TRANSLATION OF SUPERHEROES' NAMES FROM ENGLISH INTO LITHUANIAN IN THE ANIMATED SERIES *THE VENTURE BROS.*

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Abstract. In the article the focus is on the translation of superheroes' names in the subtitles of the first seven episodes of *The Venture Bros.*, a dark humour cartoon parody of the superhero genre. The aim is to see what translation strategies were used for their translation from English into Lithuanian. This kind of translation of proper names is problematic because of several reasons: (1) proper names belong to a special layer of cultural words in the source language that are usually treated as non-equivalent lexis in the target language; (2) the parody genre determines the connotations of the character names used; (3) subtitles themselves restrict a translator's choices due to the technicalities of this type of audiovisual translation. The character names included in the analysis were categorised into reoccurring character names (32) and background character names (19). Most of the former were translated by way of loan translation due to their rich connotations while background characters were mostly rendered by transcription as they are usually regular proper names rather than symbolic names with semantic or connotative value. And although some strategies were used more frequently than others, the choice of the strategy was predetermined by the contextual information of the occurrence, which leads to the conclusion that even very similar names can be translated using different translation strategies when the context is taken into consideration.

Key words: adaptation, character name, characteronym, subtitles, superhero genre, transcription, translation, translation strategies

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the superhero genre in cinematography has peaked during the recent years as blockbusters like *The Avengers* (2012), *The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005–2012), and the *X-men* saga (2000–2014) reached the theatres. The films were so successful that the comic book giants like *DC* and *Marvel* are planning to release superhero related films at least up to 2021 (Online 1). This genre, however, is fairly new in Lithuania and as such poses at least two types of challenges for translators who are to translate them into the Lithuanian language: first, challenges related to film translation (audiovisual translation) in general and, second, the ones related specifically to the superhero genre, which suggests, first of all, problems of rendering culture-specific words, especially names of the superheroes acting in the films, into Lithuanian as the target language (TL) and

retaining the connotations that these names present in English as the source language (SL).

The understanding of these challenges has prompted a selection of the object of the present study, namely, the translation into Lithuanian of the subtitles of an adult-oriented, black humour cartoon *The Venture Bros.* that depicts the adventures of the Venture family (an incompetent father and his two inept sons), their brutal bodyguard, their self-proclaimed arch-nemesis, and many other frequently reoccurring characters. The choice of this show was motivated by its unique genre as a parody of children's cartoons and the superhero genre, furthermore, it is loaded with unique superhero names which often function as satirical allusions to other popular culture characters, events or history, and as such may serve as a source of examples indicating how the translator managed (or failed) to overcome the issues of concern.

The goal of this paper is to analyse the strategies used for translation of the character names in this TV show from English into Lithuanian.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Unique culture specific references are characteristic of all languages; they are often difficult to translate. Proper names fall to the same category of culture-specific (Baker, 1992; Gill, 1998), or cultural, words (Newmark, 1988), which are sometimes referred to as realia, following the tradition started by Vlakhov and Florin (1980/2009) (see also Schäffner and Wiesemann, 2001; Robinson, 1997; Mikutytė, 2005), or even 'extralinguistic culture-bound references' (Pedersen, 2005). As it is evident that these culture-specific words are often termed differently, proper names are also treated differently, either as part of those culture-specific words or as part of a broader category of non-equivalent lexis, including cultural words, proper names, neologisms (i.e. newly coined words, slang/dialect words, taboo words, etc.) (cf. Proshina, 2008: 117). Therefore, the translation of proper names may be as complicated as that of any cultural words, and different rules of translation have to be observed in a particular TL.

Without going deep into the study of all approaches to the translation of proper names, it is important to mention that in literature four translation strategies are usually singled out for that purpose, namely, transference, substitution, translation and modification (cf. Vermes, 2003: 93–94; also Pažūsis, 2014: 47). Transference, often referred to simply as borrowing (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 2007: 17) or preservation (Davies, 2003: 73), allows to leave the names not changed in the translated text. Substitution, or cultural substitution (Nord, 2003: 214), is usually used in translation of biblical, cultural, historical proper names which have traditional equivalents in the TL. Translation, which in this article is referred to as loan translation, or calque, may be a choice in the cases of semantically motivated or transparent proper names, as their constituents may be copied into the TL according to their meaning. Finally, modification

means a complete change of a SL name in the TL and includes such sub-types as addition, omission, generalisation and the like. It is not as popular as transference, replacement by a traditional equivalent or loan translation, but the variety of sub-types it contains equals that of the other three (Pažūsis, 2014: 213).

