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ADAPTATION IN SPECULATIVE FICTION TRANSLATION (CASE STUDY OF CHARLIE HUSTON'S *CATCHPENNY*)

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*This paper focuses on showcasing the practical application of adaptation in translating speculative fiction and, in particular, the meaningful names and irrealia involved in the author's world-building. The material was provided by the American author and screenwriter's Charlie Huston's novel *Catchpenny* (2024) and its Ukrainian translation by the writer of this article, published in 2025. The main goals pursued by this research were to find the names and irrealia where adaptation was used, to describe their semantic elements, to see how much of their semantics was preserved in adaptation, and to discover whether adaptation was possible for all such units.*

The achievement of those goals required thorough studying of the following key aspects: adaptation strategies in translation (a well-developed area of translation studies embodied in multiple papers and many years of research); translation of proper names, specifically meaningful names (an age-old but still completely relevant translatology problem); translation of irrealia (a comparatively new area of translation studies with numerous prospects). Researching all these key elements confirmed that the subject and object of this research are relevant and would remain topical for years to come.

*The study showed that the novel in question (*Catchpenny*) has more than thirty fictional world-pertaining meaningful names and irrealia. By using the descriptive method, the writer of the research showed in detail how adaptation strategy was applied to these units, by analyzing the semantics of both the originals and the translations and comparing the meanings of both to predict the impact of the Ukrainian versions on the reader. It was established that for most units, it had been possible to preserve the key semantic elements and find ways to adapt them to the cultural and linguistic needs of the Ukrainian reader. The paper also showcases more and less successful adaptations and explains how the translator had decided whether to use adaptation in each particular example.*

Key words: *literary translation, translation strategies, adaptation, speculative fiction, proper names, irrealia.*

Чернікова О. І. Адаптація в перекладі фантастичної літератури (на матеріалі роману Чарлі Г'юстона «Кечпенні»). Статтю присвячено огляду практичного застосування адаптації в перекладі фантастичної літератури (наукова фантастика і фентезі), а саме у відтворенні значимих власних назв і так званих «ірреалій», що

утворюють кістяк авторської світобудови у літературі такого жанру. Дослідження проведено на матеріалі роману «Кечпенні» американського письменника і сценариста Чарлі Г'юстона (2024) і його українському перекладі, виконаному авторкою цієї статті. Основними завданнями цієї статті було знайти всі приклади символічних імен та ірреалій, що трапляються в романі, описати їхні семантичні складові, дослідити, скільки від семантики оригіналу збережено в перекладі, порівнявши лексичні одиниці вихідною і цільовою мовами, а також перевірити, чи адаптація застосовна для всіх подібних одиниць.

Задля досягнення таких завдань знадобилося детальне вивчення теоретичної бази з ключових аспектів дослідження: стратегії адаптації в перекладі (це питання в перекладознавстві дуже детально розглянуто, і дослідження в цій царині втілені в численних публікаціях), перекладу власних імен, а саме – значимих імен (давно відома, але досі релевантна перекладацька проблема, що теж має глибоке теоретичне підґрунтя), а також перекладу ірреалій (доволі нова тема досліджень, яка містить численні перспективи і ще не є достатньо вивченою). Дослідження цих аспектів показало, що як предмет, так і об'єкт цієї наукової розвідки досі є актуальними і спонукають до подальшого їх вивчення.

Дослідження показало, що роман, який слугував джерелом матеріалу («Кечпенні») містить понад тридцять прикладів значимих імен, що беруть участь в авторській «світобудові», і ірреалій, що є її невід'ємними концептами. За допомогою описового методу автору дослідження вдалося чітко й детально показати практичне застосування стратегії адаптації для таких лексичних одиниць, проаналізувати семантичні складові як оригіналу, так і перекладу, а також порівняти їхнє значення, щоб передбачити вплив українських слів на читача. Було встановлено, що в більшості адаптованих лексичних одиниць перекладачеві вдалося зберегти ключові семантичні елементи і знайти спосіб підлаштувати їх під культурні та лінгвістичні потреби українського читача. Крім того, в статті описано адаптації різного ступеню вдалості, а також надано пояснення, як саме перекладач обирає, чи застосовувати адаптацію в кожному конкретному випадку.

