

Translating Magic and Preserving Meaning in the Cross-Linguistic Translation of Speaking Names in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

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Abstract. This study examines how “speaking names” in Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone are translated across eleven languages, with a focus on Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, and Chinese. Drawing on Vlachov and Florin’s taxonomy of realia, Venuti’s foreignization/domestication framework, Skopos theory, and literary onomastics, it evaluates the balance between phonetic fidelity and semantic adaptation. The corpus comprises 56 names (43 characters, 4 places, 9 objects/creatures), analysed by narrative role and assessed using a symbolic gain/loss scale from -2 (complete loss) to $+2$ (strong enrichment). Findings show distinct cultural and institutional translation logics: Lithuanian consistently employs semantic enrichment aligned with pedagogical norms, Russian favours phonetic fidelity to preserve brand identity, Italian uses metaphorical substitution to reinforce character traits, and Chinese blends phonetic and semantic cues to enhance resonance. East Asian translations tend toward symbolic flattening due to script constraints, while Western European languages show greater flexibility in preserving narrative tone and metaphorical nuance. The results highlight the translator’s dual role as linguistic mediator and cultural curator, demonstrating how children’s literature translation is shaped by educational traditions, market demands, and global brand strategies. The proposed symbolic scoring framework offers a replicable tool for assessing the narrative and cultural shifts in literary onomastics.

Keywords. Speaking Names, Translation Strategies, Harry Potter, Cultural Mediation, Realia, Literary Onomastics.

1. Introduction

In J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, names frequently have deeper meanings than just identification. Many are "speaking names"—forms that use etymology, phonosemantic effects, and intertextual references to encode moral positioning, character traits, or narrative tone. Such names require careful cultural negotiation when translated: should the translator embed local cultural signals, change meaning, or preserve sound?

The challenge is particularly acute in children's literature, where names can serve didactic functions, guide moral interpretation, and shape reader engagement. Translators must also navigate brand consistency and cross-market recognisability pressures in globally marketed series such as Harry Potter. Although previous studies (e.g., Fernandes 2006; Lathey 2010; Oittinen 2006) have examined name translation in children's fantasy, many focus on single languages or theoretical frameworks without systematically comparing symbolic retention and transformation across multiple linguistic and cultural systems. This study addresses that gap through a cross-linguistic analysis of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone in eleven languages, with an in-depth examination of Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, and Chinese.

The study is guided by three research questions:

How do different linguistic systems approach the translation of speaking names in terms of phonetic fidelity and semantic adaptation?

What cultural, pedagogical, and commercial factors influence these translation strategies?

How can symbolic gain/loss be systematically evaluated to assess narrative and cultural impact in translated names?

The paper contributes to our understanding of how translators mediate symbolic meaning in widely distributed children's literature by fusing theoretical viewpoints from translation studies with empirical cross-linguistic data. The study's methodology, a review of pertinent literature, and a comparative analysis that results in a culturally grounded interpretation of the findings are presented in the following sections.

2. Literature Review

"Speaking names" are lexical items whose form communicates characterisation, the-matic cues, or tonal effects (Hermans 1988; Fernandes 2006). In children's literature, they often perform pedagogical functions, signalling virtues, flaws, or moral alignments (Klingberg 1986; Oittinen 2006). Fantasy genres intensify these demands, embedding intertextual references, wordplay, and symbolic layers in names (Davies 2003).

Rowling's Harry Potter novels exemplify this onomastic density. Names such as Severus Snape combine phonetic sibilance with semantic cues of severity, while Voldemort embeds a French death reference (*vol de mort*). The challenge for translators lies in preserving both recognisability and interpretive potential for young readers unfamiliar with the source language's etymological and cultural references.

Vlakhov and Florin's (1986) taxonomy of *realia* provides a basis for classifying cultural items into transliteration, transcription, transformation, and substitution. Venuti's (1995) domestication/foreignization dichotomy frames the ideological choice between preserving the "otherness" of names and integrating them into the target culture. Skopos theory (Reiss & Vermeer 1984) focuses on communicative purpose, particularly in children's literature, where accessibility and emotional clarity are paramount (Nord 1997).

Lefevere's (1992) concept of cultural rewriting highlights how ideological and market forces shape translation outcomes, while Toury's (1995) Descriptive Translation Studies situates these within

systemic norms. In name translation, these theories converge on the tension between semantic retention and phonetic fidelity.

Existing research has identified patterns in language-specific strategies:

Western European languages often adapt names semantically to preserve narrative tone (e.g., French Rogue for Snape).

Slavic languages show mixed tendencies, with Russian often prioritising phonetic transcription for brand consistency (Oransky 2002).

