

TRANSLATING ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

1

Some notes on translating nicknames from Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum into Serbo-Croatian.

Dora Maček, Yugoslavia

SUMMARY

Nicknames are noun forms important for the identification of the referent, therefore they must be represented by suitable equivalents in a translation. The form of the nickname must agree with the generally acceptable name form in the language of translation, and the content must create the same image as in the language of the original. A study of formal and semantic features playing a role in translating nicknames from Ágrip has been attempted by way of comparing underlying and surface structures, and establishing similarities in the first, and modifications in the second, necessary if a name is to be produced in Serbo-Croatian with the meaning of the original.

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

Some notes on translating nicknames from Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum into Serbo-Croatian.

Dora Maček, Yugoslavia

Names are as old as language itself because, in a sense, every word is a name for an object, an activity, a concept or anything that is part of human experience.¹ Ever since biblical times naming has been an important ritual by which man believed he could create the world around him, understand it, or influence it. This belief can be exemplified by the great importance people attach to the names of their children refraining from giving them names with a loathsome meaning or implication, no matter how pleasing the sound of the name may be. No matter how unconsciously, the name-giver believes he will influence the life of the child in some way through the name. Generally-held beliefs about the world and life will necessarily influence the repertory of personal names in a speech community, which will in turn lead to differences in name repertory between one social and cultural community and another. On the other hand, similarities in the name repertory of various linguistic communities may point to the shared beliefs and experiences of various societies, as well as to some language universals.

The repertory of personal names is thus from the start restricted to expressions with favourable connotation, and it becomes even more restricted when the ritual of name giving is subjected to social conventions and the meaning of the name becomes obscured in the course of its history. Conventionalization and opacity of meaning, together with the restriction in the number of personal names available renders the first name inept of exact reference and thus other means are sought to restrict the choice among the many namesakes and to bring a particular referent into focus. Such means are descriptions of the referent's physical appearance, his character, place of origin, occupation etc. - to mention only a few of the most common types.

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

Efficiency in communication demands that description be as short and as apposite as possible, so that it contracts into a sentence, a phrase, and eventually condenses into a word - a second name added to the first. There are no restrictions concerning the meanings of nicknames, but there are restrictions on the surface forms imposed upon a new nickname by particular rules of word formation operating in a language on the formation of names.

In literature names have been used as important stylistic devices, but Agrip² being intended as a historical account of part of Norwegian history, merely reproduces the names and nicknames of the characters as indicators of particular referents. Thus our aim here is also very simple: we shall try to find out how the meaning and form of Old Norse nicknames in Agrip compare with the form and meaning of their translation equivalents in modern Serbo-Croatian.

From the point of view of presenting the text of Agrip to a language community spatially and temporally very distant from the original audience the problem of the translator is how to approach this special category of proper nouns in order to match the original nickname and its translation equivalent most appropriately as regards their respective socio-linguistic requirements.

If not universal like first names, second names are certainly common to both the Nordic and to the South-Eastern European socio-cultural areas to which the two languages in question belong. Second names appear in both languages first as patronymics, designations of the place of origin, or various epithets, all of which we propose to label by the term "nickname". Following the requirements of the changing societies and language, many of the nicknames have acquired a permanent status, their reference then having been extended to the descendants, and even dependents, of the original name bearer, thereby

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

forming a relatively closed set of family names, which have eventually become as opaque in meaning as the first names, thus making room for new nicknames. Therefore a medieval nickname has its modern counterpart, and regarding its designating character it is not a question of whether to translate a nickname, or leave it in the original as practiced with proper nouns in most contexts, but rather a question of how to create the image of the original in a new linguistic medium.

The main problem therefore, could be said to be the search for the most appropriate name form, immediately recognizable as a name in SC, and reproducing the image intended in the original.

Notionally, nicknames in Agrip fall into several categories,³

- a. they refer to the appearance of the referent: svarti, digrbeinn, gráfeldr etc.,
- b. they refer to a trait of the referent's character or to his way of conduct: skreya, slefa, hegiandi etc.,
- c. they refer to his occupation or function in society: stallari, skáldaspillir, jarl etc.,
- d. referring to his origin either in the form of patronymics /i.e. saying whose son the referent is/: Tryggvason, Ólasunr, or indicating the locality with which the referent is connected: Yrnaiarl, á Remoli, hrisi, grenski etc.