The translation of character names, or characteronyms, poses even more problems than just the translation of proper names, because they are often loaded with semantic and/or connotative meaning, which is not easy to transfer into another culture. A detailed set of character name translation strategies is suggested by Coillie (2006: 125–130), who provides a list of 10 strategies for character name translation: (1) non-translation, reproduction, copying; (2) non-translation plus additional explanation; (3) replacement of a personal name with a common noun; (4) phonetic or morphological adaptation to the TL; (5) replacement by a counterpart in the TL (exonym); (6) replacement by a more widely known name from a source culture or an internationally known name with the same function; (7) replacement by another name from the TL (substitution); (8) translation (of names with a particular connotation); (9) replacement by another name with another or additional connotation; (10) deletion.

It is evident that the four major strategies referred to above incorporate the strategies proposed by Coillie: his can be treated as their sub-types, because they all may be placed under one of the four. However, Coillie's classification is based on the analysis of children's literature and suits mainly written discourse. *The Venture Bros.* is a TV show and the medium of the translation is subtitles, which restricts translation as to the length of the text in terms of time and the number of characters used. Moreover, there is no possibility of providing additional information in footnotes or any other similar way. Therefore, we have adapted Collie's classification by adding a few suggestions made by Proshina (2008), Pedersen (2005) and Mikutytė (2005) and have arrived at the following system of translation strategies to be used for the analysis of the translation of superheroes' names in *The Venture Bros.* (see Table 1).

Table 1 **Suggested name translation strategies**

Translation				Adaptation	
Loan Translation	Functional Analogue	Generalization/ Specification	Neologism	Transcription	Retention
				Transcription + Functional Analogue	

The translation strategies split into two major groups, those of translation and adaptation. Translation covers all strategies that are based on finding an equivalent in the TL for a name in the SL. The translation strategies are then further divided into loan translation, replacement by a functional analogue,

generalization/specification and creation of a neologism. Loan translation is a strategy used when the SL name is replaced by an equivalent in the TL (e.g. Dr. Doom – *dr. Pražūtis*). The use of a functional analogue means replacing the SL name with a different TL name that carries the same connotative meaning (e.g. Cocktease – *Koketė*). Generalization/specification is used to replace the SL name with a more general or more specific word in the TL (e.g. Britney Spears translated as *dainininkė* (singer)). Neologism is a newly created name.

Adaptation refers to strategies used for adapting a SL word or phrase into the TL, or any other means of borrowing. Adaptation can be sub-divided into Transcription and Retention. Transcription refers to adapting a SL word into the TL by changing the spelling or grammar, making it easier for the target audience to read and understand. Transcription also has one subcategory called transcription + functional analogue. It refers to instances when a name, which carries an emotional connotation in the SL, is transcribed, at the same time rendering its connotative meaning through the addition of suffixes of the same connotative value in the TL (e.g. the diminutive form of the name 'Ted', Teddy, translated into Lithuanian as *Tedukas*). Retention is a strategy when the SL name is transferred into the TL without making any changes, e.g. Britney Spears is frequently adapted into Lithuanian texts without any changes to spelling or grammatical structure.

DATA AND METHODS

For the purposes of this study, a total of 51 characters were included in the list of names to undergo the analysis in terms of translation strategy used within a certain situational and cultural context. These characters were subdivided into two groups, namely, reoccurring (32 in number) and background characters (19 in number). Characters were considered reoccurring if they were mentioned or otherwise referred to more than once in an episode or the entire series, or were actively participating in the events of the show. For example, 'Speedy' (*Smarkuolis*), who died at the end of episode 1, was treated as a reoccurring character as he was an active participant of the events and was referred to multiple times by other characters throughout the episode. Characters were classified as background characters, if they appeared only once and did not assume an important role in the events of the episode or the series, or did not appear on screen at all and were only referenced to in a conversation between other characters. For instance, 'Dr. Doom' (*dr. Pražūtis*) was treated as a background character since he never appeared in the show, the character himself being from a different series, *Fantastic 4*.

