

**Phonetic Fidelity
Versus Semantic Relevance
in Chinese Translation:
Alternative Strategies for Handling
Foreign Names in *Harry Potter***

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Abstract

This article challenges the accepted standard norm practiced in P.C. of China of slavishly transcribing foreign proper names using similarly pronounced Chinese characters irrespective of their potential meaning. It then goes on to illustrate how the criterion of creative semantic relevance can be incorporated as a translation/transcription strategy without completely foregoing phonetic similarity in order to recreate some of the magic of the names which in part makes the English original so appealing to children and adults alike.

Introduction

The question of how to handle foreign proper names when translating works of fiction is still a hotly disputed point between those who recommend a strategy geared to remaining faithful to the original, often arguing the need to expose readers to other cultures (e.g. Venuti

: 1998) and the proponents of a more free-handed approach involving a certain naturalisation of foreign elements in order to adjust to the expectations of the target readership (Baxter 2004).

This is all the more crucial in cases where there is a semantic bond between the names of the characters in a narrative and their personality, physical features and/or their place in the plot. Ignoring such semantic information encoded into the characters' names can lead to tedious, meaningless and clumsy names in the translated version, as in the case of the Spanish translations of the Asterix comics, whereas a more creative, meaning-oriented strategy based on a semantic analysis of the originals can put all the fun of the original version back in, as in the English translation of the same comics^[1]. The semantic link need not, however, be quite so direct or transparent, as in the case of many of the characters who people the Harry Potter stories by J.K. Rowling studied here. Transmitting the immediacy of this semantic bond when translating is, of course, all the more important in the case of children's literature where it is often used as a ploy in original works.

Chinese is an interesting case in point owing to both its phonemic structure and the specific characteristics of its non-alphabetic writing system which serve to highlight different potential outcomes of applying either strategy.

Within the wide range of possibilities described by Franco (200: 89-94), Chinese uses three basic ways of handling foreign proper names and loanwords using Chinese graphemes, namely: phonetic transcription; adaptation and naturalisation and; translation and neutralisation.

Phonetic transcription is by far and away the most commonly used device. Despite this fact, however, it has a number of drawbacks and implications whose significance will vary according to the particular context and target readership. Firstly, all varieties have a relatively limited phonemic inventory

but more specially a very limited syllabic structure with mainly open syllables. This is especially true of the Mandarin variety of Chinese studied here. What this means in practice is that any attempt to transcribe European proper names, especially those involving consonant clusters, closed syllables or certain sounds, will at best be inevitably haphazard and inaccurate. Secondly, Chinese uses a logographic, non-alphabetic, whereby each grapheme corresponds to a morpheme or meaningful unit of the Chinese language. Any graphemes used, therefore, for its phonetic value when transcribing a foreign name will inevitably also be potentially meaningful. Unfortunately, the meaning of the graphemes used is rarely taken into account when transcribing foreign names other than to avoid them sounding offensive or unpleasant.

Sampson makes what seems on face of it a common sense remark:

The Chinese tend to use a limited subset of their vocabulary for transliteration purposes, and many morphemes in that subset are otherwise almost or wholly obsolete [...]

Sampson (1985: 167)

However, while it is true that certain graphemes do indeed tend to be used to transcribe certain sounds, in practice the graphemes used vary considerably (see Baxter 2000), which does not help the reader to readily identify sequences of graphemes as foreign names other than by the fact that they are ungrammatical in Chinese. Usage can also vary not only from one place to another, e.g. Mainland China and Taiwan, but also from one writer to another, thus serving to confuse matters even further.

Finally, this strategy produces very long names which are very clumsy in Chinese and which do not fit in well with the Chinese tradition of a one-syllable surname followed by one- or two-syllable given names.

The second technique involves adapting foreign names by finding similar-sounding characters to the original name then pruning the number of syllables down to a bare minimum and reordering the surname and given names in order to comply with Chinese tradition. This device is commonly applied to the names of foreigners living in China, which reflects just how clumsy and hard to handle Chinese-speakers find foreign names transcribed *in extensis* using similar sounding Chinese graphemes. Once again, however, owing to the fact that Western personal names tend to be meaningless *per se*, priority still tends to be given to finding similar sounding graphemes with an appealing rather than a strictly appropriate or descriptive meaning .

