

Cultural-Mythological Motifs of Heavenly Descent and the Bear Ancestor in Russian, English and Korean Literature: Transformations in Translation and Language Encoding

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the transformation of two cultural-mythological motifs typical of Russian, English and Korean narrative traditions, in particular, heavenly descent and bear ancestor. Motif is viewed not just as a structural plot unit, but also as a cluster of names, taboo substitutions, spatial verbs and kinship terms which the translator has to renegotiate. It is precisely such associations that need to be renegotiated by the translator. For contrastive analysis, the author uses the Dangun motif of the Samguk yusa, its English and Russian translations; theonyms and folk sayings from East Slavic folklore translated into English; Anglo-Saxon theonyms and the epic of Beowulf translated into Russian. The recurrent procedures are categorized as transcription, calque, explicitation, neutralization, cultural substitution, and paratext. Verticality of the cosmos is consistently destroyed when theonyms and descent verbs become genericized (god, founder, bear) and partially restored with the retention of the name along with a brief definition of its meaning.

Keywords: Translation transformations, mythological motifs, heavenly descent, bear ancestor, Dangun, Perun, theonyms, Russian, English, Korean, domestication, foreignization.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural-mythological motifs are quite common in literatures and may have equivalents in different cultures. A bear who becomes a woman and a mother of a first king can be found in any language. Whether she remains Ungnyeo, becomes "the bear-woman", *медведица, ставшая женщиной*, or is reduced to "a woman of the forest" is no longer a question of plot. It is a question of translation.¹

In all three traditions two motifs are traceable. The first is heavenly descent, where a celestial figure comes down to a mountain, an oak, or the human world and brings order. Korean this is the chain Hwanin-Hwanung-Dangun in Iryeon's *Samguk yusa* (1281). In East Slavic material, it is the sky-and-thunder complex around Perun (Jakobson 1985; Ivanov & Toporov 1974). The English tradition shows an onomastic and literary evidence. A clear example can be seen when Tiw, Woden and Thunor survive in day-names, genealogies and, at a distance, in *Beowulf* (North 1997; West 2007). The bear which is regarded as an ancestor or a tabooed being is the second motif. For example, the Korean Ungnyeo, the Slavic "medved" is a compound that already conceals an older name, and the English bear is also a substitute for the inherited Indo-European zoonym (Udolph 2021; Kroonen 2013). Comparative mythology has referred to these similarities as typological, and at times as areal (Janhunen 2003; Grayson 2001).

The third process-what occurs to the words when the motif is transferred into another literary language has still been insufficiently described: translation studies provides the relevant terminology, including borrowing, calque, modulation, equivalence and adaptation (Vinay & Darbelnet 1995); communicative as opposed to semantic translation (Newmark 1988); foreignization or domestication (Venuti 2008); and the various transformations proposed by the Russian school (Komissarov 1990). When applied to mythological vocabulary, these methods determine whether the reader in the target language perceives a cosmology or merely a fairy tale.

The questions are practical: which transformations are normally used in the case of theonyms and of the bear-ancestor figure when translating between Russian, English, and Korean? How does the translation impact the cosmological information? What can be done to save its meaning?

METHODS

Corpus

The corpus is qualitative and contrastive. Korean source: the Dangun narrative in the Samguk yusa, with English renderings by Ha & Mintz (2006) and Grayson (2001), and Russian academic and popular translations.² Slavic source: theonyms and formulae in the Primary Chronicle and East Slavic folk narrative, set against English encyclopedic and literary translations (Dixon-Kennedy 1998). English source comprises old English theonyms in day-names and in Beowulf, including modern English glosses and Russian literary translations.³

Analytical grid. Six procedures were coded:

1. borrowing or transcription (Ungnyeo, Dangun, Perun, Woden);
2. calque (bear-woman; honey-eater; Mother Moist Earth);
3. explicitation (a she-bear transformed into a woman after twenty-one days in the cave);
4. neutralization or generalization (god; founder of Korea; bear; thunder god);
5. cultural substitution (Thor for Perun; Bruin for medved'; Callisto as an analogue of the she-bear);
6. paratext: footnote, glossary, translator's preface.