The reason for dividing the characters into reoccurring and background characters was to obtain more accurate results and a less biased analysis of the translation strategies as the choice of strategy used might have been heavily influenced by the significance of the character in the show and in reference to

other characters. Moreover, the frequency of a particular character's name might have influenced the choice of the translation as the name had to fit in the limiting space of the subtitles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen from Figure 1, the prominent strategy used for translating names was transcription, one of the sub-strategies of the adaptation: 22 out of 32 (72%) names of reoccurring characters were transcribed or partially transcribed (i.e. at least one of their names or a part of the name was transcribed). Transcription was also the main strategy used for rendering background characters as 16 out of 19 (84%) names were transcribed or partially transcribed.

Loan translation strategies were used for nearly half of reoccurring characters' names (15 out of 32, or 47%) and only five out of 19 (26%) background characters' names. Functional analogues were used for the translation of only five out of 32 names. This strategy was not used for any of the background character names. No instances of neologism or transcription + functional analogue were found in translations of the background characters, while retention was only used for background characters. Two instances of transcription + functional analogue and one instance of neologism was observed among reoccurring characters, but none among background characters.

It is also important to note that the diagram contains no instances of either generalisation or specification used for the translation of the actual character names of the show. Generalisation was used for the translation of the name 'Patty Hearst' (a kidnapping victim who sided with her kidnappers), but she is not an actual character in the show, but rather a reference to Stockholm syndrome and was translated as such (*Stokholmo sindromas*).
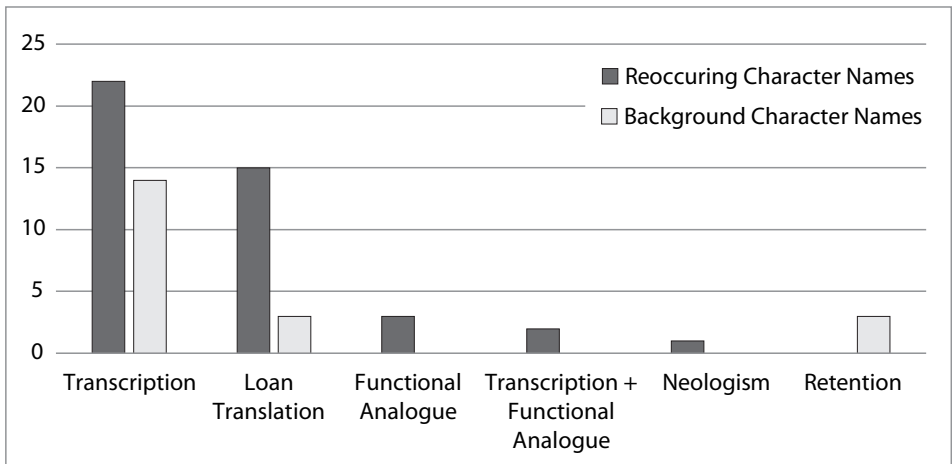

Figure 1 **Breakdown of translation strategies used for rendering character names**

In many cases, however, more than one strategy was used for the translation of the name of a single character. For example, the name 'Molotov Cocktease' was translated as Molotova Koketė, which combines both transcription and functional analogue strategies. In the course of the study it became evident that the translation strategies used for superheroes' names in *The Venture Bros.* varied from case to case depending on the role of that character and the context of the situation they appeared in. Each of the respective strategies will be further discussed in more detail.

TRANSCRIPTION

Although transcription was the most frequently used translation strategy, the reason of this choice varied from case to case. For example, the surname of the Venture family (translated as *Ventūra*) could have been translated as *Rizika* ('risk') or even *Avantiūra* ('risky adventure'), at least partially preserving the semantic meaning of the name. However, having in mind that the object of the translation was a TV show, and the translated text is available to the audience via subtitles, the visual proprieties of the show had to be taken into consideration. In the animated series *The Venture Bros.*, the name *Venture* represents not only the members of the family but the whole company under the Venture name ('The Venture Industries'). Therefore, the letter 'V' carries a significant symbolic meaning in the show and frequently appears as the logo of 'The Venture Industries' as well as a visual allusion to the Venture family. Moreover, the Venture brothers, Hank and Dean, frequently make the 'V' symbol with their hands and exclaim 'Go, team Venture!', which has become an iconic attribute of the show. Having in mind the symbolic nature and visual representation of the letter 'V', as well as the contribution of the 'V' symbolism to the plot, transcribing the name 'Venture' as *Ventūra* is a more reliable way to assure that the target audience receives visual references that are not explicit, especially since there is no satisfactory word in the Lithuanian language starting with the letter 'V' that could replace the word 'Venture'.

