

JAPANESE LANGUAGE LEARNING DYNAMICS THROUGH POETIC TRANSLATION

Mihaela IOVU

mihaela.iovu7@gmail.com

Moldova State University, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova

Résumé : Cet article explore la dynamique de l'apprentissage du japonais à travers la traduction poétique, en mettant en évidence l'interaction entre les caractéristiques linguistiques et les nuances culturelles. Le processus de maîtrise du japonais comprend des défis uniques tels que l'absence de catégories de genre et de nombre dans les noms, l'absence de degrés comparatifs dans les adjectifs, et la constance des formes verbales indépendamment du sujet. Cette grammaire complexe est enrichie par des éléments culturels comme le *kiigo* (mots saisonniers) et le *kiireji* (mots de coupure), qui ajoutent de la profondeur et du contexte aux formes poétiques telles que le *haïku* et le *tanka*. L'apprentissage du japonais nécessite une approche progressive, allant de la maîtrise des bases du *hiragana* et du *katakana* à l'engagement avec les *kanji* avancés et les structures syntaxiques complexes. La traduction, en particulier de la poésie, sert d'outil efficace pour approfondir la compréhension linguistique. La traduction implique non seulement le transfert de sens mais aussi la préservation du rythme, du ton et de l'essence culturelle incarnée dans le texte original. Les stratégies de traduction de la poésie japonaise impliquent souvent des choix critiques, tels que l'accentuation de l'imagerie visuelle ou le maintien de la structure syllabique, reflétant la flexibilité et la profondeur de la langue. Les défis de la traduction de la poésie japonaise mettent en lumière des caractéristiques linguistiques uniques, de l'utilisation des *on* (unités phonétiques) dans le comptage des syllabes à l'incorporation d'idiomes et de références culturelles. En naviguant dans ces complexités, les apprenants acquièrent une appréciation profonde des dimensions esthétiques et culturelles de la langue, transformant l'étude du japonais en une expérience dynamique et enrichissante. Cet article approfondit ces aspects, fournissant des informations sur la manière dont la traduction poétique peut améliorer le parcours global d'apprentissage de la langue.

Mots-clés : langue japonaise, traduction poétique, *kiigo*, *kiireji*, *on*, *haïku*, *tanka*, stratégies de traduction, dynamique linguistique, difficultés de traduction.

Introduction

Learning Japanese is not just about getting the grammar and vocabulary right; it is also about immersing oneself in the cultural and aesthetic layers that shape the language. Traditional methods often prioritize structured exercises and conversational practice, but integrating cultural elements like poetry can provide a more holistic approach to language learning. Poetry isn't just a collection of words; it embodies the rhythms, emotions, and philosophies of a language. For Japanese, poetry offers a gateway to understanding how the language operates in its most artistic and refined form.

Translating poetry can be an incredibly effective learning tool. Translators engage deeply with the language, delving into each word, phrase, and cultural reference to convey the essence of the original text in another language. This process involves more than just transferring meaning; it requires engaging with syntax, connotations, and even the musicality of the language. Through translation, learners actively participate in shaping how the language is interpreted and understood.

As translators navigate the complexities of poetic expression, they gain insights into the structure and cultural foundations of the original language. For example, understanding the nuances of seasonal words (*kigo*) in haiku or the use of contrast and layering in tanka poems helps learners grasp concepts unique to Japanese. This close reading and reinterpretation deepen their understanding of grammar, idioms, and stylistic elements while also highlighting expressions unique to Japanese that might not have direct equivalents in other languages.

Translation also forces learners to make choices, often prioritizing certain aspects of the original poem. In translating a Japanese haiku, one might choose to emphasize visual imagery, maintain syllable structure, or capture emotional resonance, leading to different interpretations and a greater appreciation of the language's flexibility and depth. In this way, translation is not just a mechanical exercise but a process of discovery, where learners continually refine their understanding of the language. Moreover, translating Japanese poetry requires critical thinking about word choice and meaning, exploring multiple layers of interpretation, and understanding subtle cultural references that shape the text. This exploration develops language sensitivity, moving beyond literal translations to capture the spirit of the original. The challenges encountered in translating poetry can often illuminate language features that might be overlooked in conventional language studies. Through this active process of interpretation and re-creation, learners develop a more nuanced understanding of Japanese, enabling them to communicate with greater depth and cultural awareness.