***Ключові слова:** художній переклад, перекладацькі стратегії, адаптація, жанр фантастики, власні імена, ірреалії.*

Introduction

Translation of speculative fiction is a more complicated process than working with 'realistic' fiction, since speculative fiction (sci-fi and fantasy) mostly involves whole world-building systems created by authors. In 'realistic' fiction, there is no need to explain how the world functions, what key notions (the so-called irrealia) one needs to know to understand it, and what logic lies beneath the naming rules for people, places and objects. However, speculative fiction involves concepts that exist only within the framework of a particular work of fiction. Thus, when working with every book in this genre, the translator has to grasp the unique logic of the author's world and the mechanics of its functioning.

Adaptation strategies are used by translators to bridge the gap between the linguo-cultures of the source and target text, to bring the original closer to the translation readers by adapting to their language and culture perception. In

translating fiction, especially speculative fiction (sci-fi and fantasy), the translator faces various challenges requiring the use of adaptation. One of the most prominent of these challenges is rendering fictional nomination units (names of people, places and objects). Another challenge lies in translating words denoting irrealia belonging to fictional worlds created by authors. The exact ways in which adaptation should be used, as well as the best techniques to achieve an adequate translation, are unique for every piece of fiction; thus, the problem of using adaptation in fiction remains highly topical in translation studies.

Theoretical background

Adaptation strategies used in translation of fiction, specifically speculative fiction, have always been and still remain a topical problem of translation studies, both by domestic (Selivanova, 2012; Slavova & Borysenko, 2022; Kononchuk, 2024) and foreign scholars (Newmark, 1981; Raw, 2012; Bastin, 2014; Bołtuć, 2021; Stewart, 2022; Carl, 2023; Strezovska & Damjanoski, 2024; Yeoman, 2024). Adaptation is a kind of translation where pragmatic needs and orientation at cultural expectations of the reader dominate over faithfulness (Baker, Saldanha, 2011; Bastin, 2014). In translation studies, adaptation is traditionally viewed as the ‘final’ form of transformation the translator is allowed to make. However, if we support the point of view where adaptation is regarded as pragmatically and communicatively necessary (based on the approach emphasizing the need for the translated text to make the same impact on the reader as the original does), it is logical that adaptation becomes a primary strategy in fiction translation. Moreso, when dealing with speculative fiction, the translator has even more reasons to use adaptation strategies, as in such type of fiction, the reader needs to cross not one ‘threshold’, but two: getting invested in both the plot of the book and the new concepts of the fictional world created by the author.

Such concepts are known in linguistics and translation studies under the term *irrealia* (or *pseudo-realia*). The term has been coined more than ten years ago (Loponen, 2009), but has been steadily used and explored since both by Ukrainian translato-logists (Razumna & Movchan, 2023) and foreign linguists (Loponen, 2019; Kažimír & Martinkovič, 2021; Pettini, 2024). Irrealia denote concepts that exist only within the framework of a particular work of fiction and may be expressed both by single words and by phrases.

World-building in speculative fiction is not limited by the concept of irrealia: it also involves naming rules set by the author as well as the symbolism hidden in

meaningful names, which, like the irrealia themselves, require adaptation to make the same impression on the reader of the target text as the one they make on the addressee of the source text. Translation of proper names has deep roots in translation studies, with multiple papers written on the subject (Berezhna, 2007; Holub, 2019, 2020; Sydorenko, 2023 and many others). Scholars in the field of translation studies present a wide range of opinions concerning the choice of strategies in rendering fictional proper names: the number of possible strategies varies from two to as many as seven, while the stages in dealing with proper names number as many as thirteen (Berezhna, 2007). However, in this paper the focus is not on translating proper names in general, but only those that have meaning and constitute an integral part of the fictional world built by the author.

