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## **Rendering Literary Proper Names in Another Language: The Works of Flann O'Brien as a Case in Point**

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**Abstract** • In fictional texts, personal names (and more generally proper nouns) are considered to be meaningful linguistic and cultural items since they often convey specific connotations to a literary text, and they constitute a challenge for translators since they are usually used to define the character itself, often from an ironic perspective. Translators can adopt different strategies (copy; naturalization; transcription; addition; phonological replacement; re-creation; cultural transplantation) but, as it often happens in translation, a significant part of specific connotations of the name is usually lost. Flann O'Brien resorts to a "creative" use of proper names, often comments them (De Selby, one of his characters, claims "to be in a position to state the physiological 'group' of any person merely from a brief study of the letters of his name"). This study analyses O'Brien's use of proper nouns and the several solutions adopted by translators of his novels and short stories, suggesting some possible alternatives and highlighting the semantic potential of the examined proper names which is inevitably lost.

**Keywords** • Proper Nouns; Personal Names; Fictional Texts; Flann O'Brien; Translations

**Ledizioni** 

# Rendering Literary Proper Names in Another Language: The Works of Flann O'Brien as a Case in Point

Francesco Laurenti

In Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* the reader finds about an interesting theory on names. The all-knowing De Selby in fact, as we can read in one of the frequent footnotes, "regards the earliest names as crude onomatopoeic associations with the appearance of the person or object named," and claims "to be in the position to state the physiological 'group' of any person merely from a brief study of the letters of his name" (42).

If the writer Flann O'Brien does not, totally, embrace this theory, the various names of the characters of his works, at least, strongly contribute to characterize them, as it often happens in fictional texts, but in this case even more.

This study aims to analyse and focus on the solutions adopted by several translators of his works, highlighting some approaches to reproduce the semantic and culturally connotative values of the proper names which are, inevitably often, lost or compromised.

Although various strategies are suggested, it is often believed that proper names, indicating a precise thing or person, in a precise society, are untranslatable and, therefore, should not be translated.

In the case of the corpus that we analysed, composed by sixteen different translations in seven of the almost twenty languages in which Flann O'Brien was translated, the solutions adopted indeed enable us to carry out a reflection on the effective translatability of proper names in fictional texts. Anyway, as we shall see, in transferring proper names from a language to another, a strong cultural and semantic connotation is lost, and in the case of authors such as Flann O'Brien who, while dealing with issues that often aspire to the universal, are deeply anchored to a local culture and language, this sacrifice may be even greater.

Proper names are conventionally categorized from different perspectives: according to type ("fictional" or "real"), to use, and to construction ("pure" or "modified"), but despite the many studies on this topic, sometimes not even the traditional distinction between proper names and common names is well defined and it is not always easy to draw a clear-cut demarcation between the two categories.

For our purpose, what seemed to be the most useful distinction is the one between "pure" names, where the elements that compose the name are forms that can only be used as proper names, and the names described as "mixed" and "descriptive-based" (Jonasson 35-36) which are composed of pure proper names and (or) other lexical elements, such as adjectives, common names, etc.

But even this distinction, given the fact that Flann O'Brien uses proper names of all sorts in his fiction, is sometimes too reductive.

The names of the brothers Finbarr and Manus, together with Mr. Collopy and his second wife Mrs. Crotty in *The Hard Life*, George Shagge and Faustus Kelly, or the three friends Corcoran, Hickey and Fogarty together with Dermot Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, or those of Crawford MacPherson and her husband Ned Hoolihan in *Slattery's Sago Saga*, would fall within the category of pure proper names, meaning those that are not supposed to

suggest any particular aspect of the character. But one easily feels that to relegate them in the single category of “non descriptive” names is a kind of constraint.

In the second category, composed of names who describe more openly the name-bearer, would fall most of the names of Flann O’Brien’s fiction. We refer for example to *The Good Fairy* and *Pooka MacPhellimey*, to *Shorty Andrews* and *Slug Willard*, to *Father Fahrt* and *Cactus Mike Broadfeet* or to the list of compounded names adopted by the Irish revivalist from Dublin going to the fictitious *Corcha Dorcha* or *Corkadoragha*, to say it in the English translated way, in *The Poor Mouth*. Our mind goes, only to mention a few, to *The Gaelic Daisy* and to *The Dative Case*, or to *My Friend Drumsrook* and to *The West Wind*, or to *Roseen of the Hill*.