These types can be combined, e.g. indicating both origin and appearance as in Mostrstong.

This list may be more extensive if nicknames in general were studied, but it certainly includes the most basic types of reference characteristic for nicknames in SC as well.

There is yet another characteristic feature of these appellatives to be taken into account - they can be either denotative, as when someone is called gópi or á Söla, or else

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

connotative when a metaphorical meaning is expressed, like blóþóx, Gullharaldr, hundr, and the like⁴. Both types are common in SC.

Superficially nicknames occur in simplex and complex form. For the purpose of this paper it will be proposed that words composed of stem and affix be regarded as simples, e.g. svarti or stallari, but compounds and phrases, however, as complex nicknames, e.g. ullstrengr, af Finneyjar.

Though both simplex and complex names exist in SC, simplex forms are definitely preferred, which is one of the most evident differences between SC and the Germanic languages.

We shall further suggest that all nicknames are nouns, or rather nominalizations⁵ of underlying sentences that indicate the relevant details of a referent's characteristics. Even epithets like svarti, ljómi or sterki can be regarded as nominalizations, second names, as they were termed earlier in this paper. In SC they can occur in the function of nouns, unaccompanied by the first name, and in Old Norse they can be preceded by an article like other nouns.

The following are the main types of underlying structures that nominalize into nicknames:

A. X⁶ is Y

with the subtypes:

X is Y's son

X is like Y

which again can be interpreted either as:

X looks like Y or

X behaves like Y

B. X has /a/ Y

C. X does /Y/

which has two subtypes:

X V_t Y and

X V_i

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

D. X comes from or lives in/at Y
which can also be represented as

X V Loc

These types can also be combined, which is what happens in complex forms, to give structures like:

X has /a/ Y and Y is Z

X has /a/ Y which is Z

X has /a/ ZY

Nicknames of type A. include a number of simplex forms such as nouns denoting titles: biskup, iarl, skald, adjectives like helgi, spaki, ljómi, digri, animal names hundr, sýr, gamli, birtingr, and other nouns, e.g. munnr and slefa.

Titles are clearly names with a denotative meaning, many of which are easily translated because of their international distribution. This is certainly the case with such titles as biskup, erkibyskup, konung and the like. Iarl and skald are both formally and in their denotation parallel to them, but being specific for medieval Scandinavian culture do not have ready equivalents in SC as do the first three /i.e. "biskup", "nadbiskup", "kralj"/. There are two possibilities of resolving the problem in a translation - either to leave the original forms of the titles and give notes on their meaning in the society to which they belong, which is probably most apposite in an edition meant for scholars and students, while for a more general reader a native term is a more happy solution. Though the SC equivalent for iarl /"knez"/ may have a slightly different connotation because it refers to a different social set-up, like iarl, it suggests a primarily medieval context, the details of which are remote to the modern reader, and therefore satisfactory as regards its main connotation. The translation equivalent for skald is different in that it does not have this medieval connotation, so that "singer" /"pjevač"/, instead of "poet" /"pjesnik"/ would better serve to evoke the intended

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

image, in spite of the differences between the Nordic skalds and the "singer of tales" of the southern Slavs.

It might be argued that titles cannot be treated as nicknames, but there are two reasons why it has been done so here. First, there is at least one instance in Ágrip where a title has persisted with the first name, even when the referent acquired a new title. This is the case with Hókon iarl, who is referred to by this nickname even after becoming King of Norway /see Ágrip XI.5., XII.1. etc./. The second reason is that many titles have become regular family names, possibly after an intermediate stage when they were proper nicknames /as in the case of the above-mentioned Norwegian king/. Such family names are for instance in SC "Knez", "Vojvoda", in German "Herzog", "Hofmeister" and so on. Considering these examples it is reasonable to assume that all titles are potential nicknames without change in form, and equally that all nicknames are potential family names.