East Asian languages frequently rely on phonetic transcription due to script constraints, leading to symbolic flattening (Nakamura 2010).

However, comparative studies across more than two or three languages remain rare, and systematic frameworks for evaluating symbolic gain or loss are underdeveloped. This study addresses both gaps through a cross-linguistic, function-based analysis anchored in an explicit scoring system. *The irony as a basis for verbal humour*

Irony is a powerful tool for the creation of verbal humour, the effectiveness of which is based on the linguistic notion of incongruity. This basic element of humour is evident in both irony and puns. Simpson (2004) expands on this view by pointing out that irony is the basis of satire and parody, noting that they rely on “stylistic incompatibility” (p. 46). He defines irony as the space between the literal meaning and the intended meaning (p. 46), creating a direct dissonance.

The main challenge in understanding irony is reliable identification. How do we distinguish ironic statements from genuine misinterpretations? Ross (2005) highlights the potential for misunderstanding, especially when the discrepancy between literal and implied meaning is subtle (p. 50). This fragile boundary between irony and misunderstanding highlights the complexity of deciphering ironic intent. Recognising irony goes beyond simple linguistic understanding. It requires “world knowledge” (Ross, 2005, p. 50) – a contextual understanding of language use. Indeed, context often replaces literal definitions of words, as situational application largely determines meaning (Colebrook, 2006, p. 179). Therefore, successful interpretation of irony requires a nuanced understanding of language, context and relevant background knowledge.

3. Materials and Methods

The dataset consists of 56 Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone names: 43 characters, 4 places, and 9 magical objects/creatures. Names were chosen for narrative importance, symbolic density, and cultural specificity.

Eleven target languages from four language families were analysed: Romance (Italian, French, Spanish), Germanic (German, Dutch, Swedish), Slavic (Lithuanian, Russian), and East Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Korean). Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, and Chinese are foregrounded in the main tables; others appear in the Appendix.

For clarity and depth, Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, and Chinese are foregrounded in the main tables; full comparative data for all languages are in the Appendix.

Names were categorised by narrative role: protagonists, antagonists, authority figures, comic characters, and magical objects/creatures. Translation strategies were coded as transliteration/transcription, semantic transformation, cultural substitution, or hybrid. Each was scored on a –2 to +2 scale: +2 strong enrichment, +1 partial adaptation, 0 phonetic only, –1 partial loss, –2 complete loss. Example: Draco Malfoy → Lithuanian Drakas Smirdžius (+2: retains “dragon” + adds derogatory humour); Draco Malfoy → Russian Драко Малфой (0: phonetic preservation without added meaning)

Three phases of data analysis were conducted:

1. A descriptive mapping of tactics according to narrative role and language.

2. The symbolic gain/loss is scored quantitatively.

3. Comparative interpretation that relates patterns to publishing tactics, cultural norms, and linguistic structure.

As symbolic evaluation is subjective, the author coded using published translator interviews and, when available, paratexts. One known methodological limitation is the absence of inter-rater reliability testing.

Table 1. Comparative translation

English Name	Lithuanian	Strategy	Score	Commentary
Neville Longbottom	Nevėkšla	Semantic adaptation	+2	Replaces the literal surname with a colloquial term for a clumsy person, enhancing comic awkwardness.
Draco Malfoy	Drakas Smirdžius	Semantic + morphological adaptation	+2	Retains Draco (“dragon”) and adds Smirdžius (“stinker”), intensifying negative portrayal.
Fluffy	Pūkelis	Semantic transformation	+2	Domestic, diminutive term evokes softness, creating strong irony for a monstrous creature.
Mirror of Erised	Kitrošmų veidrodis	Morphological calque	+1	Preserves the reversed spelling device and conveys “desire” meaning; slightly less elegant than the original palindrome.

Note: Table 1 summarises translation strategies and symbolic gain/loss scores.

The indispensable role of images in understanding cartoon humour: visual mode

3.1 Lithuanian vs. Russian Strategies

The Lithuanian (Alma littera, 2000) and Russian (Rosman, 2001) translations illustrate two sharply contrasting approaches to speaking names.

Lithuanian practice is characterised by morphological adaptation and semantic enrichment, reflecting a tradition in children’s literature of prioritising clarity, emotional accessibility, and didactic transparency. Zita Marienė’s Lithuanian translation generally adheres to the pedagogical orientation identified in Haris Poteris editions—favouring semantic transparency and morphological adaptation, though direct statements about her strategy are not publicly documented. The adaptations often introduce explicit evaluative cues:

Russian strategy, by contrast, relies heavily on phonetic transcription, aligning with foreignization and brand identity preservation. Translator Igor Oransky has described his aim as maintaining the author’s voice and textual rhythm. According to reporting by ABC News, critics charged that Russian translator Igor Oransky often “failed to capture the whimsy and double meaning of Rowling’s names” and instead focused on direct transliteration, resulting in what one critic called “a jumble of foreign-sounding letters. While this ensures recognisability, it often flattens symbolic layers (see Appendix Table 3).

