

Grammar 13—Translating Multi-Word Names

Many two-part names such as “book store” have direct two-part equivalents in Russian. But translating them is not as simple as translating each of the words into Russian. We must first analyze the phrase and understand the contribution which each word makes to the meaning.

Modifier Noun and Actual Noun

When an English name consists of two nouns as “book store” does, you will often find that the second noun (in this case “store”) tells us what the thing is in broad terms and the first noun acts as a modifier (in this case to tell us what kind of store). If there is a similar term in Russian, the 'real' noun will be a noun and the modifier noun will be either be an adjective or be in the genitive case. Some examples:

English	Russian	Which Literally Means
book store	книжный магазин	bookian store
Kingdom Hall	Зал Царства	Hall of Kingdom
construction site	строительная площадка	construction ground
clothing store	магазин одежды	store of clothing

Place Names as Modifiers

When the modifier noun is the proper name of the place where the thing named is located, it should be in adjectival form:

Brooklyn Bridge	Бруклинский мост
Moscow Zoo	Московский зоопарк
University of Pennsylvania	Пенсильванский университет
Boston Tea Party	Бостонское чаепитие
Columbia University	Колумбийский университет

The last example is tricky. If we did not know the history we might assume that the word “Columbia” is an arbitrary label. In fact it is an archaic alternative name for the United States of America and hence describes the university's location.

Human Names as Modifiers

When the modifier noun is the name of the thing's discoverer or of a national hero, it should be in the genitive case. In the names of institutions and public facilities the word “имени” (meaning “of the name”) is frequently included.

Pushkin Theater	Театр имени Пушкина
JFK Airport	Аэропорт имени Джона Кеннеди
Alzheimer's Disease	болезнь Альцгеймера
Saint Lawrence River	Река Святого Лаврентия
Hudson Bay	Гудзонов* залив

*The word “Гудзонов” is actually the possessive form of “Hudson”, not the genitive. This possessive form is archaic and hence is not used in names of recent origin.

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Names of Time Periods as Modifiers

When a name contains the name of a day or an hour it should be in adjectival or genitive form:

Sunday meeting	Воскресное собрание
Easter Island	Остров Пасхи
lunch break	обеденный перерыв

Two Actual Nouns Acting as Nouns

In a few cases one of the nouns is the proper name of the thing such as “The Connecticut” and the other is a generic noun which has been added to prevent confusion.

Connecticut River	река Коннектикут
Moscow River	река Москва

Here despite what we might think the words “Connecticut” and “Moscow” are not modifiers and do not describe the locations of the rivers. They are the actual names of the rivers. The generic noun “река” (River) has been added to make it clear that we mean the rivers rather than the settlements which later borrowed their names.

Arbitrary Labels

Sometimes one of the nouns is an arbitrarily selected label. This label is not the name of a national hero or a discoverer and does not meaningfully describe the thing. It is often intended to invoke a poetic or patriotic ideal. In these cases the generic noun comes first and the label comes after. The label is frequently enclosed in quotes. Generally the label remains in the nominative even when the phrase is declined.

Apollo Theater	театр «Аполлон»
The Red Rose Cafe	кафе «Красная роза»
The USS Constitution	корабль «Конституция» Соединённых Штатов
Space Shuttle Columbia	космический челнок «Колумбия»

Adjectives After the Noun

In a few cases in English the adjective comes after the noun. Be careful to not get confused and mistake the adjective for a second noun. This is particularly easy in the case of the adjective “general” which is used in the military as if it were a noun as an abbreviation for “general officer”.

English	Meaning	Russian
attorney general	highest attorney	генеральный прокурор
court martial	military court	военный суд

Conclusion

As you see, English-language names of places and establishments are often missing information which is required to render them correctly into Russian. Research may be required before one can understand the structure and meaning of the name.