The third and final possibility involves translating meaningful proper names in order to render them fully meaningful and acceptable as names to a Chinese-speaking target audience. For obvious reasons this tends only to be the case with fully transparent fictional names such as ‘Cinderella’ > 灰姑娘 {Huī Gū-niang}, lit. ‘cinder/ash-girl’ (Pringle: 2004), although even in such clear-cut cases the phonetic strategy may also be applied, e.g. 辛德雷拉 {Xīn-dé-léi-lā} (Wáng, 1986: 2363).

Here we will apply a mix of strategies two and three in order to encode relevant descriptive semantic information into the names whilst at the same time avoiding excessively altering the original pronunciation as and when possible.

Corpus and Methodology

Below we present a list of all of the characters’ names cited in the list which figures at the beginning of the Mainland Chinese translation of the first book of the Harry Potter series *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. It is important to point out that the earlier Taiwanese version differs

from the one published in the People's Republic and tends, on the whole to be generally less conservative and more creative in its choice of graphemes^[2] to represent the names of the different characters.

In general the Mainland translation of Harry Potter gives the impression of having been written by a scholar – the names are accurate and conscientious attempts to render the English phonetically but are largely lacking in any magic or charm. In only a few cases [...] does the translator try to make the name more interesting or accessible. The Taiwanese translation is more successful in capturing the spirit of J.K. Rowling's book [...] the translator has tried to make the names fit in with the book and its atmosphere. [...] Above all, the Taiwanese names are simply more fun than the Mainland names
Pringle (2004)

Notwithstanding this caveat, albeit it less conservative than the Mainland one, the Taiwanese version still tends to be predominantly concerned with phonetic fidelity. Within the framework of the semantically-oriented strategy proposed below, concerns with phonetic similarities between the pronunciation of original English and the final Chinese transcription are backgrounded in favour of searching for graphemes capable of encoding some important facet of each character's personality into their new Chinese name, whilst at the same time seeking a certain degree of naturalness regarding the target culture.

The scope of this brief study covers the names of the characters provided in the list at the beginning of the Mainland Chinese translation. Indeed, the very fact that the translator feels it necessary to include such a list serves to highlight the difficulty Chinese-speakers are assumed to be likely to experience when faced with the foreign names as transliterated in this translation.

After giving the full transcription of the name in Chinese simplified graphemes plus pinyin and its original English form, each item is dealt with in three separate sections: grapheme analysis; commentary and; alternative proposals.

The first section provides a grapheme-by-grapheme analysis of the way the different syllables of the name are transcribed, including glosses and mentions, where appropriate, of other general foreign loan words that the same grapheme is used to transcribe as well any other Harry Potter character names it appears in from the list. For ease of reading, each grapheme is numbered using Roman numerals and the pinyin transcriptions are split up into syllables linked, as appropriate, by hyphens to indicate single lexical units.

The section covers various remarks concerning the suitability of the graphemes used to transcribe the name in question, primarily from a semantic point of view in relation to the most salient features of each character's personality.

The third and final section provides a series of alternative possibilities for transcribing the English names using Chinese graphemes geared to making them semantically relevant while keeping them as phonetically similar as possible.

Conventions and abbreviations

<> written form (conventional spelling or letters)

[] Phonetic transcription

// Examples of other loanwords transcribed using this same grapheme

{ } *Pinyin* romanisation

Capitals: syllables with any of the four standard tones, e.g. {BEI} = {bēi; béi; běi; bèi}

↻ Reverse order, e.g. surname before title in Chinese

○ Grapheme used as a Chinese family name

◎ Examples of the same grapheme used in the names of other characters from the same book

NB: All definitions are from Wú (1985)

Corpus Analysis and Commentaries

1. 哈利□波特 {Hā-li Bō-tè}, ‘Harry Potter’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘breathe out’; 2. ‘laugh heartily’ // 哈雷彗星 {Hālái Huìxīng} ‘Halley’s Comet’; 哈乃斐 {nǎifěi} ‘Hanafite school (Islam)’

II. 1. ‘sharp’; 2. ‘favourable’; 3. ‘advantage’; 4. ‘benefit’ // 利比亚 {Lì-bǐ-yà} ‘Libya’; 利比里亚 {Lì-bǐ-lǐ-yà} ‘Liberia’. ◎ 奥利弗 {Ào-lì-fú} ‘Oliver’; 邓布利多 {Dèng-bù-lì-dūo} ‘Dumbledore’