When complement Y of the underlying sentence X is Y is an adjective, its nominalized form is the so-called weak form of the adjective as in góbi, helgi, digri, svarti etc., sometimes occurring with the definite article as a complex nickname e.g. Hugi enn digri, Knútr enn ríki. This is a very common type of nickname in SC /as in other Slavonic languages, cf. in Russian "Ivan the Terrible"/, and the definite form of the adjective, which is the superficial mark of adjective nominalization, accidentally agrees in the suffix with the ON form: the equivalents of góbi, helgi, kyrri etc., are "dobri", "sveti", "mirni" and so forth.

The nickname skakki can - next to the simplex "krivi" - also have as its equivalent a complex form which would reproduce the usual interpretation of the nickname, i.e. that Erlingr /Ágrip LX.2./ was nicknamed skakki because of the slanting posture of his head due to a blow that damaged his neck

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

muscles. In SC there is a family name referring to such head posture /"Krivošija", meaning "skew-neck"/, which could be used as an apt nickname for Erlingr skakki.

It should be noted here that the adjectival suffix -i is a mark of nominalization, which means it indicates that the adjective is to be regarded as a noun. In SC they can be used without the first name and instead of it, which accounts for the above interpretation of the suffix.

Animal names are favourite first names and nicknames in many languages. They are simplex names that resemble names with the underlying sentence X is /a/ Y, apparently as if Erling er gamli was transformed into Erlingr gamli. This however is not the case, because animal names are connotative nicknames par excellence, metaphorically indicating the identity of the human referent and the animal. The actual underlying sentence is thus a subtype of A., which can be more appropriately stated as X resembles Y either in appearance or in conduct. Because of their connotative character the main difficulty in finding translation equivalents for these nicknames will lie in representing the image they are expected to create.

Sýr and hundr can be translated into SC by several synonyms, some of which are common terms of abuse, so that as nicknames they suggest baseness of character, or an untidy appearance in the case of the latter. However, a dog can also symbolize fidelity; therefore, when selecting an equivalent for sýr and hundr such forms that would create an undesirable image must be avoided. Sometimes the text does not supply sufficient information about the referent, in which case the least colourful synonym will serve the purpose best.

Occasionally it may happen that there is no equivalent name for some animal, because the animal is unfamiliar to speakers of the language into which its name is to be trans-

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

lated. This is the case of birtingr, as this particular variety of trout has no vernacular name in SC. The name of the whole species, however, is likely to carry sufficient information for the modern reader to suggest the swiftness or glitter of the fish, and accordingly to serve as a satisfactory nickname equivalent.

Other typically connotative simplex nicknames are munnr and slefa. They do not mean that the referent "is a mouth/slime" nor that he "has a mouth/slime", but rather that he has a big mouth, either literally or metaphorically, i.e. that he is a braggart or the like, and that he is slimy, in the case of slefa. It is more likely to refer to the character of the person than perhaps to his producing excessive saliva, by which his appearance would be marked. Munnr has a well-known dialectal parallel name in SC "Gubec" /also meaning "snout"/, which can be used to produce a better effect than the somewhat flat standard equivalent for "mouth" /"usta"/. Slefa on the other hand, conveys whatever image was intended better if the nominalized adjective "slimy" is used instead of the noun "saliva".

Complex nicknames of type A. are Horbaknútr and Gullharaldr, kaupmabr and knarrasmibr. The first two are collapsed forms of first name and nickname of the otherwise simple structure e.g. "Harald is golden" with the connotative meaning that he possesses gold, i.e. is rich, and Knut is severe. Such collapsed nicknames are rare in SC, known mostly in loan forms from Turkish /like "Karadorde" - "the Black George"/, so they must be treated in the same manner as simplex nominalized adjectives "Harald the golden", "Knut the severe". It is interesting to observe that while postmodification is typically characteristic of both simplex and complex nicknames, premodification of the first name becomes the rule in collapsed forms.

Kaupmabr and knarrasmibr are nouns denoting professions and can be derived from similar underlying sentences like titles.

