

THE 'WHAT'S-IN-A-NAME' QUESTION VIEWED THROUGH THE PRISM OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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As both cultural universals and ethnic markers, personal names provide a means to look at the issues of individual and cultural identity, with communicative practices in view. The paper treats personal names both as lexical units 'in transit' from one language (and culture) to another, and as a vulnerable constituent of the individual's self, which requires special treatment in intercultural communication. Also addressed in the paper are some of the issues of cultural differences between the Russian and English ways of using anthroponyms, discrepancies between name formats, and current trends in name use.

*I am nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us.
Don't tell – they'd banish us!*

Emily Dickinson

1. INTRODUCTION

Personal names are rightly deemed to be cultural universals, although apparently there are ethnic groups in which they are seldom, if ever, used. In most societies, however, the very idea of being 'a nobody' implies that a human being is not regarded as a member of their particular community. Moreover, in civilized societies the role of personal names is crucial for keeping a public record of the population.

It is not surprising that anthroponyms have always attracted huge attention both from scholars and lay people. Such an enthusiasm is easy to understand for several reasons, some of which are fairly apparent: personal names constitute a very special class of vocabulary; they have a great semiotic potential and serve as cultural markers; they even reflect the historical development of the nation. Apart from these scholarly considerations, it is their

anthropocentric nature that matters: there is hardly any other word in human language that we take so personally as we do our names. For researchers, the study of proper names has for a long time been regarded as the prerogative of linguistics and onomastics in particular. However, the role proper names play in the formation of the individual's self justifies John E. Joseph's claim that the study of this lexical category should not be marginalized (Joseph 2004, 12). Indeed, proper nouns, and personal names among them, open up a vast research area in a great variety of fields: ethnography, linguistics, philosophy, translation studies - to name just a few.

This article is an attempt to tackle personal names placed at the crossroads of linguistic and cultural dimensions, with the aim to demonstrate that the role personal names occupy in the realm of one's personal identity necessitates more subtle treatment of anthroponyms than their semantically 'hollow' nature could suggest. A blend of interpretative and explanatory approaches coupled with introspection and analysis are used here to study personal names in cultural contexts.

2. SOME BACKGROUND NOTES

Major theoretical concerns underlying the study of proper names are primarily centered around their functioning, distinguishing them from common nouns, and their referential nature. According to John R. Searle, who famously described proper names functioning 'not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions', proper names allow users to refer to a particular object or individual without making people agree on their attributes. (Searle 1997 (1958), 591). That is to say that proper names are but conventional tags, which, unlike common nouns, are subject to descriptive substitution to one's own liking, as there is no binding convention among speakers, which features of the referent will necessarily be regarded as obliging. Thus, Searle seems to have resolved the issue of the distinction between common nouns and proper names, positing that the latter perform solely a referential function. The absence of meaning in proper names has been generally accepted. However, in her extensive research, Superanskaya points at the flaws of the numerous existing theories, maintaining that each of them only proves workable under certain conditions. The author argues that neither the 'meaninglessness' of proper names, nor their individualizing function, nor even the theory of their arbitrary nature is not disprovable (Superanskaya 2008, 88–91).

These doubts are not new to the learned anthroponymic discourse. Indeed, the semantic aspect of personal names needs careful handling once we turn our attention to non-European cultures, and even more so, if regarded in the context of communicative practices. Personal names do not necessarily come in noun forms, but they may be verbs, adjectives, participles or whole phrases; they may be private and never used (see Enfield, Stivers 2007, Geertz 1993). In the Akan culture (as in many other African cultures) the

name is perceived as part of the personality evolving throughout one's lifetime; therefore, several amendments may be made to a name depending on the individual's life history (Mutunda 2001, Agyecum 2006). The personalizing function of the name is also subject to doubts, for a limited name pool in a given culture makes the repetition of the same names inevitable (Bromberger 1982).