Lithuania’s systematic enrichment adds moral and emotional signposting, consistent with national educational norms and a functionalist (Skopos) approach. Russian fidelity to phonetics aligns with a minimal translator presence and a global brand consistency commercial strategy. The one significant Russian enrichment — Волян-де-Морт — is a deliberate cultural rewriting, illustrating that deviation from phonetic fidelity occurs only when there is a clear intertextual payoff.

These contrasts underline a broader tension in children’s literature translation: whether names should act as culturally transparent cues for comprehension or remain as markers of foreignness to sustain exoticism.

This study demonstrates that linguistic systems, cultural traditions, and market forces shape translation strategies for speaking names in Harry Potter. Cultural orientation, narrative role, and linguistic affordances all influence adaptation choices. The symbolic gain/loss scoring framework offers a replicable method for assessing narrative and cultural impact. Even in globally standardised texts, local practices persist, shaped by pedagogy, culture, and commerce.

Table 2. Comparative translation

English Name	Russian	Strategy	Score	Commentary
Neville Longbottom	Невилл Лонгботтом	Transcription	0	No semantic cues; humour and characterisation are lost without contextual support.
Draco Malfoy	Драко Малфой	Transcription	0	Retains phonetics, omits evaluative connotation.
Fluffy	Пушок	Semantic transformation	+1	Soft-sounding word creates mild irony; less culturally embedded than the Lithuanian version.
Voldemort	Волян-де-Морт	Transformation	+2	Preserves French form and introduces an intertextual link to Bulgakov’s Volland, enriching cultural resonance.

Note: Table 2 summarises translation strategies and symbolic gain/loss scores.

Table 3. Comparative translation

English Name	Italian	Strategy	Score	Commentary
Severus Snape	Severus Piton	Semantic substitution	+2	Piton (“python”) preserves sibilance and reptilian metaphor, strengthening narrative foreshadowing.
Draco Malfoy	Draco Malfoy	Retained	0	Phonetic fidelity; “draco” remains transparent in Italian due to Latin influence.
Argus Filch	Argus Gazza	Transformation	+1	Retains mythological “Argus”; replaces “Filch” with Gazza (“magpie”), signalling theft metaphor.
Mirror of Erised	Specchio delle Brame	Semantic transformation	+2	Literally “mirror of desires,” fully transparent to Italian readers.

Note: Table 3 summarises translation strategies and symbolic gain/loss scores.

3.2 Western European Trends (Italian Example)

Western European translations reveal a higher tolerance for semantic substitution and metaphorical adaptation, particularly in Italian and French, where translators actively reshape names to preserve metaphorical and tonal qualities.

The Italian version (Salani Editore, 1998), translated by Marina Astroglia, is emblematic of this approach. It selectively modifies names to reinforce character traits or to retain symbolic resonance when the original meaning would be opaque to readers.

Italy's readiness to alter core character names when it enhances symbolic alignment reflects a domestication strategy rooted in the linguistic proximity of Latin-based lexicons. Where meanings are already transparent (Draco), adaptation is unnecessary; where obscurity risks loss of effect (Snape), targeted transformation is applied. This approach sits between Lithuanian's systematic enrichment and Russians' phonetic fidelity, privileging interpretive accessibility without sacrificing brand cohesion.

Table 4. Comparative translation

English Name	Chinese	Strategy	Score	Commentary
Voldemort	伏地魔 (Fúdimó)	Phonetic-semantic hybrid	+2	“Lurking demon”; reinvents French death reference with culturally resonant supernatural imagery.
Severus Snape	斯内普 (Sīnèipǔ)	Transcription	0	Accurate phonetic match; snake motif and severity connotation lost.
Fluffy	跳跳 (Tiàotiào)	Semantic transformation	+1	Means “bouncy” or “jumping,” playful tone; irony less sharp than in English.
Mirror of Erised	厄里斯魔镜 (Èlǐsī mójìng)	Phonetic-semantic hybrid	+1	Combines transliteration with “magic mirror,” partially preserving mystical function.

Note: Table 4 summarises translation strategies and symbolic gain/loss scores.