III. 1. ‘wave’ 2. ‘unexpected turn of events’ // 波多黎各 {Bō-dūo-lí-gè} ‘Puerto Rico’; 波兰 {Bō-lán} ‘Poland’

IV. 1. ‘special, unusual, exceptional’

Commentary

Here the translator resorts to a purely phonetic rendering of the name. It is worth noting however, that the standard form of Harry is 哈里 {Hā-lǐ} (Wáng 1986: 2407), which can be accounted for by the possible influence of the earlier Taiwanese translation (see Pringle: 2004). It is a shame that the translator of the Mainland version wasn’t more inspired by the more creative strategy used by the translator of the Taiwanese version, e.g. ‘Draco’ > Mainland 德拉科 {Dé-lā-kè} (see below) vs. Taiwanese 跼哥 {Zhuai-ge} ‘haughty/arrogant big brother’ (see Pringle 2004). It is also interesting to note that in an attempt to “[...] adhere closely to the English name, [...] sticking *exactly* to the English form [...]” (Pringle 2004), the translator even maintains the original

order of the English names, rather than placing the surnames first as in Chinese.

Alternative proposal

The fact that the translator does not abide strictly by the standard transcription norms (cf. 11. Neville) leaves the door open to be even more creative when choosing the graphemes to be used based not only on their phonetic similarity to the original but also on their semantic relevance. While graphemes III and IV could be construed to be semantically relevant to the personality of Harry Potter and the role he plays in the plot, the first grapheme is bland and bears no relationship whatever. However, owing to the lack of meaningful graphemes available with pronunciations similar to the original, it is only possible to alter the first element in an attempt to make it semantically more relevant: 哈 {hā}> 骇 {hài} ‘be astonished; be shocked’. Despite its being phonetically less similar to the original, this new proposal has the advantage of encoding, albeit rather loosely, semantic information which complements the nature of the character in question.

2. 佩妮 {Pèi-nī}, ‘Petunia (Dursely)’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘wear’; 2. ‘an ornament worn as a pendant at the waist in ancient times’; 3. ‘admire’

II. 1. ‘girl, lass’

Commentary

There are very few graphemes pronounced {BEI, PE, PA, BA}, which limits the choice of graphemes available for transcription, especially when the aim is to incorporate not only phonetic fidelity towards the English

pronunciation but also to try and creatively encode some pertinent semantic information about the personality of the character in question. In fact, none of the graphemes with the required pronunciation is even vaguely semantically related to the personality of Petunia Dursely.

Alternative proposal

A definite change of strategy is required in this case if semantic relevance is to be given priority over phonetic fidelity. Here it is important to understand the contrast between the name given in the book to Harry's mother 'Lily', representing purity and goodness, clearly opposed to that of her sister, 'Petunia', a common garden flower. It would be possible to maintain the same play as in the original by retaining the name of the respective flowers in Chinese, i.e. 百合 {bǎihé} 'lily' vs. 喇叭 {lǎbā} 'petunia' or even 龙葵 {lóngkuí} 'black nightshade' (the first grapheme of which literally means 'dragon'). In order to ensure that it is fully identifiable as a proper noun, it could be further naturalised by suffixing the title 姨母 {yímǔ} 'one's (i.e. Harry's) mother's sister; aunt' > 龙葵姨母.

3. 佛农□德思礼 {Fú-nóng Dé-sī-lǐ}, 'Vernon Dursely'

Grapheme analysis

I. (liter.) negative particle

II. 1. 'agriculture'; 2. 'peasant; farmer'

III. 1. 'virtue'; 2. 'morals' 3. 'kindness' 4. 'heart; mind' // 德国 {Dé-guó} 'Germany' (< *Deutschland*). ◎ 德拉科 {Dé-lā-kè} 'Draco'; 塞德里克 {Sài-dé-lǐ-kè} 'Cedric'; 拉文德

{Lā-wén-dé} 'Lavender'; 吉德罗 {Jí-dé-lúo} 'Gilderoy'

