

# PROPER NAMES: Features of Ambiguity in a Multicultural Context

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the experiment was to prove, via production and perception tests, the comprehensibility of proper names. We were interested not only in their recognition in fluent speech, but also in the relationship that may exist between these significant bearers of information, and furthermore in their interpretation in different languages. This work focuses on the most obvious distortions and degrees of understanding the significant facts when talking about prominent sportsmen/sportswomen in authentic English, Spanish, French and Czech TV announcements.

**Keywords:** proper name, production, perception, acoustic distortion, interpretation

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Ziel des Experiments bestand darin, mittels Produktions- und Perzeptionstests verschiedene Grade des Verstehens von Eigennamen zu überprüfen. Dabei standen sowohl das Erkennen der Namen im Redefluss im Vordergrund, als auch die Beziehungen, die zwischen diesen wichtigen Informationsträgern bestehen können, sowie auch ihre Interpretation in verschiedene Sprachen. Die Studie behandelt deutliche Entstellungen und verschiedene Grade des Verstehens wesentlicher Informationen in Äußerungen über prominente Sportler und Sportlerinnen in authentischen englischen, spanischen, französischen und tschechischen Fernsehnachrichten.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Even if the importance of the translation and interpretation of proper names is often reflected in papers at international conferences [1], the majority of them often point out that there is still a lack of publications specialized in their sound forms. Moreover, with regard to this domain, the so called “smaller” languages are often omitted and the problem of such interpretations often seems to be ambiguous with relevance to international context.

As stated above, the distortion of proper names during either their perception or production has been analysed in previous studies (some of them took into account personal names, geographical names, even in some cases names of important international institutions). However, such experiments brought only preliminary results. In consequence, all these facts led to the creation of more detailed tests, the findings of which are presented in this paper.

The main goal of this “multilingual” study was to target the degree of reliability in production and perception of proper names in general, and by this means find out the most frequent distortions of personal proper names pronounced in authentic TV announcement. Four languages were included: French, Spanish (European variety), English (British and American varieties) and Czech (as a representative of the so called “small” languages).

## 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIMENT

### 2.1. Corpus

The basis of analyzed audio materials comes from TV commentaries in English, French, Spanish and Czech (specifically commentaries on the tennis tournament in Paris 2006 at Roland Garros). Special attention was paid to the sound quality and to various types of announcements that can be fully compared. Therefore, only one certain match, in which the same names of sportswomen and sportsmen appeared, was commented on at one time.

### 2.2. Generating the corpus

#### 2.2.1. General statements

Due to regular announcements on parallel TV channels, it was possible to generate several examples in which the same name occurred in different contexts (we must point out that all the tennis players from the chosen language groups participated in the tournament). The type and

character of each recording was chosen and organized with the aid of native speakers and phoneticians or people trained in phonetics with proficient knowledge of the given language. Bearing in mind the necessity to preserve a unified methodological approach, when analyzing all the aforementioned languages, specialised interpreters (of all of the four languages) were frequently consulted in order to select the most relevant items. The outcome of perception tests and their evaluations were also accounted for.

### 2.2.2. *Description of the procedure*

The chosen commentaries were taken from the total sum of all audio materials in order to suit our aims the most. With relevance to the given methodological approach of this experiment, we created a corpus that in total lasts 336 minutes. First of all, we generated a series of different types of tests, the main aims of which were to objectively examine the greatest problems during the production of personal proper names in multicultural communication. This was done by the analysis of authentic English, French, Spanish and Czech commentaries on the famous grand slam tennis tournament in Paris 2006 at Roland Garros.

Subsequently, to gain representative and relevant data in relation to their communicative significance, it was necessary to create tests that would show both the production and perception of each of the names. That is why we decided to let trained professionals (for each language, we chose 4 interpreters whose mother tongue was Czech, all of them have gained a Master's Degree and have at least 1 year professional working experience) interpret similar French, Spanish and English corpus into the Czech language. The final version, where the information core was always the same and the informational background fully comparable, showed the following parameters:

- The English corpus consists of only 30 names incorporated into 17 sequences of utterances [2], [3].
- However, the non-English (French, Spanish and Czech) corpora are approximately twice as long (27 sequences of utterances) and each has an additional 30 other names (i.e.  $30 + 30 = 60$  names in total) [4], [5].