So far, in the existing Russian academic discourse semantic and pragmatic studies have contributed a lot to the linguistic exploration of the personal name. Proper names are thoroughly examined in the works by Rylov, Superanskaya, Yermolovich, to mention but a few authors. In many ways their research departs from the abstraction of linguistic form, from context and function, because the attempts to characterize personal names logically in the absence of social and communicative contexts are unlikely to give a full picture of the name's role in the cultural existence of an individual. As Hymes (1993, 13) justly notes, in order to 'understand deeply and broadly the nature of linguistic, and communicative, competence [...]' we need to focus 'on the ways in which people do use language'. Nowadays, cognitive research, embracing linguistic, philosophical and cultural findings to comprehend the involvement of the anthroponym in the formation of an individual's ego, also contributes to the study of proper names. As linguistic personalities, people identify themselves among others through their names. Such a perception of the individual's self is therefore regarded as a cognitive act in which his or her lingual identity is realized (Berestnev 2007, 38).

3. HANDLING NAMES AS CULTURAL SIGNALS

3.1. Personal names in cultural contexts

In the out-of-context use, dealing with names – as long as they are not overburdened with meaning¹ – deceptively seems to be quite straightforward. However, anyone who has ever been involved in intercultural mediation as translator or interpreter will know that personal names may appear to be very treacherous translation units. No doubt, it is best for personal names (and their holders) to retain their original sound shapes, and to that end, phonetic alignment rules for proper names exist, diligently designed to bridge the phonetic gaps between languages. Hence, the variety of ways to make a foreign name most suitable for pronunciation in the receiving culture, and recognizable too: Yeltsin and Eltsin; Ciaikovskij and Tchaikovsky. The seemingly mechanical procedure—the transposition of a name with different alphabetic characters is known to be full of pitfalls. The history of translation bears witness to the amount of time and effort it has taken scholars to negotiate the transcription and transliteration principles and harmonize the transcription systems. The curious cases of mispronunciation of some outstanding

¹ This paper leaves meaningful fictional names beyond its scope.

personalities' names in Russian are famously given in L. Scherba's (Scherba 1958) work on transcription principles. The inefficiency of 'pure' transliteration of English names into Russian is illustrated with the names of W. Shakespeare and B. Shaw, which appeared absolutely unrecognizable when they were transliterated into Russian, with no regard to their phonetic resemblance to the originals (consequently, they sounded as [shakespeAre] and [shov]). Since then creative transliteration has generally been accepted as a means to bridge the differences of language pairs: it ensures the best possible result due to the sound balancing of transcription and transliteration principles.

It may happen, however, that for reasons other than interlingual phonetic gaps, pronunciation variants of some proper names do not conform to the accepted pattern, as in the Russian variants (in square brackets) of such names as, for example: Chomsky - [hOmskii]; Jakobson - [jakopsOn]; Aldous Huxley and Thomas Huxley - [hAksli] and [gEksli] respectively. The reasons for such deviations and discrepancies are cultural, rather than linguistic: the first two names retain their phonetic shapes as they were originally pronounced in Russian; the other two reflect two different transliteration traditions. Indeed, one has to be a well-known person to enjoy such recognition of one's name; hence it is not without good reason that the names of historical persons occupy a special chapter in translation studies.

It is important to emphasize here that the significance of dominant trends in the name transposition practice should not be underestimated. In the post-perestroika Russia of the early 90s, Russian newspapers used to reproduce foreign proper names in Roman script, adding Russian declension endings to them (in bold type after apostrophes in the examples below) so that they conformed to Russian grammar rules.²

- (1) *Sean Lennon, сын погибшего музыканта самой главной группы "The Beatles" John'a Lennon'a, высказался насчет причины убийства отца.*
'Sean Lennon, son of John Lennon, the deceased musician of the greatest of groups *The Beatles*, spoke on the cause of his father's murder.'
- (2) *Ни один родитель не сможет простить этого Jackson'у.*
'Not a single parent will ever be able to forgive Jackson for that.'

This rather controversial practice was short-lived, but it reflected two general trends: to treat proper names as easily recognizable iconic signs and demonstrate how smooth code switching may be. Neither proved right in the end because not many people had a sufficient command of English at that time. Alternatively, the name was dubbed in brackets (3) – which was at least educational.

² In those years it was quite a trend for the Russian press to leave borrowings from English in their original spelling; among proper names, anthroponyms and the names of companies prevailed. For more on this see Boyko 2000.

- (3) *Ровно 20 лет назад Билл Гейтс (Bill Gates) совершил самый важный поступок в своей жизни.*

'Exactly twenty years ago, Bill Gates did the most important thing in his life.'