IV. 1. 'think; consider'; 2. 'thoughts'

V. 1. 'ceremony; rite' 2. 'courtesy; etiquette'

Commentary

As anyone who has read the book will know, this person is anything but ‘kind’ as the use of grapheme III might tend to suggest. In fact, the English name of this character ‘Vernon’ sounds rather similar to ‘vermin’ or ‘venom’. None of this is reflected in any of the graphemes used to transcribe this name in the Chinese translation. What is more, contrary to what one might expect, the translator opts for rather unusual graphemes to transcribe syllables, rendered elsewhere by other graphemes more commonly used to transcribe foreign names with no apparent justification, semantic or otherwise, i.e. 佛 {fú} instead of 弗 {fú} (cf. 弗雷德 {Fú-léi-dé} ‘Fred’; 奥利弗 {Ào-lì-fú} ‘Oliver’; 弗林特 {Fú-lín-tè} ‘Flint’; 弗立维 {Fú-lì-wéi} ‘Flitwick’; 思 {sī} instead of 斯 {sī} (see 7..I) and 礼{lǐ} instead of 利 {lì} (see 1.II).

Alternative proposal

肥 {féi} ‘fat’ 脓 {nóng} ‘pus’. The choice of these two graphemes provides a generally negative feeling to the name, very much in keeping with the nature of the character described, as opposed the rather bland solution given in the published translation, whilst at the same time remaining equally faithful at the phonetic level.

As far as the surname is concerned, to be applied to the whole family, the use of grapheme III (*supra*), is wholly inappropriate, as anyone who has read the book or seen the film will know. We propose to replace it, therefore, with the grapheme 夺 {duó} meaning ‘seize; deprive’, reflecting how the whole family conspires to deprive Harry of all but the very basic necessities. Finally, ad in line with the use of this mechanism in other cases (see 6. III-IV), the whole name could be fully naturalised by suffixing the title 姨夫 {yífū}, meaning ‘husband of one’s maternal aunt; uncle’ > 肥 脓姨夫.

4. 达力 {Dá-lì}, ‘Dudley (Dursely)’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘extend’; 2. ‘reach; amount to’; 3. ‘express; communicate’; 4. ‘eminent; distinguished’

// 达尔文主义 {Dá-ěr-wén-zhǔ-yì} ‘Darwinism’

II. ‘power; strength; ability’

Comentary

The sound of this person’s name beginning with <du-> is reinforced by the repetition between his first name and his surname and brings to mind such words as ‘dud’ and ‘dreary’ and the drawling noise ‘doo’ made famous by the American cartoon character Homer Simpson. None of which is particularly positive, very much in keeping with the character of Dudley Dursley who is an ignorant bully. None of this is transmitted by the meaning of the graphemes used to transcribe the name in the Chinese translation, some of which even actually contradict the negative nature of the character, e.g. grapheme I.3.

Alternative proposal

毒 {dú} ‘poison; malicious; cruel’ or 黷 {dú} ‘blacken; defile; act wantonly’ or 妒 {dù} ‘be jealous of; envy’. Once again, sacrificing phonetic accuracy in favour of semantic relevance, it is possible to opt for a wholly appropriate grapheme to represent the first syllable of this particular character’s name: 跺 {dù} ‘to stamp one’s foot’, which harps back to the terrible tantrums he throws. Stretching the phonetic possibilities even further, we could even opt for 猪 {zhū} ‘pig; hog; swine’, in line with the constant references to his physical similarity with this animal throughout the book and also to the episode where Hagrid made him grow a pig’s tail as punishment. For lack of any more semantically relevant options,

as far as the second syllable of the name is concerned, it would perhaps be advisable to replace the grapheme 力 {lì} in order to avoid any positive connotations associated with it with the neutral and widely-used homophone 利 {lì} (see 1.II).

5. 呵不思口邓布利多 {Ā-bù-sī Dèng-bù-lì-dūo}, ‘Albus Dumbledore’

Grapheme analysis

I. Phonetic value only // 阿尔巴尼亚 {Ā-ěr-bā-ní-yà} ‘Albania’; 阿拉伯 {Ā-lā-bó} ‘Arab’

II. Negative particle

III. 1. ‘think; consider; deliberate’; 2. ‘think of; long for’; 3. ‘idea; thought’

IV. ○, e.g. surname of 邓小平 Dèng Xiǎopíng

V. 1. ‘cloth’; 2. ‘declare; announce; publish; proclaim’; 3. ‘spread; disseminate’; 4. ‘an ancient Chinese copper coin’ // 布尔什维克 {Bù-ěr-shí-wé-ikè} Bolshevik; 布隆迪 {Bù-lóng-dí} ‘Burundi’. ◎ 布朗 {Bù-lǎng} ‘Brown’; 克拉布 {Kè-lā-bù} ‘Crabbe’

