

# Importance of Geographical Names for Interpreters

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1. Cover Page
2. Outline of the Presentation

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining me today.

I am Hiromi Sodekawa, an associate-professor at Aichi Prefectural University of Japan. But as an experienced broadcast interpreter rather than a teacher today, I will discuss that professional interpreters also need to be aware of the importance of geographical names when they translate politically sensitive matters. This is because certain words and notations stand for a specific stance on the issues.

In order to demonstrate the sensitiveness of geographical names, I will pick 3 cases: one from Japan, Asia, another from Europe and South America, and the last one, which is not related to territorial disputes.

3. Broadcasting Interpreter

Before getting into the subject, let me briefly explain what professional broadcasting interpreters do in Japan.



I am not sure whether or not this category exists in other countries. A public broadcasting corporation called NHK in Japan has regular news programs of UK's BBC, US's ABC and Bloomberg, as well as other main

broadcasting stations of China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, India, Australia, Germany, France, Spain, Russia, Brazil, Turkey, and Qatar's Aljazeera with Japanese translation in voice overs. These programs demonstrate different views and perceptions on the global issues by each country or each broadcasting station. Japanese viewers enjoy them in their own language. On top of it, NHK and other private broadcasting corporations air, for example, breaking news of terror incidents, US President's speeches such as inaugural address, and players' or head coaches' victory speeches of Football World Cup, Tennis Grand Slams and so forth with simultaneous Japanese translation. Japanese viewers enjoy the programs through the translation. I have yet to find similar attempts to these in other countries' and regions' news broadcasting.

In addition, NHK has a variety of foreign language educational programs. These suggest how much Japanese people have interest in and passion for other countries and regions, cultures, and languages. That does not necessarily mean that they are excellent at foreign languages, though.

This picture (in Slide 3)<sup>1</sup> shows one shot of Hong Kong TVB's news screen. My name as an interpreter is written in Chinese characters at the lower left.

#### 4. Senkakus vs. Diayus vs. Tiaoyutai

Then let me discuss the first case as mentioned above. It is about a dispute over a group of uninhabited islands, known to the Japanese as the Senkakus, to the



Chinese as the Diaoyus, and to the Taiwanese as the Tiaoyutai. This issue is vehemently debated mainly between Japan and the mainland China, rather than among three entities, while Taiwan's status itself is not universally agreed in the international community. Many countries accept that it belongs to China, but some keep diplomatic relations with Taiwan. In this presentation, therefore, let me focus on just the two-way dispute between Japan and China.

The picture (in Slide 4) shows

where they are located. Many people including Japanese may not really know of this area.

When translating stories related to the islands dealt with by other countries' broadcasting stations, such as Hong Kong TVB, which I have shown in Slide 3, interpreters are instructed to juxtapose these two names to the Japanese audience, especially at NHK, even though, for example, Hong Kong TVB does not utter a word of the Senkakus. Japanese government does not acknowledge the existence of the "territorial dispute" over these islands, saying that they unequivocally belong to Japan. Period. This is because they purchased the three islands of the Senkakus from a Japanese private owner in 2012. Although this nationalization process caused a huge opposition from China, broadcast interpreters in Japan must not use the word "territorial" on this issue. All they can say is a "dispute over the islands". They are not prohibited to say what kind of disputes they are having. It may not sound much different and be just a nonsensical trick to the other countries' viewers. But neither of Japan nor China do want to budge an inch over the islands so that interpreters are demanded to take an extra care. Therefore, they are not allowed to put the words in the original language into the target language as they have just heard.

##### 5. A Cover of *The Economist*

This is a cover of September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 Issue of *The Economist*, with a caption:



It points out tiny unpopulated islands with a response from a turtle, "Sadly, yes." Its message is clear: waging war is ridiculous. Chinese legend says turtles have spiritual powers including foreseeing the future, because they have longevity. We hope their prediction will not come true<sup>2</sup>.