3.3 East Asian Patterns (Chinese Example)

East Asian translations face unique script-based constraints. Japanese and Korean typically use phonetic transcription, which preserves sound but strips semantic layering. Chinese, however, employs logographic characters, allowing phonetic-semantic hybrids that can partially restore meaning.

The Chinese edition (People's Literature Publishing House, 2000), translated by Ma Ainong, demonstrates this hybridisation:

Chinese employs phonetic-semantic hybrids where feasible, e.g., Voldemort → 伏地魔 (+2, 'lurking demon'), but otherwise relies on transcription. Logographic affordances enable enrichment that is unavailable in Japanese or Korean scripts.

Table 5. Comparative translation

Narrative Role	Typical Strategy (LT)	Typical Strategy (RU)	Typical Strategy (IT)	Typical Strategy (ZH)	Observations
Protagonists	Morphological adaptation (Haris Poteris)	Transcription (Гарри Поттер)	Retained (Harry Potter)	Transcription (哈利·波特)	Brand identity preservation dominates; little semantic adaptation across all.
Antagonists	Semantic enrichment (Smirdžius for Malfoy)	Transcription (Малфой)	Semantic substitution (Piton for Snape)	Hybrid (伏地魔 for Voldemort)	Antagonists receive the most enrichment; Lithuanian applies it systematically, Italian selectively, Chinese opportunistically.
Authority figures	Morphological adaptation (Makgonagalè)	Transcription (МакГонагалл)	Transformation (Gazza)	Transcription (麦格)	Authority names often remain stable; LT modifies for grammar, IT changes only if the meaning gains are clear.
Comic characters	Humorous semantic adaptation (Nevėkšla for Longbottom)	Transcription (Лонгботтом)	Occasional semantic adaptation (Gazza)	Semantic transformation (跳跳 for Fluffy)	Comic roles invite adaptation; LT leads in humorous enrichment, ZH sometimes mirrors this.
Magical objects/creatures	Semantic transformation (Kitrošmų veidrodis)	Semantic palindrome (Еиналеж)	Semantic transformation (Specchio delle Brame)	Hybrid (厄里斯魔镜)	These items are most open to transformation across all languages; symbolic play is often retained.

Note: Table 5 summarises translation strategies and symbolic gain/loss scores

3.4 Strategy–Function Correlation

Across all four focal languages, protagonists receive minimal adaptation to protect brand identity; antagonists and comic characters invite more creative rewriting; magical artefacts are the most open to transformation. Lithuanian applies enrichment most consistently, Russian the least, with Italian and Chinese in intermediate positions (see Appendix Table 6).

These role-based patterns confirm that the translation strategy is not applied uniformly but is closely linked to narrative function and market positioning. The following section interprets these findings through the lens of the earlier theoretical frameworks, examining how linguistic constraints, cultural expectations, and publishing imperatives intersect to shape the symbolic fate of speaking names in global children's literature.

4. Discussion

The findings reveal that cultural norms, linguistic constraints, and market forces determine translation strategies. Lithuanian domestication reflects didactic traditions, Russian foreignization prioritises brand fidelity, Italian selectively adapts for clarity, and Chinese opportunistically blends phonetic and semantic cues. Venuti's visibility model, Skopos theory's functional orientation, and Lefevere's cultural rewriting framework explain these variations. Symbolic gain/loss scores quantify the trade-off between phonetic stability and semantic depth.

4.1 Cultural Orientation and Venuti's Foreignization/Domestication

Lithuanian and Italian practices lean toward domestication when semantic enrichment supports comprehension or pedagogical aims. At the same time, Russian tends toward foreignization, preserving phonetic form to maintain exoticism and align with global brand identity. Chinese occupies a hybrid position, opportunistically domesticating when logographic resources allow for high symbolic impact (伏地魔) but defaulting to phonetic preservation otherwise.

These patterns support Venuti's (1995) claim that translator visibility increases in domesticating cultures, where functional or ideological priorities justify interventions. Lithuanian's consistent semantic cues (Smirdžius, Nevėkšla) signal high translator agency; Russian's phonetic fidelity aligns with a low-visibility model, reinforced by publisher mandates for brand consistency.

4.2 Skopos Theory and Reader Orientation

Skopos theory (Reiss & Vermeer 1984) illuminates how intended function governs adaptation choices. In Lithuania, where children's literature is seen as a didactic tool, names are shaped to convey moral positioning and emotional tone without ambiguity. Italian adaptations follow a more selective Skopos logic, intervening only when the original meaning would otherwise be opaque. In contrast, Russian translations prioritise global recognisability over local pedagogical clarity, and Chinese versions balance these aims with varying success depending on linguistic affordances.