RESULTS

The translation process of heavenly descent

The cosmology is considered to be a system of syntax in the Korean version of the story. Hwanin stays in heaven, Hwanung goes down to the sacred tree on Taebaek, the responsibilities of wind, rain and cloud are assigned, and Dangun is born from the

union with the transformed woman and then establishes a polity (Grayson 2001: 30-35). In most English translations the proper names are retained by transcription and the verb “descend” or “come down” is used. The vertical arrangement continues to be present. The administrative aspect of the descent is often neglected. In popular retellings the duties associated with wind, rain and cloud are replaced by “he taught people agriculture and medicine”. Thus, the role of the particular cosmological figure is depicted in terms of accomplishments of a culture hero. The Russian translations of this passage deal with the issue in their own way. In some cases they refer to the figure by such names as *Хванин*, *Хванун*, or *Тангун*. Others explain the first name and make the second part more explicit, for example: *верховный небесный владыка послал на землю своего сына* (the supreme heavenly ruler sent his son to earth.). It clarifies the sense of the phrase for the reader, but it also means losing part of the cosmological sense.

Another problem arises with regard to the Slavic thunder-god. There is an etymological link between the name Perun & Perun, meaning “thunderbolt” in Russian (Derksen 2008: 396-397). If an English translator uses the name Perun without explaining it, the English-language reader will be unable to connect it with the weather or thunder in general. This can be solved by providing a little commentary: “the thunder god Perun.”

Using a familiar figure such as Thor or Jupiter takes the translation further from the original, as Perun is then presented through the mythological traditions more familiar to English-speaking readers. The same can be seen when English texts that mention Thunor or Thor are translated into Russian. In most cases, the name is simply rendered as Top and the word Thursday undergoes a similar loss. The English name still carries the traces of its association with the theonym; on the other hand, the Russian word “четверг” has no such associations anymore. Therefore, the cultural connotation is lost at the lexical level and should be interpreted separately.

Translating the bear ancestor

The name “Ungnyeo” is fairly direct in meaning, as it literally refers to a “bear woman.” In English academic writing, the Korean name is usually retained in transcription, while “bear-woman” is added as a calque to make the meaning clear (Grayson 2001). Having both versions helps to draw the reader’s attention to the relationship between the name and the bear symbolism. If “Ungnyeo” is translated into English as “a woman” or “his wife,” this relationship is obscured, and the totemic nature of the story becomes less noticeable.

When a figure like Callisto is used for comparison, the issue arises from the fact that even though Callisto may be recognizable to people who know Greek mythology, she is part of another culture, and thus the function of the character in the Korean story cannot be entirely conveyed through the comparison.

In Russian language the name and the transformation can be expressed in several ways. The word *medveditsa* directly means “female bear,” and Russian syntax can easily describe the change from one form to another. Still, this formulation makes the story look like a traditional folklore transformation rather than status change in the Korean text. The formulation *женщина-медведица Уннё* corresponds to the original version better since it maintains both the personal name and the compound noun. In academic translation, this type of formulation helps to save the cultural meaning of the Korean text without introducing another mythological character or tradition.

The Slavic *medved* meaning “honey-eater,” and the Germanic *berô*, meaning “the brown one” could be interpreted as euphemistic names of a bear (Vasmer 1986-1987; Kroonen 2013: 59-60). If *medved* is translated literally as “bear,” the semantic meaning will be kept intact, but the tradition of using such names is not. It was done in order not to call the bear by its name directly due to taboo, but it can easily be lost in translation without an explanatory note. A similar issue arises with honorific forms such as *khoziain* (“master” or “lord”). A translator can keep the form through a calque, for example “the Master,” or use a familiar English name such as “Bruin”. It all depends on

whether the translator is preserving the original euphemistic quality of the term, or trying to give the reader something more tangible.

