



Issues in the English Translation of University Names in East Asia

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Abstract

The names of universities in English-speaking countries can be broadly categorized into two basic formats: 'X University' and the 'University of X'. When the only modifier in the name is a non-place element, the 'University of X' format must be used. When the only modifier in the name is a place, both 'University of X' and the 'University of X' are legal choices, but the "University of X" format has a higher formality and priority. However, most of the universities in East Asia, whether they are named after places or non-place elements, choose the 'University of X' format when translating their names into English. This phenomenon primarily arises from the fact that East Asian languages can express both ordinary modifier relationships and broad possessive relationships using the 'X+N' format. As a result, East Asian universities tend to adopt this format when translating their names, rather than opting for a structure that aligns more closely with English language conventions.

Keywords

English translation of university names; characteristics of East Asia languages; noun phrase structure

1. Introduction

This paper addresses two issues: the difference between "X University" and "University of X" formats and the preference for the former in East Asia. In China, discussions on related issues are linked to standardizing English translations of university names (Zhang & Huang, 2022; Li, 2022; Yang & Li, 2022 among others). The related studies highlight that English-speaking universities mainly use the "University of X" format, while in China, they mostly use the "X University" format. In order to align with the prevalent conventions in English-speaking contexts, it is advised that Chinese universities should adopt the "University of X" format (Xiao & Chen, 2018; Zhang & Zou, 2022). These views have been discussed in China for a long time and have had a significant impact. However, within the English-speaking academic community, this seems to be a relatively superficial issue that is not subject to rigorous debate. Our research has not uncovered any academic papers that engage in a meaningful discussion of the distinction between 'University of X' and 'University of X'.

But firstly, there are notable differences in the use of the "X University" and "University of X" formats between the UK and the US, indicating that these two formats cannot be freely interchangeable and must have differences. Secondly, the reasons behind the widespread adoption of the "X University" format by most universities in East Asia as their English translations are also worthy of further investigation.

To narrow the scope of discussion, this paper only includes university English names or translations with singular modifiers, such as "University of California" and "Harvard University". In contrast, examples of multi-element modifiers include "Massachusetts Institute of Technology," "Hong Kong University of Science and Technology," "Seoul National University," etc. The English names of these universities simultaneously include the region they are located, the subjects they focus and other elements.

2. Modifiers and Formats of University Names

In terms of naming formats, there are two basic formats for English university names with singular modifiers: "X University" and "University of X". Meanwhile, in terms of modifiers, they can be divided into two basic types: universities named after places and universities named after non-place elements. Through investigation and analysis, we found that there is a certain correspondence between the attributes of the modifiers and the formats "X University" and "University of X".

2.1 Universities Named After Non-place Elements

Universities that use non-place elements as singular modifiers tend to use the "X University" format, which seems to be a mandatory grammatical rule. The most common non-place modifiers are named after individuals, such as Harvard, Stanford, and Yale. The "X University" format for universities named after individuals is a grammatical rule widely observed in English-speaking countries, the only exception to the 'X University' format found is the College of William and Mary. We also found a variant is seen for universities named after individuals, such as Queen's University in Canada. The English-translated names of universities after people in East Asia also follow the 'X University' format, such as Sun Yat-sen University and Sejong University.

Universities sometimes use historical and cultural words, or "characteristic words" as their names, such as Temple University in the United States has the religious modifier "Temple". In East Asia, Rikkyo University in Japan means "establishing education", which is originally a verb phrase, but lost the original syntactic attributes when translated into English. For this discussion, we'll consider "Rikkyo" as a noun. Similarly, Chung-Ang University and Fudan University are also considered to be modified by a singular characteristic word. Whether in East Asia or in English-speaking countries, the English names of universities with characteristic words as the only modifier all use the "X University" format.

2.2 Universities Named After Places

In the English-speaking world, university names with places as the only modifier usually use the "University of X" format, such as the University of Oxford, University of Cambridge in the UK; the University of Chicago, and the University of California in the US; the University of Toronto and University of Ottawa in Canada; the University of Melbourne in Australia; and the University of Auckland in New Zealand, all of which fall into this category. According to the QS2024 university ranking list, there are 104 such schools in the UK and the US.