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

Kaupmabr can be derived from

{ X is a man
 } the man is a trader? → X is a man who is a trader →

X is a tradesman → X tradesman

Knarresmibr has the object expressed in its superficial structure:

{ X is a smith
 } the smith makes boats → X is a smith who makes boats →
 X is a smith for boats → X is a "boat smith"

The first nickname cannot have any other equivalent in SC but the simplex agentive noun "trader" /"trgovac"/, while knarresmibr could be rendered as "boat builder" /"brodograditelj"/ whose underlying structure is parallel to the above, except that the word is modern and would not stylistically fit into a context of such words as the proposed translations of iari or skald. Therefore the simplex agentive "brodar", which includes reference not only to boat building but to handling of boats in general is to be preferred.

The patronymic is yet another complex subtype of A. and it can be either phrasal or compound - Haralds sunr or Tryggvason - both derived from possessive genitive phrases:

X is /Tryggvi has a son/ → X is tryggvi's son →
 X Tryggvi's son /Ólafr Tryggvason/

The inflexional affix of head of the genitive phrase is deleted when it is transformed into a compound. in the above example, but is retained in Þiostolfr Ólasunnr for instance.

In certain regions where SC is spoken patronymics are still common in order to distinguish persons with the same first and family names from each other. Their superficial form is the genitive with deleted head noun, thus X is Tryggvi's son becomes X is Tryggvi's → X Tryggvi's, Harald's etc. Though the most common family name form is an older patronymic with the suffix -iç /similar to the Russian form/ it implies

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

affiliation to a family or tribe /similar to the older Germanic suffix -ing/, and is therefore less adequate a translation equivalent of the ON patronymic than the above-mentioned form, or the whole possessive phrase "Tryggvi's son". The SC reader is, on the other hand, familiar with the Scandinavian family names with the suffix -son, and is used to interpreting them as equivalent to the SC family names in -ié. So long as it is not important whether Tryggvason, for example, is regarded as patronymic or family name it may as well remain unchanged.

The above complex nickname included type B. of underlying sentence to which type belong the denotative nicknames referring to the outward characteristics of the referent such as: hárfagri, blátonn, hvitbeinn, lafskegg, lúsaskegg, ullstrengur, gráfeldr, and the like. As far as their surface form is concerned they are complex, consisting of a nominal head, mostly premodified by an adjective /blátonn, gráfeldr/, or a noun /ullstrengur/, except for hárfagri which is postmodified and nominalized in the manner discussed earlier in connection with simplex nominalized adjectives. Lafskegg is somewhat different as it is composed of predicate + subject.

The structure of the underlying sentences can be postulated as follows: X has /a/ Y - the Y is Z →

X has /a/ Y which is Z →

X has YZ →

X YZ hárfagri

X ZY blátonn, hvitbeinn, etc.

The subtype noun + noun is: X has a cord - the cord is made of wool →

X has a cord which is made of wool and further transformed in the above manner to give ullstrengur. Like ullstrengur, the connotative nickname referring to the conduct of the referent, blóðox is derived from a similar structure. Lúsaskegg can be interpreted like a double possessive, appearing in surface structure with an infix -a-⁸.

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

X has a beard = the beard has lice →

X has a beard which has lice →

X has a beard with lice →

X has a lice-infix-beard X lusaskegg

Lafskegg on the other hand, contains the noun and an intransitive verb: X has a beard - the beard hangs →

X has a beard which hangs →

X has a "hang-beard".

When a nickname refers to parts of the body in SC it can appear as a complex forms composed of adjective+infix+noun+suffix -i, like nominalized adjectives, in spite of the regular premodification of the head, even in hárfagri /"plavokosi"/. Other complex nicknames of the above-mentioned type cannot be transformed into compounds, only into possessive phrases like: X with grey fur /or with the possessive genitive/
X with a bloody axe, wollen cord
X with a lousy beard, hanging beard.