Calque keeps personhood; Bruin lowers the sacred register into a beast-fable

Table 1. *Recurrent transformations of the two motifs*

Item	Borrowing + gloss	Calque / explication	Neutralization / substitution
Hwanung's descent	Hwanung descended from heaven	soshel s nebes na sviashchennuiu goru	a divine prince came to earth
Dangun	Dangun (founder of Gojoseon)	Sandalwood ruler	the first Korean king
Ungnyeo	Ungnyeo, the bear-woman	zhenshchina-medveditsa Unnyo	his wife; a woman of the cave
Perun	Perun, the Slavic thunder god	Perun-gromoverzhets	Thor; the god of lightning
medved' / bear	(Medved) honey-eater	honey-eater; the brown one	bear; Bruin; zver'

The role of translation direction

The way mythological names are handled can be affected by the direction of translation. When Korean texts are translated into English, the original name is often *preserve*d, with a short explanation added when necessary, particularly in academic writing about Korean culture. Korean-to-Russian translations can follow a similar approach, although narrative texts tend to allow for more adaptation to the target language and culture. When translating from English into Russian, names of Thor, Odin, and the Russian equivalent of Voden are established. At the same time, it is not typical to preserve the mythological element in Thursday in a transparent way. Modern English translations of Slavic myths do not replace Perun and Veles with heroes from other cultures but leave the source-culture references unchanged, making it possible for the reader to recognize the meaning of the name. The morphological taboo, however, survives translation very rarely. For instance, in English translations, it is not common to render medved' by the literal translation of honey-eater unless the etymology is mentioned.

DISCUSSION

Mythological motifs are vulnerable to losing their cultural meaning in translation because they often carry more than just their literal or referential meaning. While the word “bear” refers to an animal, *Ungnyeo* and *medved* not only provide names for the creature, but convey information about its relations to other beings or cultural rules regarding naming. When the meaning of such terms gets replaced with a direct translation, a part of the mythological meaning gets lost, regardless of the smoothness of the target text.

A combination of translation methods can work better than relying on a single equivalent. For instance, keeping the original name of a mythological creature and adding a brief explanation allows the cultural meaning to remain visible while keeping the text clear for the reader. Other details can be put into a footnote or some other paratextual form of translation. This approach corresponds to the ideas of Venuti (2008) concerning the necessity of keeping the sense of cultural difference visible, while at the same time solving the problem of accessibility noted by Newmark (1988).

Cultural substitution could be seen more as an analogy than as an exact equivalent. Using names like *Callisto* to refer to *Ungnyeo* or *Thor* to refer to Perun may be effective in explaining the similarity between the mythologies in class; however, such a substitution is problematic in literary translation as it brings in the figure from another cultural tradition and thus may undermine the mythological context of the source text.

On the other hand, the similarity in mythologies cannot be a ready answer for a translator in search of ready-made equivalents. For example, the existence of bear tradition in all circumpolar cultures (Janhunen 2003) cannot suggest the substitution of the words used in their respective mythologies. In such cases, translation requires determining what elements of the source culture should be retained in the target culture and what could be expressed by means of explanations. The corpus analyzed here is exemplary rather than representative, and Korean translations of Slavic mythological works are few as

compared to translations in the other directions discussed. Thus, the expansion of the corpus could be done in order to include modern novels, children's stories, and screen translations.

CONCLUSION

Motifs of the descent from heaven and the bear ancestor do not present any significant structural challenges for translation into Russian, English and Korean. Yet some aspects of the cultural content encoded in these motifs might be missed if one translates the names, taboo-based compounds, and verbs describing vertical movement disregarding the wider context of the mythological story.

A mixed translation technique could solve the problem. It means that the theonym (ancestral name) will remain unchanged in transcription and accompanied by a calque or an explanatory phrase explaining the meaning: descent from heaven, transformation of the bear into a woman, the euphemism of "honey eater." In case when the etymological background is rather extensive to provide in the body of text, it is possible to use the footnote or any other form of paratext. While neutralization and cultural substitution are also appropriate strategies in case of retelling in the popular manner when the accessibility is the first goal, such translation procedures might minimize the cultural specificity of the source motif.

NOTES

1. Plots travel more easily than names. Jakobson (1985: 12-32) already insisted that comparative mythology must be checked against linguistic evidence; the present paper adds a third constraint: published translations, in which a motif is forced to choose a lexical form in another language.
2. English translations of the *Samguk yusa* used include Ha & Mintz (2006) and Grayson (2001). The Russian versions differ between Tangun and Hwanung versions; both are registered.
3. There are relatively few Old English sources that preserve pre-Christian theonyms (North 1997). The translations of *Beowulf* are therefore doubly burdened by having to interpret an incomplete

English pagan vocabulary and, in the case of Russian versions, by deciding how much of this vocabulary to retain.

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