Meanwhile, it is also very common for university names after places to employ the 'X University' format, such as Lancaster University and Newcastle University in the UK; Boston University and Princeton University in the US. According to the QS2024 university rankings, there are 72 such schools on the ranking list in the UK and the US. In East Asia, most universities use the "X University" format when translating their names into English. The 2024 QS University Ranking shows that only the University of Tsukuba, the University of Ulsan, the University of Seoul, and the University of Tokyo use the "University of X" format in Japan and South Korea. In mainland China, only the University of Jinan, the University of Sanya, and the University of South China do the same.

3. Linguistic Basis Behind Name Formats

Research into university names in East Asia, the UK, and the US revealed two basic rules: when a non-place element is used as a singular modifier, the format "X University" is invariably used. When a place is used as the modifier, there are two legal formats: "University of X" and "X University". This raises three questions: (1) Why must university names with non-place elements use the "X University" format? (2) Why do universities with place modifiers have two formats? (3) Why do UK and US universities tend to use the "University of X" format?

Firstly, the names of individuals or other non-place elements within the name of the university can only serve as a pure attribute, modifying the head noun "university". In line with the syntactic characteristics of English noun phrases, when a simple attribute is used to modify the head noun, the format typically used is "A+N", as opposed to "N of A" or other formats. In other words, the reason why "Temple University" cannot be referred to as the "University of Temple" is analogous to the reason why "history book" is not referred to as a "book of history".

In the case of university names that employ places as modifiers, both the "X University" and the "University of X" formats are in use. It is our contention that when the "X University" format is employed, the place is regarded as a

mere attribute, establishing a modifier-head relationship with the term "University". But the "University of X" format, which is more prevalent in the UK and the US, suggests a broad possessive relationship between the place and the term "University". This implies that the university is associated with this region or with the government of this region. In accordance with the principles of English syntax, when a broad possessor (N_1) and the possessed (N_2) combine, the " N_2 of N_1 " format is predominantly employed, whereas " $N_1 + N_2$ " or alternative formats are typically avoided. Consequently, the designation "California University" is inappropriate for a university that belongs to the state of California.

It is important to note the difference between broad and narrow possessive relationships. In English, narrow possessive relationships are typically indicated by the construction " N_1 's N_2 ". From the perspective of possessive relationships, we can also explain certain exceptions pertaining to universities named after individuals. For example, the College of William and Mary in the United States employs the "University of X" format, as the institution was established by King William III and Queen Mary II of England at the time. As rulers, "William and Mary" are thus entitled to be regarded as the proprietors of the college, rather than mere "modifiers". Similarly, the use of the terms "Queen's University" and "King's College" in Commonwealth countries indicates that the monarch, in their capacity as head of state, is regarded as the proprietor of those institutions. In contrast, John Harvard, despite his role as the founder of Harvard University, is not the proprietor of the institution. Consequently, he can only be referenced as a modifier in the format "X University".

By analyzing the semantic types of university name modifiers and combining the different semantic relationships of simple modification, broad possession, and narrow possession with the corresponding rules of English noun phrase structures, it is possible to summarize the rationale for the choice of university name formats in the following table.

Table 1. Linguistic Basis for the Choice of University Name Formats

Formats	Semantic relationships	Example noun phrase	University name
A N	simple modification	history book, toy store	Harvard University
N_2 of N_1	broad possessive	Duke of York, map of China	University of California
N_1 's N_2	narrow possession	Ann's house, Tom's car	Queen's University

4. Differences Between "University of X" and "X University"

Even though the "University of X" and "X University" formats are both legally permissible when using places as modifiers for university names, we believe that there must be some differences between them.

The initial discrepancies arise from the correspondence between two distinct noun phrase structures and the nuances of simple modification and broad possession. The "X University" format shows the place is used as a simple attribute, while the "University of X" structure implies a broad possessive relationship, suggesting that the university belongs to the area or the local government. It can thus be observed that most UK and US universities using the "University of X" format are public. Conversely, some universities deliberately avoid the "University of X" format to downplay the possessive relationship. New York University and Boston University are two esteemed private universities, both of them chose the "X University" format to diminish the implicit possessive relationship.