By engaging with poetry in this way, language learners also encounter the beauty of Japanese aesthetics, such as the concept of *mono no aware* (the gentle sorrow associated with the transience of things) or *wabi-sabi* (the beauty found in imperfection). Understanding these aesthetic principles enriches the language learning process, connecting linguistic skills to cultural appreciation. Translators come to realize that words are not isolated; they are imbued with cultural significance, historical context, and emotional weight.

Therefore, learning through translating Japanese poetry offers an immersive and dynamic approach that fosters not only language skills but also cultural fluency. It challenges learners to go beyond standard textbooks and actively engage with the living language, making them both language learners and cultural interpreters. As we explore the dynamics of Japanese language learning through poetic translation, we will delve into different forms of traditional and modern Japanese poetry, examine various translation

approaches, and demonstrate how translating poetry can transform language study into a truly enriching experience.

Specific features of Japanese language

Given the approach to translating in this study, it is necessary to briefly mention some peculiarities of the source language, Japanese, as some of these aspects become obstacles in the context of translation. From a syntactical point of view, the important grammatical details are: nouns do not have gender and number categories, adjectives do not have comparative degrees, and verbs do not have a grammatical person category, so verbs maintain their form regardless of the subject. Another interesting feature is that Japanese pronouns sometimes are generally absent, unlike in Western languages where they play an essential role; Japanese sentences can be fully understood without pronouns, and this is possible only through context.

Regarding the poetic translation of Japanese texts, it was mentioned in A. J. Pinnington's work *Kinds of Ambiguity: Reflexions on English Translations of Japanese Vers.* Due to the gap between the structures of the English and Japanese languages, information is conveyed using different linguistic means. For example, content that is intentionally emphasized in English is expressed through grammatical structures in Japanese. In this case, the translator must convey the poem's rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, tones, onomatopoeia, sound symbolism, and other means of expression. (Pinnington, 1988:52)

Japanese offers a diverse range of pronouns that can be chosen to fit the context, each linked to different stylistic registers. For example, the personal pronoun "I" has various forms: watakushi (very formal), watashi (formal), washi (used by elderly people), atakushi (feminine), boku (informal, masculine), atashi (informal, feminine), and ore (very informal, masculine). The language also has a complex honorific system, requiring different forms of address based on social status, making it appear highly context-dependent to foreigners. The line between text and context in Japanese becomes blurred.

A haiku, seen as a model of the aesthetics of silence, employs ellipsis and polysemy to create multiple layers of silence with an extreme economy of words. What the poet leaves unsaid is as significant as what is stated. "A few words", "an image", and "a feeling".

The use of mimetic words in various literary genres, including haiku—the shortest poetic form in world literature—reflects this auditory symbolism. Here's a haiku by Issa (1763-1827): "ō-botaru, yurari-yurari to tōri keru." (A huge firefly, Waveringly, Passes by.) In the Japanese dictionary, yurari is explained as someone swaying slowly. Attempting to translate "yurari-yurari" into Romanian, one might opt for "tremurător", "fluctuant", "șovăitor", "vibrant", "neliniștit", "nedecis", etc. All these are conceptual lexemes, whereas "yurari-yurari," undoubtedly describing a discontinuous motion, imitates the fleeting rhythm through auditory suggestion. Japanese onomatopoeia not only suggests feelings of freedom or dignity but also a kind of joy: enjoying your time without any rush (Frentiu, 2017: 51)

Until the fifth century, the Japanese did not have their own writing system. In the sixth century, with the advent of Buddhism, they adopted Chinese characters (kanji). As kanji are monosyllabic ideograms and Japanese is polysyllabic, adapting these characters to Japanese was necessary. Initially, they retained the sound of kanji while discarding their meaning. In the ninth century, the kana syllabary was created and adopted, preserving the Chinese character but discarding its meaning.

Given the supreme spiritual occupation for men was studying Chinese language and literature, it fell to the imperial court ladies to create the first significant works of

native literature, facilitated by the kana syllabary. This period saw the perfection of Japanese calligraphy.

Japanese poetry, viewed from its beginnings as “the language of passion and emotion” (Ueda 1991: 2), emphasizes the ethical duties and virtues of the translator. A translator must approach their work with integrity, not hiding difficulties or failures; with modesty, recognizing that literary translation is an approximation; and with pride, knowing that their delicate work contributes to the intellectual and emotional enrichment of people and the moral closeness of nations. Translators must confidently use their skills and the resources of both languages, undisturbed by the opinions of some linguists or the challenges of translating the ineffable (Frentiu, 2017: 78).