The number of given names corresponds to the number of sound realizations of any proper name

included into the corpus; and there were up to 3 sound realizations of any proper name in each sequence of an utterance. All the sequences, extracted from the original commentaries, were 8 minutes in total and that for each of the above-mentioned languages. Then, these extracts were copied into a larger file so that each of these samples appeared consecutively twice. The subsequent sample was followed by a pause of double duration of the original sequence of the utterance. In this time slot, the participants were asked to interpret what they had heard.

This method was chosen with respect to our previous experience; gained from interpreting a larger number of proper names incorporated in a more extensive sound material. Moreover, at the very beginning of this experiment, even experienced professional interpreters were not able to detect and interpret proper names in fluent speech after one listening. One can add that all the professional announcers were fully comprehensible. However, the rhythmic and melodic structure of the commentaries as well as their faster tempo were the most problematic areas that interpreters should, nevertheless, be able to deal with.

### 2.2.3. *Final corpora*

In total, 990 potential sound realizations of proper names within 4 different languages were studied. The findings were as follows:

- There were 150 potential sound realizations of proper names in ENGLISH (the original version + 4 interpretations into Czech);
- There were 300 potential sound realizations of proper names found in FRENCH (the original commentary + 4 interpretations into Czech);
- There were 300 potential sound realizations of proper names in SPANISH (the original commentary + 4 interpretations into Czech);
- 240 sound realizations of proper names in CZECH (extracted from 4 professional commentaries) – and that in order to compare professional commentary with interpretations from Spanish, English and French.

As shown above, isolated sound realizations of proper names included in the corpus were examined. As attention was paid especially to the

degree of the impact of context on the distortion or reinterpretation, it is obvious that some of the proper names appeared several times.

### 3. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. General features of proper names within interpretations

Sequences of utterances spoken in each of the above mentioned languages were interpreted by professionals experienced in the domain into the Czech language, and then compared with recordings of Czech professional announcers. Within the realizations, the different degrees of comprehensibility were sorted as follows:

- a) fully comprehensible;
- b) partly or totally distorted (difficulties in recognizing word boundaries – mainly between the first name and surname; gender confusions;
- c) incomprehensible.

To verify the methodology and to ensure the objectivity of all the measurements, the Czech interpreted material was divided into several parts corresponding to „the language groups“. Later, only proper names of famous sportsmen/sportswomen were extracted. The original sound realization (generated from original TV announcements) of each proper name was compared with possible interpretations (pronunciations) of the given language. This method was identical for all the involved languages. In the end, all the interpretations from Spanish, English and French were put together and were confronted with Czech professional pronunciations. This procedure enabled an objective auditory analysis of each sound realization of the proper name.

All recordings were made in the Cool and Sound Forge programmes; all the measurements were carried out in the Praat programme.

Afterwards, all these realizations were included in perception tests and that according to the original language (i.e. French, English, and Spanish). Their comprehensibility was judged by a group of professional phoneticians together with native speakers and people trained in phonetics with professional knowledge of the given language.

#### 3.2. General results

From the total number of 600 potential sound interpretations of proper names (we do not take

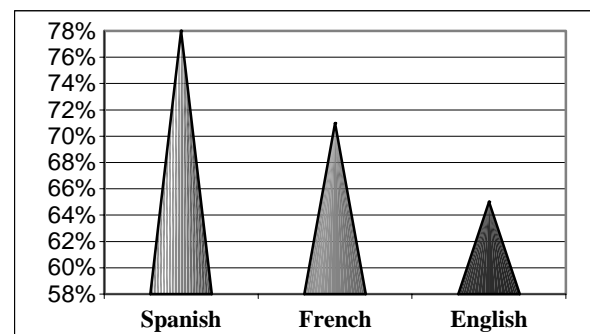
into account the Czech announcers and original commentaries) we can conclude that:

- a) 72 % (432 cases) were detected as fully comprehensible;
- b) 15 % (92 cases) were judged as partly or totally distorted;
- c) 13 % (76 cases) were found as incomprehensible.

It is particularly interesting to observe the differences in repeated interpretations of the same proper name where the capturing depended not only on the character of the original recording but also on the context (several cases have shown that even if the name is well interpreted once, it does not mean that the interpreter is able to detect it again).

To sum up, as shown in Figure 1, the Spanish interpreters proved as most competent in detecting proper names in fluent speech (78 %), second came French interpreters (71 %) and English interpreters had the worst result (65 %).

**Figure 1:** The percentage of fully comprehensible proper names during the interpretation into Czech from each of the given languages.