From this perspective, together with these compounded-descriptive-based names would also go *Bonapáirt Micheálangaló Pheadair Eoghain Shorcha Thomáis Mháire Sheáin Shéamais Dhiarmada* of the original Gaelic *An Béal Bocht: Bonaparte, son of Michelangelo, son of Peter, son of Owen, son of Thomas’s Sarah, grand-daughter of John’s Mary, grand-daughter of James, son of Dermot...* Even Patrick Power, the English translator of the book, in this case assists the reader with a footnote, explaining that the original name is “more euphonious than the translation” (126) considering the advantage, in Gaelic, of the possibility to use genitive cases for each word after the first one. But what happens in translation? How can one render these long archaic patronymic forms? If these names maintain, even in other languages, a cheerful effect, would the foreign reader perceive their parallel context-based implications?

And what about the names of animals, things, and places too, if pigs are named *Ambrose* and *Sarah*, *Earthquake Wonder* is the name of a kind of potato, and estates are called *Poguemahone Hall*, as in *Slattery’s Sago Saga*?

Translators know that, in fictional texts, there is rarely a proper name that has no informative function at all, however subtle it may be (Nord 185), and it is generally agreed that proper names are meaningful linguistic items (Salmon Kovarski 83).

In our *corpus* the methods adopted by translators vary from transliteration to exoticism, from cultural transplantation to copy, from re-creation to phonological replacement or, sometimes, to a combination of these strategies used together

Very often proper names were transliterated, they were shifted to conform to the phonic or graphic rules of the Target Language (TL). This happened mainly with the Gaelic and Hibernian English. This is the case, for example of *Máirtín Ó Bánasa*, *Bonapáirt Ó Cúnasa*, or *Corcha Dorcha* in *An Béal Bocht*: here names were adapted on the level of spelling and phonology to the letter of the target language.

On the first page of *The Poor Mouth*, which is itself the English translation of *An Béal Bocht*, the narrator introduces himself like this: “O’Coonassa is my surname in Gaelic, my first name is Bonaparte” (11), while the Gaelic spelling of the name would ironically have been different. The surname of his father is originally said to be *Ó Bánasa* and, in the several translations we read, it was transliterated *O’Bannassa* (in English and Italian), *O’Banassa* (in French) and remained *Ó Bánasa* in the Spanish *La Boca Pobre* (which was the only one to be translated directly from the original Irish version). In some other cases, as it happens with Sarah’s son Ambrose, the pig in *The Poor Mouth*, the translators replace the name with a more or less similar name in the TL, and *Ambrose* becomes *Ambrogio* in Italian and *Ambrosio* in Spanish, maintaining the funny effect of a generally human name used for an animal.

Besides these minimal spelling nuances, in *The Poor Mouth*, personal names assume several peculiar functions.

First of all, the names of members of the narrator's family are ironically *Michelangelo*, *Bonaparte*, *Leonardo*, which show a desire to hide the peasant origins and a certain aspiration to *grandeur*, in contrast with their poverty.

But that's only the beginning of the "name-making game".

On his first day at school, Bonaparte O'Coonassa is asked by his English-speaking teacher to repeat his name but the student, who only speaks Gaelic, understands the question only when a mate at his back whispers "Your name he wants!" (30) and he replies then in the "Gaelic way", starting to mention all his genealogical tree or, as somebody said, his "pedigree" (Booker 72). But before the young boy completes his full name he is suddenly interrupted by his master with an oar blow on his skull and a simultaneous scream: "Yer nam, is Jams O'Donnel!" (30): the boy is robbed of his name by the schoolmaster, and suddenly loses his consciousness.