Aim and methods

The aim of this paper is to describe the practical application of adaptation strategies in rendering nomination units and words denoting irrealia pertaining to speculative fiction. The research material has been provided by the Ukrainian translation (Hiuston, 2025) of the American author and screenwriter Charlie Huston's fantasy thriller *Catchpenny* (Huston, 2024). The Ukrainian translation of the novel was done by the author of this paper and published in 2025. This particular material has been chosen to provide examples of the practical application of adaptation in speculative fiction where the author creates a system of concepts and naming rules specific to one particular work of fiction. To achieve the aim of the research, several objectives have been set: continuous sampling of meaningful names as well as words and phrases denoting irrealia in Ch. Huston's *Catchpenny* and its Ukrainian translation; studying the semantic elements of such names and other language units; observing how much of their semantics has been preserved in the Ukrainian translation; comparing examples where adaptation was successful to those where the translator failed to apply it.

Results and discussion

The strategy of *adaptation*, reflected mostly in the application of modulation techniques, is normally used for meaningful names in fiction (especially speculative fiction – sci-fi and fantasy – and children's literature). However, the degree of creativity involved in following this chosen strategy differs from translator to translator. Additionally, it is often for the translator to decide whether the name should be considered meaningful in the context of the work of fiction in

question. The original novel (*Catchpenny*) uses multiple meaningful proper names (nicknames) as important elements of its particular world-building system, such as *Dizzy*, *Sparkie*, *Shingles*, *Clay*, etc. It is worth mentioning in advance that not all characters' names in the novel are equally meaningful. Some of them (especially nicknames) involve a high degree of symbolism and thus needed to be adapted (otherwise a whole layer of meaning would be lost to the Ukrainian reader). Some have a certain degree of symbolism, but do not have much impact on the plot, thus, they were transcoded rather than adapted. Finally, most proper names in *Catchpenny* (if one makes a statistic count) belong to real-world people and serve more as references than real character names. In the case of such nomination units, transcoding was applied.

Examples of names with a high degree of symbolism and relevance to *Catchpenny*'s plot are as follows:

In the very first chapter, the translator faces with a challenge of rendering two nicknames for children's toys: a stuffed toy bat named *Dizzy* and a ragdoll pony named *Sparkie*. These toys, especially the bat, play an important role in introducing us to how this fictional world works, so the translator chose to use adaptation. *Dizzy* became *Вертуць* in the Ukrainian translation due to its semantic elements: something a small child would call their favorite toy, involving disorientation/uncontrolled flight of a bat. Note that the element of disorientation has been lost, but the specific movement of a bat's flight was partially preserved. *Sparkie* was much easier to adapt by using one of the equivalents for *spark* (*блицяти*) and adding a suffix to denote a childish way of naming a toy: *Блищик*.

One of the frequently mentioned characters in the novel is known as *Shingles*. Here, the translator had to combine what we know about the character (context) with the semantics of her nickname. *Shingles* is a skin disease (*лишай*), but the character bearing that name is a very kind and sweet person, so the adapted nickname has been made 'milder': *Лишайка*.

One of the story's villains is nicknamed *Perilous* [Sue]. To adapt this name to the Ukrainian reader, the translator chose *Зяба* [С'ю]. It is a little far from the notion of *peril*, but reflects the characteristic given to Sue in the novel: a person dangerous equally to herself and others. *Зяба* may be understood as both someone who hurts others and someone who is lost and miserable.

Some meaningful proper names in the novel are not only plot elements, but also take part in wordplay. For example, the main character's antagonist, *Clay*, says that he chose this name not because he thinks of himself as a golem (made of clay),

but because he is like a Claymore mine (brings destruction). To preserve both the wordplay and the underlying symbolism, the translator chose to name him *Глин* and turn the joke into «ГОЛЕМ З ГЛИНИ? – НІ, ТОМУ ЩО ТЕПЕР ВСІМ ГЛИНА».