It is important to note that compounds of the surface structure noun-noun cannot have that form as there are considerable restrictions on their formation in SC.⁹ It has become common, however, to translate such compounds by two juxtaposed nouns in the nominative, which in turn must receive a connotative interpretation of the underlying sentence X is a Y /i.e. Harald is a "grey fur", Eirik is a bloody axe etc./ because this type of structure is restricted to such function in SC, even when occurring in compounds. As this type of structure is gaining in frequency due to foreign influence, it could be regarded as an innovation in the language, having the same interpretation as suggested for the above Norse forms.

Connotative nicknames like blóðǫx, referring to Eirik's conduct, can be translated by a simplex form - either the nominalized adjective "the bloody", or the noun "axe" - with

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

some loss of the stylistic strength of the image created by the compound.

The modifying noun of such compounds has to be adjectivalized as shown in the above examples, and only in lafskegg, which contains a verb a compound can be obtained of the surface form Verb+infix+noun e.g. "visibrada"

Numerous nicknames are derived from various agentive nouns /type C. of underlying sentence/. They include simplex forms denoting an occupation like stallari, or the conduct of the referent, e.g. skreya, flettir, bengir, as well as complex nicknames of the type verb + object: volubriotr, bambaskelmir, skáldaspillir, gillikrist. In both simplex and complex forms nominalization is indicated by the suffix -a, or -ir. In SC such phrases have a similar surface form with suffixes /-ac, -ač, -ar, -aš/ characteristic of agentive nouns, and there can be little difficulty in finding the right equivalent for simplex ~~EX~~ forms, particularly when they are denotative and do not carry any special meaning.

The complex phrases have the same surface structure as suggested for lafskegg. The order of verb and object is the same as in the underlying sentence, while it is inverted in CN, i.e. Einar shakes /his/ paunch

SC shake+infix+paunch, CN bambaskelmir

Vemundr brakes /the/ staff

SC brake+infix+staff, CN volubriotr

but the same surface form is found in CN as well in gillikrist /SC serve+infix+Christ, "služikrist"/.

The translation here closely follows the form and the image of the original, except for skáldaspillir, where the SC equivalent is a derived noun with the prefix nadri- used with agentive nouns /particularly those denoting professions/ to indicate that the referent is bad in his metier. The verb spilla has accordingly an equivalent in the prefix "nadri-", and skald

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

the equivalent noun "pjesnik" /i.e. "poet" in this case, not "pjevač", as the second is rare, while the first is quite common/.

Similarly agentives in the form of participles can serve as nicknames, as with begiandi. In SC active participles are very restricted in the function of noun modifiers and hence deverbative adjectives /formed with the suffix -ljiv/ are more adequate equivalents for participles, and the shift of meaning is minimal.

The last common type of nickname derives from sentences with locative phrases, mostly denoting the origin of the referent, like hrísi, soenski, af Finneyiar etc., but also the location of his homestead, e.g. bryggiufótr. The name Iór-salafari is actually the agentive type of complex nickname, except that the object here indicates the goal of the verb of movement. Simplex forms are nominalized adjectives, which have formal parallels in SC /the suffix -ski/, but in SC are adjectives derived from geographical names, or names of nations, commonly used as epithets of rulers or the nobility, while other suffixes are used for commoners. These forms can be translated by nouns referring to the nationality /"švedanin" for soenski, i.e. "the Swede", instead of "švedski" i.e. "the Swedish"/, or with prepositional phrases of the type:

X comes from Y →

X from Y

in the manner of Kalf á Eggjar or Thora á Remoli. Complex forms like mostrstong or lundasól that derive from

X is /a, the/ Y - X comes from Z

can only be rendered as

X is /a/ Y from Z.

Both feminine nicknames "Dora the pole from Mostr" and "Gubrun the sun from Lund" are a combination of denotative /from Mostr, from Lund/ and connotative /stong, sól/ elements, which carry the same implication about the looks and/or the nature

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

of the referent if translated literally into SC.

Once again, the collapsed "locatives" must be translated by a phrase, as such compounds are not common in SC, as mentioned earlier; so Yrniaarl will give "iarl from/of Yrni", and Steigar-Þórir "Þórir from Steig".