#### 3.3. The most common errors

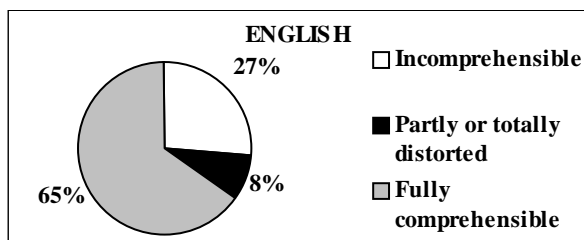
The most common errors can be found at the segmental level (i.e. incorrect capturing of individual phonemes within the syllables of the name), but also in inappropriate rhythmic and melodic realizations of names in the given context in which the boundary between the first name and surname was not distinguished (Marian Cic instead of Mario Ancic, Dina Rasafina instead of Dinara Safina, etc.). This then led to gender confusion (sportswoman instead of sportsman or vice versa), or to the interpretation of only one part of the name (either the first name, or the surname). In addition to the aforementioned mistakes, the lack of general knowledge resulted in misinterpretations: Gaël Monfils was literally translated as “my son” (due to phonetic resemblance to the French words “*mon*

*files*”) or as “game office” (due to phonetic resemblance to the English words). Another extreme example can be found in the interpretation of the stadium “Roland Garros” which was taken several times for a tennis player. On the other hand, the names of Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic were relatively comprehensible.

### 3.4. Concrete language groups: results

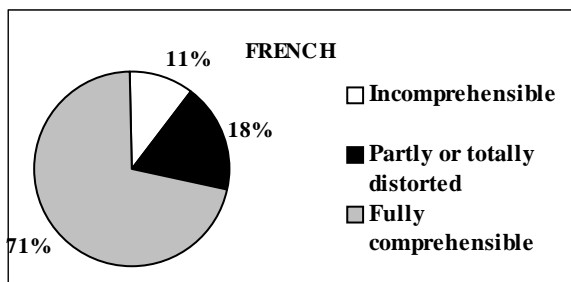
As it is shown in Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4, all the groups of interpreters (whose mother tongue was Czech) had problems with the distortion of proper names. Not even the names of the most famous players were always clearly detected. Even though, the interpreters, whose mother tongue belongs to the Slavonic group of languages, did not manage to gain a higher percentage in the interpretation of Slavonic proper names.

**Figure 2:** The degree of comprehensibility of proper names interpreted into Czech from English.

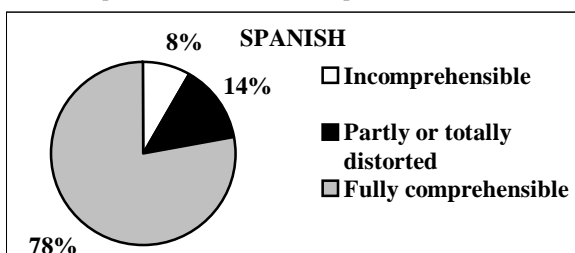


Interpreters into English (Figure 2) had the highest percentage of incomprehensible names; interpreters into Romance languages (Figures 3 and 4) had a big score in distorted proper names.

**Figure 3:** The degree of comprehensibility of proper names interpreted into Czech from French.



**Figure 4:** The degree of comprehensibility of proper names interpreted into Czech from Spanish.



## 4. CONCLUSION

This study is part of a long term research and represents a preliminary experiment. Its outcome can be generally divided into two main areas:

1. from the theoretical point of view:
  - a) analysis of discrepancies in the production and perception of generally well-known proper names within the sports domain,
  - b) means of eliminating the most frequent misunderstandings in multicultural communication.
2. From the practical point of view: preliminary suggestions for the teaching of phonetic structures in L2 acquisition.

Furthermore, this study proves that it is not only important that professional interpreters gain a proficient knowledge of their working language – study its phonological structure, but also it is vital to gain an overall grasp of the phonological systems of those world languages that one can encounter [6]. Without such expertise interpreters can not sufficiently perform their profession in an international context. The results clearly indicate the necessity to incorporate the teaching of pronunciation of proper names into the syllabus designed for interpreters. From these findings, it is evident that an additional study should be conducted on the various forms that well-known proper names can have in the interpretation of professional announcers of various nationalities.

## 5. REFERENCES

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**Acknowledgements :** This work was supported by research project GAČR 405/05/0049.