VI. See 1.II

VII. 1. ‘much; many’ // 多瑙河 {Dūo-nǎo-hé} ‘Danube’; 多米尼加 {Dūo-mǐ-ní-jiā} ‘Dominica’

Commentary

Nothing of the character’s personality can be construed from the semantic contents of the Chinese characters used to transcribe his name, again on a purely mechanical phonetic basis. Although the origin and meaning of the surname are unclear, it is clear that the first name ‘Albus’ comes from the Latin meaning ‘white’ as a sign of his goodness and purity, physically reflected by his long white beard to which frequent explicit references are made throughout the story (*cf.* also ‘Lily’ in Section

2. above) as opposed to the evil of the ‘dark’ arts.

Alternative proposal

A very limited range of graphemes is available to transcribe the sound {A}, none of which are any more semantically relevant than the transcription given in the Chinese translation. Once again, here we propose a linguistic substitution based on the Chinese translation of the character’s first name, ‘Albus’, which contains the most pertinent traits of his personality > 白 {bái} ‘white’^[3]. This also has the advantage of naturalising the name, as this grapheme is used as a Chinese surname, thereby making it more readily assimilable for a young Chinese-speaking public, whilst at the same time remaining faithful to the spirit of the original > 白教授 {Bái Jiāo-shòu}, lit. ‘Professor White’.

6. 麦格教授 {Mài-gé Jiāo-shòu}, ‘Professor Minerva (Mac Gonagill)’ U

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘cereals’; 2. ‘wheat’; 3. ○ // 麦加 {Màijiā} ‘Mecca’; 麦地那 {Màidìnà} ‘Medina’

II. 1. ‘check pattern’; 2. ‘division’; 3. ‘standard; pattern’ // 格林纳达 {Gélínnàdá}

‘Grenada’; 格陵兰 {Gélínglán} ‘Greenland’; ◎ 海格 {Hǎi-gé} ‘Hagrid’

III-IV: ‘teacher’ (semantic)

Commentary

Here, in line with Chinese tradition not necessarily followed elsewhere, the translator has opted to use the surname followed by the title ‘professor’, perhaps to make the name more easily digestible for Chinese readers rather than an overly cumbersome rendering of her entire

name. On the whole, the graphemes used to transcribe the name are dull and have little to do with the character's personality or role.

Alternative proposal

Forsaking phonetic fidelity, an interesting solution might be to combine the graphemes 咪 {mī}, meaning 'mew; miaow' and 革 {gé}, which as well as being a surname means, amongst other things, 'change; transform', thus tying in nicely both with the fact that she is the teacher of transformations as well as the fact that she herself changes into a cat > 咪革教授

7. 斯内普教授 {Sī-nèi-pǔ Jiāo-shòu}, 'Professor (Severus) Snape'

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. (liter.) 'this'; 2. 'then; thus'; 3. ○ // 斯里兰卡 {Sī-lǐ-lán-kǎ} 'Sri Lanka'; 斯拉夫 {Sī-lā-fū} 'Slav'. ◎ 斯普劳特 {Sī-pǔ-láo-tè} 'Sprout'; 宾斯 {Bīn-sī} 'Binns'; 平斯 {Píng-sī} 'Pince'; 韦斯莱 {Wéi-sī-lái} 'Weasley'; 托马斯 {Tóu-mǎ-sī} 'Thomas'; 贾斯廷 {Jiǎ-sī-tíng} 'Justin'

II. 1. 'inner; within; inside'; 2. 'one's wife or her relatives'

III. 1. 'general, universal' // 普什图 {Pǔ-shí-tú} 'Pashto' ◎ 斯普劳特 {Sī-pǔ-láo-tè} 'Sprout'; 格拉普兰 {Gé-lā Pǔ-lán} 'Grubbly-Plank'

IV-V 'Teacher' (see also below).

Commentary

This teacher is the one most hated by Harry and his friends, who he treats unfairly, favouring their archenemies who belong to his own House, none of which is even vaguely alluded to by the very mechanical, academic way the syllables of the English name are transcribed into

Chinese. This is one of the most semantically transparent names in English (see also below).

Alternative proposal

Given the limited range of graphemes available with a pronunciation similar to the syllables of the original English name, it is only really possible to change the grapheme used to transcribe the first syllable in order to achieve a greater level of semantic relevance.