Translation is both a science and an art, requiring discipline and rigor alongside artistic inspiration, as one searches, chooses, and discovers the right word for the language being translated from and into. The translator becomes the expected craftsman with a logical and analytical mind, whose intuition and sense of both the mother tongue (into which they translate) and the foreign language (from which they translate) testify not only for themselves but especially for others—the author and reader about the interpretation of the text presented for reading. Any attempt to understand by interpreting the meaning of a particular text demands from the translator extreme sensitivity and a mandatory inward look at the cultural dimension offered by that text, with particular attention drawn to the cultural identity elevated by literary translations. Inevitably, we stray from the original but return to it after each word.

Most translators think that focusing solely on the vocabulary and grammar of a text is sufficient, believing the text will then handle itself. However, achieving the full meaning of a text involves more than just understanding the basic definitions of words and the relationships between sentences. It also requires addressing the cultural context. Translators must, therefore, thoroughly understand the ways of thinking and feeling within the cultures and civilizations of the languages they are translating between. Without grasping the fundamental elements identified by the “semantic fields” method and recognizing each culture’s unique attributes that shape and individualize languages, successful translation is unattainable. (Frentiu, 2017:138).

Learning Japanese is a fulfilling and structured journey that unfolds in several distinct stages, each presenting unique challenges and milestones that learners must navigate. Progression through these stages can vary greatly among individuals, influenced by factors such as previous language experience, preferred study methods, and overall dedication to the process. In the **beginner stage**, learners focus on foundational elements, such as pronunciation, simple greetings, and basic grammar structures, including the mastery of hiragana and katakana. Typically, this stage lasts around 3 to 6 months and involves approximately 150 to 300 hours of consistent study.

As learners advance to the elementary stage, they expand their vocabulary and begin to grasp more complex sentence structures, including the introduction of kanji. This stage also requires an additional 3 to 6 months of dedicated effort, with similar time commitments. Progressing further, students enter the intermediate stage, where they engage more deeply with Japanese media and culture, learning around 1,000 kanji characters. This stage lasts about 6 to 12 months, allowing learners to practice conversational skills and gain exposure to Japanese literature and television.

Once learners reach the advanced stage, the focus shifts to refining language skills and understanding cultural nuances. Mastery of 2,000 kanji characters and specialized

vocabulary becomes essential, demanding 1 to 2 years of intensive study. Finally, the proficiency stage represents a culmination of this journey, where learners achieve near-native fluency and engage in complex conversations and professional environments. Achieving overall proficiency in Japanese typically requires 2 to 5 years of committed study, totaling approximately 1,500 to 3,000 hours. This journey calls for patience, perseverance, and a genuine interest in both the language and culture, ultimately leading to a rewarding mastery of the Japanese language.

Translating poetry from Japanese is a complex endeavor that demands not only advanced language proficiency but also an appreciation for the cultural subtleties embedded in the text. Mastering the intricate grammar, rich vocabulary, and kanji characters is just the beginning; one must also develop a keen sensitivity to the emotional depth and thematic elements present in the original work. This requires translators to delve into the cultural and historical context, understanding how language shapes meaning within its cultural framework.

Moreover, the art of poetic translation is an ongoing process of discovery and growth. Advanced learners often reach this level of proficiency after years of immersive study, yet true mastery involves continuous refinement of their skills. Engaging with native speakers, consuming a wide range of Japanese literature, and participating in workshops can further enhance their abilities. Translators must find the delicate balance between staying true to the original text while crafting a version that resonates with readers in the target language, making it a rewarding but challenging journey. Ultimately, translating poetry serves not only as a linguistic exercise but also as a bridge that connects diverse cultures through the beauty of language and emotion.

The difficulty of Japanese materials can be categorized into several levels, the same thing can be boded regarding the difficulty level of texts that are being translated. At the very easy level, there are children's books such as “いないいないばあ” (Inai Inai Baa), which is a popular book about peek-a-boo, simple haikus like Matsuo Basho's “古池や 蛙飛び込む 水の音” (Furuike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto), taking into account that there are already tens of variants of translation there are a lot of sources for comparison, basic vocabulary lists covering everyday objects or common phrases like colors and numbers, and short proverbs like “猿も木から落ちる” (Saru mo ki kara ochiru – “Even monkeys fall from trees”). At the easy level, learners can engage with simple dialogues from beginner-level textbooks, light-hearted anime subtitles from series such as Doraemon, and elementary school songs like “赤とんぼ” (Aka Tombo – “Red Dragonfly”).