All the young Irish peasants in Corcha Dorcha are re-named *Jams O'Donnell* by the colonial British school system, with a double effect: the teachers, avoiding improbable Gaelic surnames, will have their task simplified and the students, oar blow after oar blow, will lose their own identities, gradually being introduced to oppression. A weird and barbaric approach to the translation of proper names, we would say: translation as a loss of identity.

On the other hand, the revivalists coming from Dublin will reject their foreign names to adopt "true" Gaelic pseudonyms, such as *The Gaelic Daisy*, who was a "bulky, fat, slow-moving man whose face was grey and flabby" (52): an anti-connotation *par excellence*.

Flann O'Brien writes a page-long list of these revivalist honorary titles (*The Dative Case*, *My Friend Drumsrook*, *The West Wind*, *Roseen of the Hill*, *the Headache* and so on). In this case, translators simply treat the names as common names and adjectives and translate them with the corresponding TL words: the translation is not particularly difficult and the target reader would easily perceive the irony of the narrator. But would a foreign translation target reader understand Flann O'Brien's critical approach to the revivalist expressed by this name-making-game? The translator can only lean on the reader's sensibility and knowledge of the Irish culture.

Sometimes names remain unchanged. This strategy is adopted in two different situations: when the proper names such as *Beniamino Bari* or *Mr. Scheisemacher* sound "exotic" even to the English reader, and in the case of neutral-sounding names. So, Corcoran, Hickey and Fogarty, Jem Casey, Dermott Trellis, Tim Hartigan, Mr. Collopy and Mrs. Crotty, George Shagge and Faustus Kelly will generally all maintain their names travelling from nation to nation, from a language to another.

But, since things are not always as simple as they seem, even this approach, most of the time unavoidable, sacrifices something of the original proper names.

In Flann O'Brien's fiction in fact, even most neutral-sounding names, or at least those where the meaning of the name is not too obvious, are often the result of a process of erasure, for example of a Gaelic form and rewriting by the British. The Romanian translator Adrian Oțoiu, in his commendable analysis "Hibernian Choices: The Politics of Naming in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*" (357-369), explains how, for example, in the case of the three friends Corcoran, Hickey and Fogarty, Mr. Corcoran's name is an anglicised form of Gaelic *Ó Corcra*, "descendant of Corcra", a personal name derived from *corcair* ("purple"). *Fogarty* is a reduced anglicized form of Gaelic *Ó Fógartaigh*, "son of Fógartach", derived from *fógarta* which means "banished", "outlawed". *Hickey* is then the rewriting of the Gaelic *Ó hÍceadh*, "descendant of Ícidhe", a byname meaning "doctor" or "healer". Then we learn that Jem Casey, the weird writer of the "realistic" poem "The Workman's Friend" in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, draws his name from the Gaelic *Ó Cathasaigh*,

“descendant of Cathasach”, a byname meaning “vigilant” or “noisy”, “a fit reminder of the plebeian poet’s brazen doggerel” (O’toiu 364). The surname of the other writer, the eccentric novelist who is finally charged with plagiarism for his excessive use of intertextuality, Trellis, derives from the Latin word *trilix*, the figurative “thread”, and evokes his way of composing texts montaging other writer’s previous works. Even his name, *Dermot*, is once again an example of and anglicised Gaelicism from *Mac Diarmada*, “son of Diarmad”, ironically meaning “free from envy”. The translator can only choose to treat them as conventional proper names, as those having no particular meaning or any clear sense. Once again, something is lost.

Other proper names which the translator is allowed to leave unchanged are those like *Beniamino Bari* or *Mr. Scheisemacher*. In the case of *Beniamino Bari* “the the eminent tenor, the golden-throated budgerigar of Milano” in *The Third Policeman*, the surname evokes simultaneously the word *baritone* and the Italian origins of the character, which are also inferable by his first name *Beniamino*, meaning “teacher’s pet”.