These briefly outlined approaches to handling proper names in a foreign environment demonstrate that the use of linguistic methods is largely determined by current cultural trends. It is important, however, to consider the effect different techniques in the treatment of personal names may have on the individual.

3.2. On personal names, identity and vulnerability

Even in monolingual circumstances, where translation is not involved, 'culture-meets-culture' situations are not infrequent. With proper names, it happens between same-alphabet languages: retaining their original spelling, names still remain as 'strangers' because they read differently in the language of communication. As the reading rules of the recipient language seldom match those of the source one, the name's vocal shape is often distorted. For obvious reasons the situation becomes more complicated when the word is put in a different alphabetic milieu. In order to avoid the embarrassment of hearing one's name mispronounced, people often opt for changing their (given) names, like one of the characters in the novel 'Prague' by Arthur Phillips. (The passage below is about a Hungarian guy living in America, whose given name was Károly).

- (4) *At age nine he announced to his parents that he was tired of people calling him Ca-RO-lee rather than KAR-oy and therefore he would henceforth be called Charles; but he was twelve when Hungarian words finally grew less familiar than English ones. Twelve-year-old Károly the Hungarian lived dormant inside Charles the Ohioan throughout high school, college, and high school, unnecessary, unnoticed, unwelcome. (Philips 2002, 48)*

Such situations are not infrequent in real life: the fact that Chinese immigrants often take on English (first) names in Anglophone countries is common knowledge; Russia-based nationals from Asian republics also often resort to this method to avoid embarrassment. Obviously, it is the recipient culture's language that dictates the choice.

Apparently, one's own name is so dear to an individual that the slightest distortion of the personal name evokes a negative reaction on the part of its bearer. Who would not recall funny jokes around surnames in our younger years, when we are most sensitive to the way our names are pronounced! Even if a person's name is innocently twisted, they will feel uncomfortable, not to mention the distortions that turn a name into a cognate word with a meaning showing through. This fact in itself is undeniable proof of the value personal names have for the realization of one's identity.

Distortion of the name is of course an extreme case of interference into the individual's self. However, the misuse of even the legitimate variants of one's name is usually regarded as trespassing. Here, what at first sight seems to be a purely technical problem evolves into

an issue deserving special treatment, for the hollow sign of a personal name ‘pretending’ to mean something in a foreign language involuntary acquires the connotative qualities innately untypical for this class of words, thus causing damage to the lingual personality – the name holder. This threat to the individual’s cognitive self necessitates adaptations whose range embraces a variety of means from phonetic changes to complete replacements, as in the case of changing one’s name.

In intercultural communication purely incidental concurrences also take place, and practice shows that they are not always easily avoidable. Although current transcription/transliteration systems enjoy some stability at the present time, there is little certainty that they will ever be refined to everyone’s satisfaction. And it is exactly at this point where the issue of meaning shows through the surface of the otherwise hollow sign representing an individual. In recent years there have been televised reports of multiple complaints from the Russian citizens of Latvia whose names, spelt according to Latvian transcription, appeared cognate with either obscene Russian words or the ones just evoking unpleasant associations (e.g. the Latvian transcription makes the common Russian surname Shishkin sound like the word meaning ‘boobs’ for the Russian name holder).

Such coincidences are not infrequent. Russian students of English and translation in the Soviet Union used to be taught the subtleties of transliteration on the example of the name of the member of the Communist party Politburo Shitikov. The name was spelt as Chitikov to avoid unnecessary associations with the English four-letter word. (Yermolovich (2001) recalls this case in one of his publications too). A true case of a very unfortunate coincidence of an Indian proper name with a Russian obscene word is mentioned in one of Tatyana Tolstaya’s essays (Tolstaya 2001, 61); if asked, translators and interpreters will readily offer more of these highly challenging situations for consideration. Whatever the difficulties, they must be dealt with the utmost decorum to avoid embarrassment of both the parties involved in oral and written communication.

The necessity of handling proper names with care in intercultural contexts becomes obvious as soon as one realizes its role in the formation of one’s cultural self. Among other challenges, one of the mediator’s major concerns in cross-cultural context is not to hurt a person’s feelings by distorting their names. While the change of name is entirely the name holder’s decision, other ways to respond to the threat of interfering with one’s identity are entirely the responsibility of cultural mediators.