Moving up to medium difficulty, short stories such as early chapters of Haruki Murakami's “ノルウェイの森” (Noruwei no Mori – “Norwegian Wood”), children's news articles, and easy manga like “よつぱと!” (Yotsuba!) are appropriate. Challenging materials include classic literature like Natsume Sōseki's “吾輩は猫である” (Wagahai wa Neko de Aru – “I Am a Cat”), traditional poetic texts like 和歌 (Waka) and 連歌 (Renga), and Japanese folktales such as “桃太郎” (Momotarō – “Peach Boy”).

Difficult materials involve academic papers, modern novels like Haruki Murakami's “1Q84” and legal documents. At the very difficult level, classical literature like “源氏物語” (Genji Monogatari – “The Tale of Genji”), philosophical texts by thinkers like Nishida Kitarō, and technical manuals in specialized fields require advanced comprehension skills.

So, although poetic texts may be of various difficulty level because of the imagery, figures of speech, uncommon word order for beginners, multiple meanings of the kanji (characters) being used it is necessary that the translator possesses not only basic vocabulary but also social and cultural knowledge.

For instance, the difference in word order between English and Japanese is a major cause of interpretation and translation issues in areas such as speed, retention, and naturalness.

Japanese poetic language

Japanese poetic language is a unique and intricate form of expression that reflects the rich cultural and historical tapestry of Japan. Characterized by its use of *kireji* (cutting words) and *kigo* (seasonal words), this poetic tradition emphasizes brevity, emotion, and a deep connection to nature. Through various forms, such as haiku, tanka, and renga, poets convey complex feelings and ideas using subtle imagery and sound play. This linguistic artistry not only captures the essence of Japanese aesthetics but also invites readers to engage with the beauty of language and the world around them.

“If haiku are generally written in a single column in Japanese, why are they usually translated into three lines? A good question, to which there are several possible answers. Primarily, it is because the three-part syllable division in Japanese haiku becomes clearer in English when the lines are divided. In addition, traditional haiku often include pause marks called *kireji* (cutting words) that help to mark rhythmic divisions.” (Addiss, 2012: 14)

Kireji introduces a pause in the poem’s flow, allowing readers to reflect on the earlier lines and evoke an emotional response. It often marks a shift in perspective or theme, creating a contrast between images or ideas, thus deepening the poem’s meaning. *Kireji* can add layers of emotional nuance, tension, or invite interpretation. In haiku and tanka, it acts as a structural tool, separating the two contrasting parts of the poem. Some of the most common examples are:

- や (*ya*): Used to indicate a pause, often translating to “and” or “or” in English, but more as a soft interjection.
- かな (*kana*): Expresses wonder or a sense of contemplation, often conveying a wistful tone.
- ぜ (*ze*): Adds emphasis, usually in a more assertive or informal context.
- な (*na*): Often used to convey a sense of affection or admiration, creating a softer tone. (Addiss, 2012: 61)

Another very interesting element of the Japanese language, unique to haiku, is the seasonal words, *kigo*. This term is composed of two characters: 季語, which means season and vocabulary, word, or language. Thus, *kigo* represents the multitude of lexemes used to describe seasons in haiku. Seasonal words are closely tied to the way of thinking, so changes are directly linked to mentality. Therefore, changes in our perception of the world around us lead to changes in our associations, and the words we associate with a particular season also change. Many poets have ventured into the world of haiku and discovered new realms and horizons. From this perspective, new seasonal words, new *kigo*, can be born. This activity can be observed in the historical example of Basho, who embarked on a great adventure to increase the cultural value of haiku and introduced new vocabulary into the haiku world.

Matsuo Basho is one of the most renowned figures not only in the history of Japanese literature but also in world literature, and his work can be endlessly analysed thanks to the surplus of kigo and symbolism it contains. Here are some examples of elements associated with each of the four seasons:

- Winter:** Cold, fallen leaves, admiring the snow, Fugu fish, oysters, Christmas, calendar;
Spring: Mist, plum blossoms, nightingale, sakura (cherry blossoms), Hinamatsuri (Doll Festival), frog, swallow;
Summer: Heat, scorching sun, rainy season (tsuyu), wisteria, tango no sekku (Boys' Festival), cuckoo, cicada;
Autumn: Typhoon, Milky Way, moon, insects, crickets, Nashi pears, coloured leaves, scarecrows, Akimatsuri (Autumn Festival).