Another reason why the majority of names were transcribed is strongly related to the fact that many names were regular names rather than symbolic, which stems from the dual nature of the parody genre and the characters themselves. *The Venture Bros.* is known for both exaggerating and domesticating characters and events to achieve parody and humour, which often results in characters having dual personalities: an exaggerated hero/villain personality that often conforms to the clichés of the hero genre, and (often a clichéd) domesticated 'regular' personality that often helps to highlight the absurdity of the hero/villain personality. Likewise, the show gives a mix of characters with both hero/villain names and regular names. For instance, the surname 'Venture' (although transcribed and not translated due to the reasons discussed previously) functions as a typical hero name, while the first names of the family members are regular names: Thaddeus, Dean, Hank, and Jonas. Therefore, although the animated

series focus on heroes and villains who are known to have meaningful/symbolic names, regular names were just as frequent, making transcription a common strategy for name translation that helps highlighting the satirical nature of the show.

However, while transcription does not mean any semantic loss, some connotative loss might have occurred in the interpretation of certain aspects of the show under analysis. *The Venture Bros.* is a parody that satirizes old cartoons from the 1960s–80s. Animated series from that era are known to be less sensitive to racial or cultural issues and are usually dominated by Caucasian characters or racial stereotypes (Online 2). *The Venture Bros.*, as a parody of such cartoons, frequently follows the pattern of its parody target, therefore, many of the characters are named with typical, if not stereotypical, Caucasian American names, for example, Steve Summers, Jeanie Tom, Mike, Todd, Bud Manstrong, etc. Such a feature becomes especially evident in episode 4, where the main characters encounter 'Orange County Liberation Front', a revolutionary group represented by members of a suburban community who decide to revolt as they are unhappy about the changes in their community. All the members of the revolt have names, which conform to the typical Caucasian suburbia stereotype (for example, Debbie, Peggie, Chad, Tod, or Ted). All such names were transcribed, resulting in a possible connotative loss in meaning, as there are no Lithuanian alternatives for the connotations due to a different demographic constitution.

LOAN TRANSLATION

Names of characters that bear significance to the plot are more likely to have a connotative or semantic meaning, especially since the hero genre is known for having character names that directly refer to the character's abilities, importance or other features. Good examples outside of *The Venture Bros.* universe would be Batman from the *Batman* series, Spiderman from the *Spiderman* series, Rogue from the *X-men* series, etc. Characters of *The Venture Bros.* series with similar names are Action Man, The Monarch, Dr. Girlfriend, Dr. Venture, etc. Thus, the connotation attached to a name appears to be the most important reason for changing it (Collie, 2006: 129). This statement is supported by the results of the frequency of translation strategies used as 47% of reoccurring characters' names or parts of their names were directly translated, while in comparison, only 26% of background characters' names or parts of their names were directly translated.

The table below shows the list of superheroes' names with semantic and/or connotative meaning and the translation strategies used for the names that were not transcribed. A gray font marks that part of the name which was transcribed, thus, not included in the translation strategy column. Slash '/' separates different names used to refer to the same character and the translation strategies used respectively. '+' indicates that more than one strategy was used for the same name. If the same strategy was used for all the names of a character, the translation strategy is stated only once.

Table 2 **The translation of superheroes' names semantic and/or connotative meaning**

English	Lithuanian	Translation Strategy
The Monarch	Monarchas	Loan translation
Dr. Girlfriend	Dr. Mergina	Loan translation
Speedy	Smarkuolis	Functional analogue
Baron/Underbheit	Baronas/Underkąsnis	Loan translation/ retention + loan translation
Catclops	Katinakis	Neologism
Girl Hitler	Panelė Hitleris	Loan translation
Manic Eightball	Maniakas Aštuonetas	Loan translation
G.U.A.R.D.O	SARGAS	Loan translation
Sasburger/Sasquatch	Sniegiukas/Sniego žmogus	Functional analogue/ loan translation
Molotov Cocktease	Molotova Koketė	Functional analogue
Pumpkin/Triana	Moliūgėlis/Triana	Loan translation
Action Man/Rodney	Nuotykių ieškotojas/Rodnis	Functional analogue
Captain	Kapitonas	Loan translation
Richard/Sally Impossible	Ričardas/Salė Neįmanoma	Loan translation
White	Baltas	Loan translation
Giant Boy Detective	Milžinas Berniukas Detektyvas	Loan translation
Anna Bizzy Bee	Ana Bizė Bitė	Loan translation
Nat King Kobra	Nat Karalius Kobra	Retention + loan translation