3.3. Name and gender

In the Russian language proper names are a special issue well worth the space they are given in grammar manuals due to the complexity of their declension paradigm (or rather paradigms). Dealing with surnames in Russian requires substantial grammatical competence even for native speakers. The difficulty arises when surnames are accompanied with initials only, for it is crucial to know the gender of the person in order to choose the

right morphological forms the name takes depending on the case. Given the significant differences between the feminine and masculine forms of personal names in Russian, and the dependence of those forms on many factors, such as the origin of the name, type of ending, or even on the place of the stressed syllable, it is not surprising that even native speakers often find it hard to cope with proper names' morphological forms. For that reason plenty of structural research has been done in this area and a great array of reference material and manuals exist. These issues are the technical linguistic challenges users face in day-to-day communication, and they inevitably emerge in translation situations: if a gender- 'neutral' surname occurs in a translation into Russian, it has little chance of taking the correct declension forms unless the gender of the person in question is known.

This insensitivity to Slavic gender formants becomes easily observable when boys born to single Russian mothers in the Western states are registered under their mother's surnames in their female forms, e.g. Alexander Popova (instead of Alexander Popov). It is not unusual for the borrowing process to adopt a common noun as a syntactic word and then add inflectional morphemes to it. Nowadays Russian can boast plenty of such words as смузисБІ (*smoothies*) and нагетссБІ (*nuggets*), borrowed in their plural forms (underlined) with a Russian plural morpheme added (capitalized), thus duplicating the plurality. However, in the case of surnames, misleading feminine gender morphemes may create an awkward situation for male individuals, especially when they are placed in the initial cultural context (see Rylov 2010 for detailed description of such cases).

Apart from this purely linguistic gap there are cultural ones. English is known for its complicated combinations of honorifics and names in formal situations. For Russian speakers, an envelope addressed to a married woman with her husband's first name followed by their surname on it (e.g. 'to Mrs Ivan Smirnov') is quite exotic. Nowadays, current liberalization trends in the English-speaking world allow women to display their independency through forms of address if they choose to.³ Interestingly, in a foreign language context a Slavic name retains its female form (in English and other European languages) if a woman is not represented as her husband's wife, but is on her own; otherwise, her surname gets its masculine form: *Visiting Mrs Nabokov* (masculine) is the title of an essay by Martin Amis.

3.4. Name format as a challenge in language contact

The format of one's legal name is specific for each individual culture, therefore constituting part of one's cultural identity. The changes that names undergo in the course of a person's life are not typical of African cultures alone, as was mentioned above: in western cultures our name formats also 'mature' in the course of human life, thus marking the stages of socialization. The further one progresses in life, the greater role his/her full name plays in it. In Russian culture an individual's full name consists of three parts: first name, patronymic and surname.

³ Hilary Clinton is addressed as Mrs. Clinton, but objected to the form Mrs. William J. Clinton when she was the First Lady.

The main reason for using a particular format of the name is to designate the distance between individuals. There are also honorifics to accompany personal names in most formal contexts. The set of parameters according to which the appropriateness of name format use is established in lingual communities appears to be the same. By and large, they are: age, social status, family and interpersonal relations and combinations of all these factors. Depending on the situation, the age factor may prevail over status, status over all other parameters, and so on.

The name formats Russian and English users elect for communication in different public settings often disagree and require careful treatment when placed in the intercultural context. Between English and Russian, the cardinal difference in name formats lies in the presence of a functional patronymic in the full Russian personal name. The awareness of the role patronymics play in communication is crucial for gauging the distance between speakers, their social status, etc. No one would ever seriously consider addressing someone younger by the first name with the patronymic – for the native speakers it would be a breach of convention. At my university, a virtual cultural embarrassment occurred when a colleague from the UK, who came to learn Russian and teach English, began his acquaintance with a group of students by learning their full names – in the group rolls full names are listed – and continued to address them using their patronymics.