The rather boring and standard grapheme could be replaced by the more evocative 私 {sī} ‘selfish; secret; private; illicit; illegal’ which fits in rather nicely with the personality of this teacher. However, the temptation to give up slavishly follow the English original on semantic grounds is all the more irresistible when we discover the similarly pronounced 蛇 {shé} ‘snake; serpent’ which is an absolute must given the fact that this teacher is head of the Slytherin house (< ‘to slither’) which also accounts for his name in English (< ‘snake’).

8. 海格 {Hǎi-gé}, ‘(Rubeus) Hagrid’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘sea’ // 海地 {Hǎi-dì} ‘Haiti’

II. *Vid. ut supra* 6. II.

Commentary

It is worth pointing out that there is no relationship in the story whatever between Hagrid and the sea. The list of character names given at the beginning of the Chinese translation only includes this character’s surname which is rendered phonetically. His first name is actually transcribed 鲁伯 {Lǔ-bó}, neither grapheme being especially meaningful or relevant.

Alternative proposal

For the first syllable we have a choice between 和 {hé} ‘gentle; kind; mild’ which does describe his deep-down personality, but is rather out of character on the whole, given his huge strength and fiery temper and 荷 {hè} meaning ‘carry on one’s shoulders or back; responsibility’, which reflects his strength and reminds the readers of how it was Hagrid whose job it was at the very start of the story to carry Harry to safety. For want of a more phonetically similar grapheme to transcribe the second syllable in order to reflect at least some aspect of Hagrid’s personality, we propose to opt for 孑 {jié} meaning ‘lonely; all alone’ which describes how this character lives.

9. 罗恩 {Luó-ēn}, ‘Ron (Weasley)’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘bird net’; 2. ‘collect; gather together’; 3. ‘display; spread out’ 4. ‘sieve; sift’ 5. ○ // 罗

马 {Luó-mǎ} ‘Rome’; 罗得西亚 {Luó-dé-xī-yà} ‘Rhodesia’. ◎ 吉德罗 {Jí-dé-lúo}

‘Gilderoy’; 罗琳 {Lúo-lín} ‘Rowling’

II. 1. ‘kindness; favour; grace’

Commentary

This transcription is based on the conventional use of certain graphemes to render certain sounds. Inevitably, English <r-> is rendered as Chinese {l-} in initial position rather than pinyin {r-} which is actually pronounced [ɹ].

Alternative proposal

Despite the fact that it is used less frequently to transcribe foreign names in Chinese, the first syllable could perhaps be better rendered

using the Chinese grapheme 落 {luò}, meaning ‘to lag behind’, reflecting the fact that Ron is certainly not one of the school’s most academically gifted students.

10. 赫敏 {Hè-mǐn}, ‘Hermione (Granger)’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘conspicuous; grand’; 2. ‘illustrious’ ○ A Chinese surname // ‘hertz’

II. 1. ‘quick; nimble; agile’

Commentary

The first choice of Chinese grapheme is semantically satisfactory in as much as Hermione is rather a bookish character and certainly stands out as one of the best students in the school. The second grapheme could, however, perhaps be improved upon by replacing it with 美 {měi} usually meaning ‘beautiful’ but which also has the meaning of ‘very satisfactory; good: to be pleased with oneself’. This grapheme also has the advantage of being used to transcribe well-known foreign loanwords, e.g. 美国 {Měiguó} ‘America’.

11. 纳威 {Nà-wēi}, ‘Neville (Longbottom)’

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. ‘receive; admit’; 2. ‘accept’; 3. ‘enjoy’; 4. ‘pay; offer’; 5. ‘sew close stitches’ // 纳粹

{Nà-cuì} ‘Nazi’; 纳米比亚 {Nà-mǐ-bǐ-yà} ‘Namibia

II. 1. ‘impressive strength; might; power’; 2. ‘by force’ // 威尼斯 {Wēi-ní-sī} ‘Venice’

Commentary

The transcription does not coincide with the standard form usually

used to render this English name in Chinese 内维尔 {Nèi-wéi-ěr} (Wáng 1986: 2462), although this variant form does not respond to any ostensible attempt to bring the meaning of the graphemes used any nearer to the personality of the character in question. Moreover, the second grapheme used describes a trait very far removed from the personality of Neville Longbottom in the story itself.