## 6. Falkland Islands vs. Malvinas

The second case involves the isolated and sparsely-populated Falkland Islands, a British overseas territory in the south-west Atlantic Ocean. The windswept and almost-treeless territory is made up of two main islands, East Falkland and West Falkland, as well as hundreds of smaller islands and islets.

It is still the subject of a sovereignty dispute between Britain and Argentina, who waged a brief but bitter war over the territory in 1982.

At that time, Argentine forces landed

on what they call the Malvinas to stake a territorial claim. But they were ejected by a British military task force. The British prime minister at that time, Mrs. (later Baroness) Thatcher, enjoyed the reputation of being an iron lady. Argentina insists it has a right to the islands, because it inherited them from the Spanish crown in the early 1800s. It has also based its claim on the islands' proximity to the South American mainland.

However, Britain asserts their legitimacy on a basis of its long-term administration of the Falklands and the principle of self-determination for the islanders, who are almost all of British descent. So, the residents want to belong to Britain.

This is a map I have found through googling. As you see, the atlasmap exhibits only the Falklands, not the Malvinas, suggesting the map takes a pro-British stance for this matter.



## 7. Territorial Disputes

These two cases are only a part of the territorial disputes in the world, which are more than 50 cases in total. Why are they created?

- 1) National boundaries are drawn in the map of the world, but not all the countries accept them. Even though internationally recognized, some of them cause

territorial disputes and other troubles among neighboring countries sharing the borders.

- 2) Main reasons for the disputes are i) natural resources, ii) arbitrarily defined borders by the third parties, iii) power of balance changing in the global circumstances, and iv) domestic political situation changing or ethnic conflicts occurring in the associated countries.
- 3) Territorial disputes should be resolved diplomatically, but they are often settled militarily as well.

Consequently, geographical names demonstrate clearly each party's claim over the territorial disputes.

## 8. Burma vs. Myanmar

The third case has nothing to do with territorial disputes. "Should it be Burma or Myanmar?" is a question.

Both words in fact mean the same thing: Myanmar is the formal term whereas Burma is the informal everyday term. So, when people are writing for publication, they are likely to use Myanmar, but for speaking they use Burma. Its ruling military junta renamed the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, a year after the suppression of a popular uprising. Rangoon also became Yangon. It reflects the notion that literary language is master, and adopting the traditional, formal name is an attempt by the junta to break from the colonial past. The



change was recognized by the United Nations, and by countries such as France and Japan, but not by the United States and Britain. The British government supports

Burma's democracy movement which does not accept the legitimacy of the military regime to change the official name of the country, and prefers the “old” colloquial name Burma. So, while working for BBC World Service as an interpreter, the author was instructed to use Burma rather than Myanmar. However, following a democratization process initiated in 2010, BBC began to use Myanmar and Yangon around 2014. Myanmar became no longer a symbol of the military regime.

## 9. Conclusion

As discussed here, we can find what notations are accepted or used reflects dynamics of domestic or global power politics of that time. They are constantly changing.

While language and interpreting skills are essential for professional interpreters, interpreters also need to have basic general knowledge in every field, in the mother tongue and the target language, regardless of what subjects are being interpreted. But they are not enough. When it comes to politically sensitive issues in the world, interpreters are required to take an extra care of choosing words for translation.

Interpreters cannot be either activists or representatives of any particular ideology or mediators or negotiators of conflict. But they might be influencing a discussion, even though they are expected to be neutral and objective in translation. Therefore, to stay more neutral and be a better communicator, interpreters need to know the significance of the matters of notations.

## Notes

1. The numbering of chapters refers to the number of power point slides.
2. Japan faces other disputes such as the Northern Territories and the Kuril Islands to the Russian, and Takeshima to the Japanese and Dokdo to the South Korea. These are considered disputed territories. Japan negotiates with Russia to return at least two of the Northern Territories which have been taken and occupied by Russia since the end of WWII. This largest pending concern prohibits Japan and Russia from signing a peace treaty.

As Takeshima or Dokdo, it is de facto South Korea's because South Korea controls it. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no one was interested in these uninhabited rocks. But it turned out that they have a considerable amount of natural gas underneath. Then it became an issue.

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