Loan translation was used in those instances when the semantic or connotative value of the name was understandable and a direct equivalent could be found to produce the same effect as in the SL. For instance, the name 'The Monarch' was translated as *Monarchas* since it has a direct equivalent in Lithuanian for this butterfly species, which is the super-villain theme of the character. Similarly, 'Captain' and 'Dr. Girlfriend' were translated as *Kapitonas* and *dr. Mergina* respectively. The name 'White' was translated as *Baltas* since the character is an albino, however, a certain connotative loss did occur in the latter case due to the fact that 'White' is also one of the most common surnames in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The ambiguity of whether the character's name is a symbolic hero name or just a regular surname is lost in the TL.

FUNCTIONAL ANALOGUE

In translation functional analogues were fairly common, too. For example, the name 'Molotov Cocktease' was translated as *Molotova Koketė* using the said strategy. In other words, since there was no satisfactory way to translate the surname literally, a different word, *Koketė* ('coquette'), that has similar connotations in the Lithuanian language was used, thus maintaining both the connotative value of the name as well as the verbal pun referencing to Molotov cocktails. Another interesting case of functional analogue is the translation of 'Sasburger', an affectionate name for Sasquatch (also known as the Big Foot). Since the Lithuanian equivalent for 'Sasquatch' is *Sniego žmogus* ('snowman') the affectionate form of the name was translated by adding a diminutive suffix to the Lithuanian translation – the name was translated as *Sniegiukas*.

One more instance of functional analogue worth noting is the translation of 'Action Man'. The character's name was translated as *Nuotykių ieškotojas* ('adventurer'). The literal translation of action man would be *Veiksmo žmogus*, however, such a translation sounds very unnatural and does not evoke any of the connotations of the SL. The translation *Nuotykių ieškotojas* evokes similar connotations as the source name; therefore, it was chosen as the Lithuanian equivalent. Although the connotative value of the name was transferred in the translation, there is a likely loss of a certain cultural reference. While in *The Venture Bros.* series Action Man is a character in its own right, he is also a part of a sequence that pays homage to David Bowie's song *Ashes to Ashes*. The sequence pays a tribute to David Bowie by acting out the lyrics of his song in a plane crash sequence, where Major Tom plunges to his death with a spaceship. Both Action Man and Major Tom are characters in the song and in the TV show. Translating the names, especially 'Action Man', which loses its original form, is likely to make the original reference more difficult for the Lithuanian audience to understand. However, such a loss in intertextuality is likely to be unavoidable as the song is not translated into Lithuanian, thus making it next to impossible for the TL audience to understand the reference (unless they already speak English and know the song).

NEOLOGISM

There was only one case of neologism, in other words, a case when a completely new word was created. The name 'Catclops' was translated as *Katinakis* ('cat-eye'). 'Catclops' is a very peculiar character in episode 3, he is an underling of one of the villains, and has a cat in place of his eye, thus his name 'Catclops' is a reference to Cyclops, both the mythological creature and a comic book character for the series *X-men*. Although the name could have been translated as *Katklopas,* thus maintaining the original form, however, it was decided that the name sounds rather cumbersome in Lithuanian, and makes it difficult to understand the pun since the part *Kat-* which references to cats might be hard to understand or might be interpreted as another word. Although *Katinakis* seems to be a more explicit

way to translate the meaning of the name, there is a certain connotative loss: the reference to the mythological creature as well as a comic book character becomes unrecognisable. However, the translation *Katinakis* holds a greater advantage compared to *Katklopas* because it is easier to read and pronounce – an important difference in the case of subtitles.

RETENTION

Retention was the only translation strategy that was used for background character names but not for reoccurring character names. The most prominent example of retention is the name 'David Bowie'. In the TL the name was adapted without any changes to the spelling or grammatical structure of the name. The main motive behind such a choice of translation was that David Bowie is a real living person, a well known musician. In the series *The Venture Bros.* he is also given the role of The Sovereign – the head of The Guild of Calamitous Intent, a super villain organisation. The name is left unchanged to make it easily recognizable for the TL audience as, clearly, David Bowie and his work are among the motives of the animated show.