Alternative proposal

One possible alternative would be to combine the graphemes 耐无 {Nài-wú} meaning ‘be able to bear or endure and ‘negative particle’. Although this combination is syntactically ungrammatical in Chinese, it nevertheless presents the advantage of remaining faithful to the original pronunciation of the English name whilst at the same time pointing to certain aspects of the character’s personality. In fact, the ungrammaticalness of the syntagm itself provides the Chinese reader with an immediate clue that the graphemes are to be read primarily as a foreign proper name and not for the value they would normally have in Chinese.

12. 马尔福 {Mǎ-ěr-fú}, ‘(Draco) Malfoy’

Grapheme analysis

- I. 1. ‘horse’ 2. ○ // 马克思 {Mǎ-kè-sī} ‘Marx’; 马耳他 {Mǎ-ěr-tā} ‘Malta’. © 托马斯 {Túo-mǎ-sī} ‘Thomas’; 马库斯 {Mǎ-kù-sī} ‘Marcus’
- II. 1. (liter.) ‘you’; 2. ‘like that; so’; 3. (liter.) ‘that’
- III. 1. ‘good fortune; blessing; happiness’

Commentary

For some reason, the list of the names of the characters given at

the start of the Chinese translation only includes this character's surname, which is surprising given the key role played by this character as Harry Potter's archenemy and the relative semantic transparency of the name 'Draco' = 'dragon', also clearly reminiscent of 'Dracula'. Incidentally, nothing in the transcription of this first name which does appear later in the book is semantically relevant to the character's personality: 德拉科 {Délā-kē}^[4]. Nor is anything of the relatively transparent meaning of the surname taken from the French 'mal' + 'foi' meaning 'bad faith' transmitted by the corresponding Chinese transcription. In fact, rather than highlighting any of the character's negative traits which are essential to the plot, the third grapheme used to transcribe the last syllable of the surname is in fact quite positive.

Alternative proposal

In order to preserve at least a hint of the original pronunciation of the name and also to avoid any possible positive connotations in Chinese, the grapheme 龙 {lóng} 'dragon' is not an ideal alternative. For want of a more phonetically faithful alternative which falls within the desired semantic range, the first name could be rendered by one single grapheme: 歹 {dǎi} which means 'bad; evil; vicious' and is found in the word 歹徒 {dǎitú}, meaning 'scoundrel; ruffian; evildoer'.

The following alternative proposal would be semantically more pertinent for the transcription of the surname by reflecting aspects of the character in question despite being phonetically less accurate: 谋 {móu} 'work for, seek, plot' + 非 {fēi} 'evil, wrongdoing'.

13. 伏地魔 {Fú-dì-mó}, 'Voldemort'

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. 'bend over; lie prostrate'; 2. 'subside'; 3. 'hide'; 4. 'admit defeat'

or guilt' // 伏尔加河 {Fú-ěr-jiā-hé} 'Volga'

II. 1. 'the earth'; 2. 'land; soil'; 3. 'place'; 4. 'position; situation'

III. 1. 'evil spirit; demon; devil; monster'; 2. 'magic, mystic'

Commentary

This is one of the Lord of Evil's unutterable names, from the French meaning 'flight of death'. While grapheme III is therefore, at first sight, seemingly quite appropriate, it is important to note that it is also used in the title of the book in its positive sense. To avoid any possible confusion about the nature of this character, less ambiguous Chinese graphemes could be found

Alternative proposal

Some possible alternatives in keeping with the character's personality could be as follows: 1. A 蝠 {fú} 'bat'; 符 {fú} 'magic figures drawn by Taoist priests to invoke/expel spirits and/or bring goodwill, fortune'; 腐 {fǔ} 'rotten, putrid, stale, corrupt'; 讣 {fù} 'obituary (death)' and; 歹 {dǎi} 'evil, vicious' and 屠 {tú} 'slaughter, butcher'. The latter has the double advantage of referring to all of the people this character allegedly killed as alluded to several times throughout the narrative itself, whilst at the same time being a genuine Chinese surname.