In addition to the differences in possessive relationships, our findings show that although "University of X" and "X University" are both legally recognized, there are differences in formality between them. In the UK, both naming formats apply to the same university, a search of the official website yielded 13,700 results for "Oxford University" and 30,900 for "University of Oxford." Similarly, Lancaster University is also known as the University of Lancaster, and Newcastle University is the University of Newcastle. However, archives and documents show that "University of X" is the only format used in official documents and legal instruments. This shows that "X University" could be a colloquial designation but the official name in the legal sense must be "University of X".

Thirdly, the "University of X" has always been the preferred option. In the US, "University of X" and "X University" are two different institutions, just as "Miami University" and "University of Miami" refer to two separate universities. The majority of states in the US have more than one university system, except in a few states. To avoid repetition, different formats must be used for different universities in the same location. Our survey shows that the "University of X" has always been the earlier established of the two institutions of the same name. For instance, the University of Pennsylvania was established in 1791, Pennsylvania State University was founded in 1954, the

University of Michigan was established in 1817, and Michigan State University was founded in 1955. The "University of X" format is the default for US universities named after places, if an older institution uses this format, a newer institution must choose an alternative, such as "X University".

In conclusion, in the United Kingdom and the United States, when a place is used as a modifier in the name of a university, although there are two legal formats, namely "University of X" and "X University", the status of the two formats is not equal, and the semantics they express are also different. The designation "University of X" suggests a broad possessive relationship between the place and the institution.

5. Characteristics of East Asia Universities

In contrast to the situation in the United Kingdom and the United States, the overwhelming majority of universities in East Asia, irrespective of whether they are public or private institutions, and regardless of whether they are named after a specific place or modified by a non-place element, have adopted the 'X University' format.

(1) University names modified by non-place elements

- a. Tsinghua University
- b. Fudan University
- c. Keio University
- d. Hallym University
- e. Sejong University
- f. Meiji University
- g. Sun Yat-sen University

(2) University names modified by place

- a. Peking University
- b. Korea University
- c. Kyoto University

It can be observed that universities in East Asia that are modified by non-place elements all use the "X University" format. This format is determined by the rules of English modifier-head structure. However, it remains unclear why the overwhelming majority of universities in East Asia that are named after places also employ the "X University" format in lieu of the default format "University of X".

The answer may be that, although English generally employs two distinct syntactic formats to convey "pure modification" and "broad possession," in the languages of the three East Asian countries, these two distinct semantic relationships are expressed using the same linguistic form, namely, "X+N."

(3) Pure modification

Chinese:	lishi shu	wanju dian	qinghua daxue
Japanese:	歴史書	おもちゃ屋	カリフォルニア大学
Korean:	□□□	□□□□□	□□□□□
English:	History book	Toy store	Tsinghua University

(4) Broad possession

Chinese:	yueke gongjue	zhongguo ditu	dongjing daxue
Japanese:	ヨーク公	中国地図	東京大学
Korean:	□□□□	□□□□	□□□□□
English:	Duke of York	Map of China	Tokyo University

The fact that East Asian languages express two distinct semantic relationships with the same language form has also prompted universities in East Asia to adopt the "X University" format for the translation of their names. This translation method, which directly transfers the word order characteristics of East Asian languages to English while ignoring the language rules and pragmatic habits of the target language, is essentially pidgin English, which is obviously not an appropriate translation method. Especially in the case of public universities funded by the government, it is syntactically wrong to translate "Tokyo University" into "Tokyo University" due to the broad possessive relationship between the place and the university, just like it is inappropriate to refer to "Duke of York" as "York Duke".

6. Conclusion

There are two main formats of university names: 'University of X' and 'X University'. The former format indicates a simple modification between X and the central word, while the latter can express a broader possessive relationship between the region and the school. Non-place elements, e.g., individual names, cannot be possessors of schools, so universities name after non-place elements must use the "X University" format. In the case of universities named after places, although "X University" and "University of X" are both grammatical options, the "University of X" format is the default option with a stronger formality.

Most East Asian universities use the "X University" format for their English names. This translation method is shaped by the noun structure of East Asian languages, where both simple and broad possessive relationships can be expressed in the "X+N" format, so the same word order is used in translation. The "X University" format is grammatically accurate but from a semantic and pragmatic perspective, it is neither formal nor appropriate because it fails to reflect the possessive relationship between the place and the institution. It is our contention that universities in East Asia that are derived from places should be translated into the "University of X" format. This proposal is not based on rigid grammar rules but on respect for the linguistic culture and linguistic habits of the target language users.

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