Bryggiufótr is similar to the above examples in the surface structure, as it consists of a noun genitive + noun nominative. The underlying sentence, however, is somewhat different:
 X lives at the "foot" - the pier has a "foot" >
 X lives at the "foot" which is of the pier →
 X lives at the "foot" of the pier →
 X lives at the "pier's foot" →
 X "pier's foot"

In SC this form would be very awkward as a nickname, and rendered as a phrase it cannot function as a name, but simply as a relative clause modifying the noun. Nevertheless, it is possible to join the locative phrase /at the "foot"; or rather at the end/ with the genitive of the possessive construction /of the pier/ into a compound "nakrajmola", with primary stress on the second syllable to mark it off from the level stresses of the phrase, which type of compound is occasionally found in SC in the function of a nickname.

Iórsalafari, derived from

X travels to Y →

X is a traveller to Y →

X is a Y-traveller, or rather Y-travelling in ON.

This type of agentive compound can only be translated by the relative clause: "Sigurb who travelled to Jerusalem"; or by the simplex deverbal noun "traveller" and a locative phrase to designate the goal. This is also a clumsy phrase for a nickname but the possibility of forming a compound does not exist. The possible simplex forms, with a loss of some of the denotative meaning of the original, would be "pilgrim" or "traveller"

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

without mentioning the goal. It is interesting to note that there is a simplex agentive derived from the name of Rome - "romar" - as the word for "pilgrim" in one of the northern Croatian dialects, which could be employed instead of "pilgrim" under due consideration of its appropriateness as regards the style of the whole translation. On the other hand Sigurb Jór-salafari has already been known in SC texts in untranslated form of the name, the nickname having been interpreted as a family name, i.e. "Sigurd Jorsalfar". Considering the importance of nicknames as meaningful designations of the referent, I do not think that they should be left in the original form, as it is entirely meaningless to a SC reader, with the exception of patronymics.

An attempt has been made here to show that difficulties in translating nicknames can be expected in those features of the names in which ON and SC differ. There are several characteristics to be observed, of which some are formal and others connected with the implication and meaning of a name, though similarities and differences can be expected in any type of nickname. The main problem, however, lies in the form of the nickname, because many of the complex forms so common in Germanic languages are unacceptable in SC, either because composition in general is more restricted in SC, or because of the inadequacy of the form to serve as a name when not agreeing with the generally accepted name form in SC. Simplex forms, on the other hand, may be deficient as regards denotation, which is to be preserved to the highest possible degree. It is possible for both simplex and complex forms not to carry the same connotations in the two languages: this, again, ought to be understood by the reader of the translation as much in the same way as by the original audience as possible. Sometimes it is difficult to know what was exactly meant, in which case the most acceptable form will be the one least marked for special

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia

meaning. Which of the variant equivalents or synonyms will be used must in any case depend on the style of the whole translation, which in turn will depend on the reader it is intended for. A general balance of form as regards its meaning and its acceptability as name in the language of the translation, as well as stylistic harmony must be the main concern of the translator.

NOTES

1. Harrison, Bernard "Meaning and Structure: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language." 1972. p. 26.
2. Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum, editor Finnur Jonsson, Halle 1929.
3. I owe this division to Herman Palsson.
4. It has been suggested by S. Žepić in "Morphologie und Semantik der deutschen Nominalkomposita", Zagreb 1970, that the term bahuvrihi could be applied not only to compounds, but to any word with metaphorical meaning.
5. Lees, Robert S. "The Grammar of English Nominalizations", 5th printing, Bloomington, 1968.
6. X is used as the symbol for first name and Y, Z for elements of the nickname. V_t and V_i stand for transitive and intransitive verb respectively, Loc for a phrase with locative meaning. Serbo-Croatian is shortened into SC and Old Norse into ON.
7. Another interpretation could be : the man does/performs trading, which is the underlying structure of the English noun "trader".
8. In a different interpretation -a could be the genitive plural suffix, meaning that the beard belonged to the lice, e.g. as their dwelling place or the like.
9. Bujas, Željko "Composition in Serbo-Croatian and English", Reports, 3., publication of the Yugoslav Serbo-Croatian - English Contrastive Project, Zagreb, 1970.

Dora Maček

Yugoslavia