14. 奇洛教授 {Qí-luò Jiāo-shòu}, 'Professor Quirell' ☹

Grapheme analysis

I. 1. 'strange; queer; rare'; 2. 'surprise; wonder; astonish'

II. Name of a river which passes through Shaanxi and Henan Provinces

III-IV: *Vid. ut supra* 6. III-IV

Commentary

The name is somewhat reminiscent of that of the Norwegian traitor, Quisling, and as such fits in nicely with the role this character plays in the plot of the story. Although the grapheme used to represent the first syllable of the name is semantically quite appropriate, it is potentially ambiguous as it has a possible double reading in Chinese, i.e. {qí/jī} which is best avoided when using graphemes to transcribe foreign loanwords and names. Nor is there any apparent reason to justify using the grapheme 洛 {LUO} rather than the more common quasi homophone 罗 already used to transcribe other names (cf. 9.I ‘Ron’).

Alternative proposal

As no more phonetically similar alternatives are available to transcribe the syllables of this character’s name, the principle of semantic relevance overrides that of phonetic faithfulness, providing the alternative solution 结栗 {Jiē-li} made up of the graphemes 结 {jiē} ‘to stammer, stutter’ (from the disyllabic word 结巴栗 {jiēba}) + 栗 {li} ‘shudder, shake with fear’, both of which describe especially distinguishing features of this character’s persona and role in the story.

Conclusions

It seems fair to say that the standard strategy used for transcribing foreign names in Chinese falls very short of the mark for two main reasons: firstly because it is only very approximate at the best of times, both regarding the phonetic equivalences established between English and Chinese syllables and in the irregular usage of the graphemes used to represent these syllable. In the very academic version applied in the Mainland translation, this focus on phonetic equivalences inevitably gives

rise to extremely long sequences of meaningless graphemes which are highly unsuited to the Chinese language and culture and therefore difficult to assimilate, which is all the more important when translating literature intended to appeal to young people. The second reason involves the fact that priority is given almost exclusively to phonetic fidelity, thus ignoring to a large extent the potential semantic readings of the graphemes used. This factor is especially important in cases such as Harry Potter where many of the characters' names are related, albeit often only indirectly, to some aspect of their personality or the role they play in the plot.

In order to offset the potentially negative consequences of adopting this mainstream strategy, the alternative strategy of giving overriding priority to semantic relevance through the graphemes used attempts to put some of the magic experienced by English readers back into the Chinese translation. The adoption of a meaning-based strategy does not necessarily mean forsaking phonetic similarity between the original Chinese names and their newly created Chinese equivalents, thus avoiding a total neutralisation of the foreign element which would require a full rewriting and adaptation of the scenario in order for it to remain internally coherent, i.e. the names remain essentially English despite being better adapted to usual Chinese norms. Nevertheless, phonetic fidelity would need to be sacrificed in favour of semantic relevance should no suitably sounding graphemes be available to transcribe the particular syllables of any given source name.

Above and beyond any specific conditioning factors such as the copyrighting and proprietary ownership of names, when deciding between a strategy geared to remaining as faithful as possible to the original via a slavish reproduction of English names by means of long threads of meaningless Chinese graphemes and a less conservative semantic-oriented strategy, rather than 'betraying' the author and the original, only the latter really pays tribute to the author by allowing an ever increasing number

of children and adults from around the world to fully enjoy the adventures of Harry Potter in a way not too dissimilar from the experience of her original English-speaking target readership.

Notes

- [1] Compare the way the name of Obelix's dog is handled: 'Idéfix' (French) > 'Idefix' (Spanish) and 'Idêfix' (Vietnamese) or that of the untalented bard: 'Assuranceturix' (French) > 'Asuranceturix' (Spanish) all of which are meaningless and cumbersome in the target language and 'Dogmatix' and 'Cacafonix' from the British and U.S. translations of the same names respectively. (Tjong: 2004)
- [2] Contrary to usual practice, here we shall use the term 'grapheme' to refer to written Chinese characters in order to avoid confusion with the characters referred to in the book.
- [3] It is in fact one of the so-called 百家姓 (lit. 'Hundred Surnames', see Young: 1996-2003).
- [4] Character analysis: I. See above 3.III; II. 1. 'pull ; tug ; drag' ; 2. 'transport ; haul' ; 3. play certain instruments' ; 4. 'to defecate' // 拉丁 {lādīng} 'Latin' ; 拉马克学说 {lāmākè xuéshuō} 'Lamarckism'. II. 1. 'A branch of academic study' ; 2. 'A division of an administrative unit ; section' ; 3. 'family' // 科摩罗 {kēmóluó} 'the Comoros' ; 科威特 {kēwēitè} 'Kuwait'.

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