Another interesting case of retention is the name 'Nat King Cobra', which was translated as *Nat Karalius Kobra*, where the first name 'Nat' was left unchanged when rendering from SL to TL. This name is a play of words and a reference to a real person, an American musician Nat King Cole. One might argue that a better translation strategy would have been to use retention on both first names to keep the reference clearer (*Nat King Kobra*) like in the example with David Bowie. However, the translator decided to translate the name 'King' for a more dramatic effect, which aids another reference hidden in the name. Although the character himself never appeared on the show, it was clear from the extravagant outfits his henchmen wore and their manner of speaking that Nat King Cobra is also a reference to the super-villain from the animated series *G.I. Joe* – Commander Cobra. Having in mind that the age of the target audience is 15–30 years, it is more likely that the audience would recognize the reference to the animated series rather than the musician because Nat King Cole died in 1965 and is no longer a widely remembered figure in today's popular culture. The name *Nat King Kobra* would sound confusing and cumbersome in Lithuanian, while the name *Nat Karalius Kobra* sounds more like a typical super-villain name, which perfectly fits the parody nature of *The Venture Bros.*

The translation of the name *Baron Underbheit* is also a notable case. The name 'Baron' was simply translated as *Baronas*, however, the surname *Underbheit* proved to be a difficult case to translate. As many other super villain names, *Underbheit* holds a strong symbolic meaning. The character *Baron Underbheit* is a ruthless dictator of his country Underland. European and German traditions are one of the main villain themes of this character as throughout the episodes there are several references to both Nazi dictatorship and medieval European feudalism and folklore. The character himself speaks with a German accent.

Another important feature of the character is his jaw made out of iron. Clearly, the name *Underbheit* is a play on words because although the name appears to look like a German sounding name, it is a typical super villain name where the first part 'Under' refers both to the German and European origins implied as well as underworld from European folklore, while the second part 'bheit' is a reference to his jaw (it is pronounced the same as the English word 'bite'). Therefore, combining retention of a Germanic prefix *under-* and loan translation of a German sounding root *-bheit* [bait] as *kąsti* 'to bite' or *kąsnis* 'a bite' to keep reference to the jaw, the German and European cultural connotations were preserved. The result of the translation of the name was *Baronas Underkąsnis.*

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the present study was to analyse the strategies used for the translation of character names in the series *The Venture Bros.*, a dark humour cartoon parody of the superhero genre. Their translation proved problematic because of several reasons: (1) proper names in general belong to a special layer of cultural words in the source language that are usually treated as non-equivalent lexis in the target language; (2) the parody of the superhero genre determines the connotations of the character names used; (3) the medium of translation is subtitles, which also place certain restrictions on a translator's choices due to the technicalities of this type of audiovisual translation. All these problems must be overcome if a successful delivery of the planned effect is expected.

For the purposes of convenience of analysis, all the character names in the show were categorized into reoccurring and background characters. The study has revealed that the most frequent translation strategy used for both reoccurring and background characters was transcription. Such a result is mostly related to the fact that a significant part of the names were regular proper names. Regular proper names, in their turn, were more frequent among background characters, which tend to have fewer symbolic names or names with connotations, unlike reoccurring characters that tend to have names based on cultural references and word play. The high frequency of transcription can also be attributed to the dual nature of *The Venture Bros.* series as both a super-hero themed TV show and a parody of such. As most characters assume their superhero identities (which usually have names that carry connotative meanings) and their regular ones (which usually have regular Anglo-Saxon names), transcribing regular names aids the effects of parody and humour.

The second most frequent translation strategy was loan translation, which was mostly dominant among reoccurring characters. Such a choice of translation strategies is motivated by the fact that the majority of reoccurring characters have symbolic names, which represent the superheroes' powers or origins, and in the case of *The Venture Bros.* series, are also a tool for parody. Therefore, transcription was more frequently used when rendering background characters' names from

English into Lithuanian as background characters were less likely to have names that carry significant connotative or semantic meaning.

And although some strategies were used more frequently than others, there was no significantly consistent pattern as to why and when a particular strategy was used. The choice of the strategy seems to be predetermined by the contextual information of the occurrence, which leads to the conclusion that even very similar names can be translated using different translation strategies when the context is taken into consideration.

The use of any translation strategy was heavily influenced by the contextual information provided in the show, the cultural knowledge expected from the target audience, the visual aid complementing the subtitles, and the technical restrictions of subtitling. Therefore, there were cases where very similar types of names were translated using different strategies. The lack of consistency in translation strategies used may be related to the fact that the golden and silver ages of comic books were lost in Lithuania, which prevented the development of the translation patterns to aid the translation of the superhero genre.

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