutionary Enormous Authentic of the Revolutionary Party* (*Partidul Curat Uriaș Refăcut Revoluționar*/*PCURR*). The literal equivalence of the Romanian *PCURR* would be the **SS Party* in English. Two out of four constituents of the abbreviation from the SL were translated with their immediate matches from the TL: *Uriaș – Enormous*, and *Revoluționar – Revolutionary*, the other two being calibrated for the '*REAR'* form. The abbreviation of the party in the SL is extremely important. From a semantical point of view, the SL complete name of the party is erroneous, a quality which has been preserved in the TL too. The option of the translator is very narrow in this case, mainly because of the different word order in English language. Nevertheless, this is a case of a successful reproduction.

It is undeniable that there a lots of cases when the translation of the proper names is unacceptable. Here though, the translation is necessary, lest the translator wants to destroy the organicity of the play. The work of the translator in this case led to her decision to preserve the significance of the names, thus, offering the TL readership a chance to fully immerge in the

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universității de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)

play's world, and at the same time, to faithfully carry the message and intention of the author to the other side.

Works Cited:

Gibka, Martyna, in "*Literary Onomastics: a Theory*", p. 49-51, Lodz: ArchaeGraph.

Kalashnikov, Alexander. (2006). "Proper Names in Translation of Fiction", in "Translation Journal: Literary Translations", volume 10, no. 1, January 2016, available online at: https://translationjournal.net/journal/35propernames.htm [accessed in October, 2019]

Lungu-Badea, Georgiana. (2013). "Translation of Literary Proper Names", in *Onomastics in Contemporary Public Space*, edited by Oliviu Felecan and Alina Bugheşiu, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Vermes, A.P.. (2003) "Proper Names in Translation: An Explanatory Attempt", in *Across Languages and Culture*, volume 4, no. 1, available online at https://akademiai.com/doi/abs/10.1556/Acr.4.2003.1.5 [accessed in October, 2019]

BDD-A31236 © 2019 Editura Universităţii de Nord din Baia Mare
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-08 17:01:59 UTC)