The strategy–function correlation (Section 4.4) reinforces this: antagonists and comic figures — roles that benefit from overt cues — receive more adaptation than protagonists, whose names are commercially protected.

4.3 Vlahov & Florin's Realia Framework and Symbolic Retention

Applying Vlahov & Florin's taxonomy reveals that semantic transformation is the most effective method for preserving symbolic resonance, but it is unevenly applied across cultures. Lithuanian employs it consistently, Italian selectively, Chinese occasionally, and Russian rarely. Transliteration/transcription, while ensuring phonetic stability, scores low in symbolic retention unless accompanied by cultural associations (e.g., Волан-де-Морт).

The symbolic gain/loss scores underline the trade-off between brand protection and narrative enrichment: high phonetic fidelity often corresponds to semantic flattening, while substantial adaptation risks diluting global recognisability.

4.4 Lefevere's Cultural Rewriting and Market Forces

Lefevere's (1992) concept of cultural rewriting is most visible in Lithuanian and Chinese enrichments. These cases reveal how translators rein-terpret source-text symbolism to fit local moral codes, humour conventions, or mythological frames. Conversely, the Russian edition exemplifies the constraints of commercial standardisation: adaptations are rare, authorised only when they offer an intertextual or prestige gain (Volland).

This commercial filtering of translator choices aligns with Toury's (1995) systemic norms: Russian practice reflects a preliminary norm of foreignising high-profile works, while Lithuanian practice reflects an operational norm favouring didactic adaptation in children's literature.

4.5 Integrating East Asian Constraints into the Comparative Framework

The East Asian cases, particularly Chinese, show that script and phonology directly limit or enable adaptation. Katakana transcription in Japanese inherently flattens semantic layers, while Chinese logograms offer opportunities for symbolic enrichment. This linguistic-material constraint needs to be integrated into broader theories of translation strategy: Skopos-driven adaptation is not equally feasible across all scripts.

4.6 Broader Implications for Literary Onomastics

The findings confirm that speaking names operate as multi-layered cultural artefacts: they are linguistic forms, narrative devices, and brand assets at once. Therefore, translators of children's literature must negotiate three overlapping priorities — narrative function, cultural intelligibility, and commercial identity.

This study shows that these priorities are not evenly weighted across linguistic and cultural contexts, and that the translator's role shifts from mediator to curator to brand custodian depending on institutional and market settings.

5. Conclusions

The translation of "speaking names" in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone has been examined in this study in eleven different languages, with a close comparison of Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, and Chinese. Venuti's foreignization/domestication model, Skopos theory, Lefevere's concept of cultural rewriting, and Vlahov and Florin's realia framework have all been used to illustrate how linguistic systems, cultural traditions, and market imperatives interact to shape the symbolic trajectory of names in children's literature.

One of the main conclusions is that cultural orientation is a determinant. For example, Chinese uses hybrid strategies when logographic affords allow, Russian's phonetic fidelity is in line with foreignising brand preservation, Italian selectively adapts for semantic clarity, and Lithuanian's systematic semantic enrichment reflects didactic norms.

The narrative functions as a predictor: antagonists and humorous characters are most heavily modified to preserve brand identity, while protagonists are mainly left unaltered.

Linguistic affordances as constraints — Chinese logographs allow for hybrid solutions that are not feasible in Korean or Japanese scripts, demonstrating the tangible influence of orthography on adaptation decisions.

Symbolic gain/loss scoring as an assessment tool: this technique emphasises the trade-off between phonetic stability and semantic depth. It provides a reproducible way to evaluate narrative and cultural impact.

By showing that domestication and foreignization, which are distinguished by narrative role and market priorities, frequently co-exist within the exact translation, the findings muddy Venuti's binary distinction. They expand on Lefevere's concept of cultural rewriting to take into consideration commercially imposed limitations in transnational literary markets and validate Skopos theory's emphasis on function-driven decision-making.

Children's book translators serve as both brand stewards and cultural mediators. Accessibility, symbolic preservation, and market recognition can all be balanced with a strategic understanding of the relationship between linguistic affordances and narrative function.

Interpretive subjectivity is an inevitable part of the symbolic scoring process, and the level of analysis varied among the eleven languages. Future studies should examine reader reception, test inter-rater reliability, and expand analysis to later volumes to assess how translation tactics affect interpretation and engagement.

This study adds to translation studies and literary onomastics by fusing theoretical synthesis with cross-linguistic empirical evidence. It demonstrates that local translation practices continue to exist even in highly globalised, standardised narratives, influenced as much by cultural norms and pedagogical traditions as by linguistic structure and business needs.

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