The subtleties of name use need to be respected in intercultural communication. There are certain conventions to be observed: with cultural icons such as Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky or Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, full three-component names are idiomatic and therefore more recurrent in our tradition, while for a non-Russian speaker Pyotr Tchaikovsky or Alexander Pushkin are sufficient. However, the names of Marina Tsvetayeva and Boris Pasternak seldom hold patronymics in them. It is not an idle issue for translation practice where the right choice has to be made, often in situations more challenging than with the names as illustrious as above.

Respect of national conventions is the cornerstone principle in translation practice. For efficient cross-cultural communication the relevance of word order in the string of name components is of great importance. In Russian, an individual would most commonly give his/her name in the order as follows: surname + given name (patronymic in formal cases), while in the English language tradition the reverse order is more common. In intercultural exchange the Russian patronymic is usually avoided, primarily for the reason that it is usually bulky and not an easy combination of sounds to pronounce. When in the early nineties the first foreign tourists and business representatives began arriving in the previously closed Kaliningrad region, the first exchanges of business cards often caused confusion. Most visiting cards of Russian business people had the holders' personal details in the last-name-first and first-name-last order. As a result, their American would-be partners inevitably addressed them as, e.g. Mr. Alexey or Mrs. Irina (both first names in Russian).

Practices of addressing people in formal and informal situations are now changing under the influence of massive cultural exchange with the West. Nevertheless, any breach

of convention may result in miscomprehension. It is not that the wrong word is used, but the word wrongly used. And a very special word too, for it is meant to duly represent an individual.

There are different cultural practices regarding the taking of liberties with personal names, both within one culture and inter-culturally. In the course of cultural adaptation the name may undergo more than one amendment of spelling. It is worth noting that different cultural communication practices play a major role in such adaptations: once the name reaches a foreign soil, it complies with the rules of the recipient culture. The name of the Russian political leader Gorbachev never had the chance to appear in the Russian press in the form of *Gorby* – the then highly popular moniker in the western mass media: such an abbreviation would have been too radical for Russian name using practice. In recent decades, however, the social changes in Russia have had their repercussions in the democratization of language use. Not a long time ago it was only American presidents that we used to know by their initials: FDR, JFK, TR; now we have Russian popular figures known as ВВП (Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin), БАБ (Boris Abramovich Berezovsky), МВХ (Mikhail Borisovich Khodorkovsky). Such substitutes are unable to cross language borders, but trends do.

4. CONCLUSION

Name and identity, the changes names undergo in the course of crossing borders, and the role of cultural and linguistic mediation are issues well worth the attention they get in various research areas nowadays. We can depart from a simplistic treatment of personal names in intercultural exchange only if we give an insight into the cultural implications of the name. Personal names do not have to be meaningful language signs to display their cultural significance.

People cannot choose their names at birth; later in life their capacity to interfere with their name is also rather limited. In cross-cultural situations, however, a foreign language, foreign culture and possibly a cultural mediator – they all influence the way personal names are treated. Obviously, there is more than one straightforward way to handle personal names, and the choices among various methods are determined by a complex combination of linguistic and cultural factors, including fashions and trends. Inconsistencies between grammatical structures and categories of the languages involved in cultural exchange may have cultural implications; different name formats need matching and democratization trends have to be accounted for. The necessity of handling proper names with care and with due attention to their value for the individual in intercultural contexts becomes obvious as soon as one realizes its role in the formation of one's cultural self.

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KLAUSIMAS „KA SLEPIA VARDAS“ KULTŪRŲ KOMUNIKACIJOS POŽIŪRIU

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Santrauka

Asmenvardžiai kiekvienoje kalboje yra labai specifinė žodyno dalis. Jie turi labai didelį semiotinį potencialą atlikti kultūros žymiklio funkciją. Be abejo, jie vaidina svarbų vaidmenį ir nustatant žmogaus tapatybę. Straipsnyje aptariamas asmens tapatybės, išreikštos jo vardu, klausimas ir kaip jo(s) tapatybę veikia bet koks asmens vardo pakeitimas, „pasikėsinimas“ į jo individualumą. Antroponimai yra priemonė pažvelgti į asmens ir kultūros tapatybę. Straipsnyje jie aptariami kaip leksiniai vienetai, „keliaujantys“ iš vienos kalbos (ir kultūros) į kitą, ir kaip labai pažeidžiama individualybės dalis. Kultūrų komunikacijoje jiems reikia skirti deramą dėmesį.