While translating the novel *Slattery’s Sago Saga* then, when I bumped into the name of Charlie Bendix Scheisemacher, the rich stockholder and American Ambassador in Dublin, if I could not be sure that the name *Charlie* was an allusion to the slang meaning “idiot” and “fool”, and that *Bendix* was a distortion of the verb “bend”, which could have made sense, I could not doubt that the surname was a kind of transliteration of the German for *shit maker* (“Scheisemacher”). I chose not to translate the first name, being its possible connotation quite unclear and perhaps not too obvious even to an English speaking reader, and of course I left the surname unchanged, since I supposed that the amount of target readers who would recognize the word-play hidden in *Scheisemacher* would correspond to that of the potential English readers of the original text.

An easier task for the translator is to deal with the names of the brothers Manus and Finbarr in *The Hard Life*. If it is true that the connotation of the names of the two brothers is satirical, *Manus* meaning in Latin “hand” (a clear allusion to the practical abilities of the protagonist) and *Finbarr* being the Gaelic form for “Fair-headed” with an allusion to the meditative nature of the narrator. The reader in fact, is helped by the erratic explanation of the two proper names: “Manus and Finbarr are fine names, fine Irish names,—Mr. Colopy said—In the Latin Manus means big [...] and that is such an uplifting name [...] but Finbarr is the real Irish for he was a saint from County Cork...” (ch. 2). Mr. Colopy’s comment, even if a little misleading, actually underlines the ironic contrast between the pretentious names and the real condition of the characters, and even the foreign reader is helped.

It is more difficult for the translator to deal with the names of Father Fahrt, Mr. Collopy and Mrs. Crotty, or at least the translator, feeling that these names will remain unchanged in translation, knows that something, once again, will be lost.

The name of the parish priest successfully connotes the ineffective authority figure who is incapable of anything other than the mouthing of ecclesiastical clichés, his speech consisting in little more than the kind of empty passing of wind indicated by his name (Booker 89). For these three characters only one strategy is adopted in the corpus we analysed: copying the names. The Spanish translator, in the introduction to the novel, explaining that O’Brien’s humour appears not only in the plot, but also in the use of language, writes that characters have crude names, but certainly fun, for the phonetic affinity: the priest is called *Fahrt* (“flatulence”), the drinker is *Collopy* (“bocadillo”), the friend *Crotty* (“entrepiera”, “groin”), *Finbarr* (“excelente bar”, “excellent bar”), and so on. Maybe these suggestions are not always correct, but the target reader takes a hint to approach the original names.

On the other side, when the translators opted for the so-called cultural transplantation the proper name was replaced by a Target Language name that had the same cultural connotation as the original one.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the struggle between good and evil, the spirit versus the flesh, is represented by the opposition between the Good Fairy and the Pooka (Villa Flor 62), and the dealing with their names represents a real challenge for translators, for several reasons, but mainly because when asked directly, Good Fairy replies “my sex is a secret that I cannot reveal” (110).

The Good Fairy is always referred to in the novel as *Good Fairy*, never by a pronoun, which would be a perfect way to disclose the sex of this hero (or heroine), in a language, like English, that does not differentiate gender by grammatical forms. This gender issue poses then several problems in translation.

Adrian Oțoiu, the Romanian translator, names the Good Fairy *Zățna cea buna*, a character existing in the Romanian folklore but that contradicts anything a Romanian reader would know of fairies. Oțoiu provides indeed the reader with a “survival-kit information” (66) in the 30-page introduction to the novel, even to illuminate about the “elusive ambivalent figure” (66) of the Good Fairy. On the other side, the character of the Pooka, which is itself an anglicised form of the Irish *púca*, meaning literally “the evil one” is named by Oțoiu, since there is no Romanian equivalent, *diavolul Pooka* (“the Pooka devil”), adding a word of extra information, (*diavolul*) to make it more understandable.

Krzysztof Fordonski, the Polish translator, explaining the difficulties to render this same name into Polish, tells that he had the option of leaving the name *The Fairy Queen* untranslated, perfectly sexless for a Polish reader though just as perfectly meaningless (78). Another option would have been to use the similarity between The Good Fairy to one of the characters of *Peter Pan*, recurring to the name *Dzwoneczek*, corresponding to Barrie’s *Tinker Bell*, and to use the feminine verb forms. But this possibility was rejected as it would have introduced a too far, and misleading, fetched reading into the translated text. Therefore the translator chooses to adopt *Dobra Wróżka*, a “she” Polish equivalent of *Good Fairy*, but decides to use the masculine verb forms to stress the strong character of The Good Fairy.