Some meaningful place names deserve mentioning, such as *Gyre*. It is a fictional world which resembles a spiral and is in constant chaos. Additionally, the name has to be somewhat scary and anxiety-inducing, so the translator chose *Нурт* as phonetically similar to the original and with the meaning of constant spiral movement, like in a whirlpool.

Additionally, some names, while bearing certain symbolism, were not adapted in translation, because their meaning was not impactful enough. For instance, one of the main characters is a lost girl named *Circe*, which the English-speaking reader immediately associates with the Greek goddess who kept Odysseus and his crew from returning home. There is even a joke in the novel acknowledging that Circe has an Ancient Greek name. However, the plot does not describe her as a seductress or anything like the mythological Circe. Hence, she was simply transcoded as *Сепсі*.

Another example where the translator chose not to use adaptation is the main character's name itself: *Catchpenny*. Although it is somewhat plot-relevant (the copycat of the main character calls herself *Penny Catcher*, and there is catching involved during the climax, the name was not adapted for several reasons: first, it is a last name, not a nickname, and it would stand out among transcribed last names; second, it is also the title of the whole novel, and publishing policies advise translators not to go too far from the original naming; third, it turned out to be practically impossible to find an adaptation which would sound phonetically harmonious and would not make a wrong impression. This, the name was rendered simply as *Кечпенні*.

Another group of words and phrases where adaptation was chosen as the main strategy are the novel's irrealia (concepts pertaining to a particular fictional world). Although *Catchpenny* is set in modern Los Angeles (and uses multiple references to its history and geography), the whole plot revolves around the notion of *mojo*, which is basically magic, but has a different name on purpose (to make it more down-to-earth and as un-fanciful as possible). This, to adapt this concept to the Ukrainian reader, the translator chose the word *чар* which is still magic-related (same as the original word), but is much less sophisticated than *магія*. Connotation-wise, the word *чар* also reads as a kind of substance, which is what *mojo* is in the novel.

Things containing *mojo* are called *curiosities*, and in the Ukrainian translation they became *цікавинки*, basically preserving the semantics of the original (*curious* – *цікавий*). They are magical, but also attract attention and are sought for and kept in collections.

People who are *in the racket* (translated as *y memi* to preserve the distinct mafia flavor of the *mojo* trade), i.e., know how to work with *mojo*, can choose one or more of its practical appliances: *limning*, for which the translator chose *живопис*, as it is the art of making new life out of mirrors; *vehemancy* – *насіомантія*, to preserve the *-mancy* part as in *necromancy* and render the *vehement* element which denotes passion and extreme emotion; *auspicing* – *струміння*, which preserves the semantic element of moving forward, to the future, like a stream.

Finally, life forms created by *limners* (*живописці*) out of mirrors are called *manikins*, which is semantically related to something human-like but artificial (mannikins in shops), but also denote something less than human, something second-tier to humans (the etymology of *mannikin* reads ‘little man’). The first part of its semantics was lost in translation, but the second part (something less than human and despicable) was preserved in its adaptation as *людець/людуці*. This part was deemed by the translator to be more important, as much of the plot revolves around a manikin trying to live his own life and prove to his creator that he is no worse than real humans.

All in all, the research involved more than thirty irrealia and fictional world-related meaningful names. In most of them, the main semantic elements have been preserved during adaptation, and the results feel natural in the Ukrainian version of the novel (at least, according to readers).

Conclusions

To conclude, the objectives of the study – to describe meaningful names and irrealia in the original and Ukrainian versions of *Catchpenny*, to show how adaptation was practically applied to such units and to analyze their semantic elements, determining whether something had been lost in translation – have been accomplished. The analyzed units had been divided into meaningful names and realia, and representatives of both groups were broken down into semantic elements and compared to their Ukrainian counterparts to see how much meaning had ‘survived’ the adaptation. As this paper’s primary focus was on showcasing the practical application of adaptation strategies for meaningful names and irrealia, this

approach has proved successful for reaching the aim of the research. It is worth noting that the material, description and analysis provided by this research leaves enough space for prospective studies of both proper name translation and irrealia translation.

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