Rodolfo Wilcock, the Italian translator, finding the names in the Latin and Ancient Greek language, were *daimon* would be a neutral spirit, opts for the name *Agatodemone*, being the Agathodaemon a good spirit or angel, opposing him or her, to the *Cacodemone*, the name adopted for the Pooka, meaning “an evil spirit”. Both names, *Agatodemone* and *Cacodemone*, sound quite exotic (if not weird and funny) in the form to the Italian ear, but the effect of the original is actually reproduced. *La Bonne fée*, the Good Fairy of the French translation, on the contrary, being too feminine, greatly distances the reader from the original gender ambivalence of the character.

Álvarez, the Spanish translator, opts for the name *Hado Bueno* (“Good Faith”). The word *Hado* shares in fact with *Fairy* a common Latin etymology, deriving the two words from *fatum* and its plural *fata* and explains, through the adjective *Bueno*, the nature of the Hado. At the same time, in the introduction to the novel Álvarez tells the reader that all the traditional issue of the gender of angels, in the novel, is expressed in the story of the Hado Bueno.

But *At Swim-Two-Birds* is also frequented by the two cowboys Shorty Andrews and Slug Willard. Gardiner, to distinguish them from composite names (composed by a name and a surname) called these “compound proper names”, that are the names that often consist of combinations of adjectives or common nouns (21-23). What happens to them in translation?

If in Italian they become *Lumaca Willard* (the Italian *lumaca* literally means “snail”, but figuratively “sluggard”) and *Tappo Andrews* (the Italian *tappo* literally means “stopper”, “cork”, but figuratively “shorty”; “runt”), half Italianizing the names, curiously in Spain they become *Bajito Andrews* and *Slug Willard*, leaving only the name of the second cowboy unaltered.

I would like to highlight the solutions adopted by the Romanian writer and translator Oțoiu. If he translates *Shorty* as *Scurtu*, which in Romanian can also be a surname, in the case of *Slug Willard* he uses a sort of oblique equivalence. The slug is an uncommon animal in Romania, and most people don’t call it by its proper name *limace*, but tend to confound it with the snail, the *melc*. But since he feels that *Melc* would never be a person’s name in Romania he thinks of a popular children’s rhyme, sung by kids when they find a snail and try to lure it to get its feelers out of its house and sing:

Melc, melc, codobelec	Snail, snail, tail-a-snail,
Scoate <i>coarne bouresti</i>	Pull out <i>oxen’s horns</i>
Si te du la balta	And go to the pool
Si bea apa calda,	And drink warm water,
Si te du la DunĂfre	And go to the Danube
Si bea apa turbure.	And drink turbid water.

He retains the “oxen’s horns” (“*coarne bouresti*”) since in Romanian *bouresti* is actually an adjective, reminiscent of *bourel* (“small ox”). Being the usage of both the adjective and the noun almost exclusively met in children’s folklore, he chooses to call the cowboy *Bourel*.

To conclude, we can state that proper names in Flann O’Brien’s works are a relevant element to transmit the local flavor of a text, and are almost never purely denotative, as most of proper names would be, but always bear some connotative aspects and meanings, and have a sense, often ironic, which is derived from a particular cultural situation.

The wide-spread belief, according to which literary proper names cannot be translated, can certainly be discussed. Translators do not just leave names untranslated and whenever this happens it is either for the fact that there is no alternative, or because it is the way to lose less. But something, some connotations, are always lost.

In our corpus the trends were different, in some cases similar, in some cases distant, but always confirmed the fact that a translator of Flann O’Brien cannot adopt a single strategy. Multiple approaches are necessary, because Flann O’Brien’s approaches to naming are multiple and in the difficult task of translating proper names in his works lies, we believe, a further reason that still today, despite the success and the world wide spread recognition, limits the knowledge of this writer out of the English speaking world.

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