While many of these elements are common to multiple cultures, elements such as Fugu fish, the rainy season, and traditional festivals pose a challenge for translators (Addiss, 2012: 12).

Another interesting characteristic of the Japanese used by poets is the use of specific words. In modern Japanese the majority of these notions are considered archaisms and this aspect proves once more the complexity of poetic languages. Such an example can be found in one of the most well know and translated haiku by Matsuo Basho.

古池や蛙飛び込む水の音

Furuike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto

Translation: *An old pond— / a frog jumps in, / the sound of water.*

The words “kawazu” (蛙) and “kaeru” (蛙) in Japanese refer to different concepts, even though they sound similar. The first one refers specifically to the amphibian commonly known as a frog. It is often used in literature, poetry, and everyday conversation to evoke imagery associated with nature, particularly in the context of water, spring, and life cycles. Where 蛙 (kaeru) is the modern and commonly used word for “frog” in everyday Japanese. It’s the term you’ll encounter in daily conversation, literature, and contemporary contexts.

This is a great example how through reading, translating and analyzing other translations a person can considerably improve their language skills, and also it proves that great knowledge is need in order to create a decent and qualitative translation.

Types of Japanese poetry and their translation

Several authors have highlighted that poetry often loses its essence during translation, underscoring the significant challenges in conveying poetry across languages. Notably, Ewald Osers addressed this issue in his work *Aspects of Poetry Translation* (Osers, 1988: 19) and Adam Czerniawski, in his book *Translating Poetry: Theory and Practice* (Czerniawski, 1994: 3). Contrary to this notion, Czerniawski argued that a poem’s worth can be validated through its ability to be translated. Despite this, numerous linguists have extensively debated the feasibility of translating poetry, offering both supportive and opposing viewpoints.

In American literature, poet Robert Frost was among the first to support this kind of translation, asserting that poetry is what remains after translation. He believes that when we are uncertain, we should translate, and the outcome will be prose, while the remainder will be poetry. To accomplish this, it is crucial to understand the nature of a poetic text, its

features, and the challenges that arise during the translation process due to its unique elements and characteristics. A significant aspect of poetry is that a word, phrase, or sentence acquires emotional weight and a special impact on the reader or listener through the novel use of lexemes in a context, the freshness they bring, and the sense of surprise they evoke. Ewald Osers offers a brief explanation of the form and impact of poetry, highlighting how it stands apart from everyday speech. (Osers, 1988: 16)

In the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Howard Nemerov offers a more detailed and understandable definition of poetry. He describes it as a form of literature that provides a concentrated and imaginative expression of experience or a specific emotional response, using language carefully chosen and arranged for meaning, sound, and rhythm. The author emphasizes the importance of these elements and suggests that a translator's attempt to convey the emotional impact of a poem is challenging, alongside the difficulties related to the structure, form, and rhythm of the poetry (Nemerov, 2013).

Poetic texts possess certain distinctive features, regardless of their origin and the language in which they were created. Japanese poetic works have their own uniqueness, given that the traditions, culture, and mindset of the Land of the Rising Sun focus on harmony with nature, contemplation of life and the role of human beings, modesty, and inner balance.

Here, we recall the main types of Japanese poetry and detail their characteristics. Tanka (短歌) is one of the oldest fixed-form types of poetry. It consists of five units with verses of 5-7-5/7-7 syllables. The first part, containing 5-7-5 syllables, is called *kami-no-ku* (the upper phrase), and the following part with 7-7 syllables is known as *shimo-no-ku* (the lower phrase). Compared to the well-known haiku (俳句), tanka is older. The earliest tankas were called *hanka* (inverted poem).

Tanka predates haiku and consists of five lines with a specific syllable pattern, this form has been used for centuries to express personal emotions, romantic longing, and reflections on nature. Unlike haiku, tanka allows for a broader range of themes and more personal expression, making it a versatile form for conveying human experiences. An example of tanka we would like to present has been created by Princess Shikishi.

| | | |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| みわた | Romaji: | Literal Translation: |
| ,見渡せば | Miwaseba | As I look out, |
| はな こうよう | hana mo momiji mo | Neither flowers nor autumn leaves |
| ,花も ,紅葉も | nakarikeri | Are to be seen; |
| なかりけり | ura no tomaya no | Only the rustic hut by the shore |
| うら とまや | aki no yūgure | In the autumn dusk. |
| ,浦の , 苦屋の | | |
| あき ゆうぐ | | |
| ,秋の , 夕暮れ | | |

This tanka creates a vivid scene of emptiness and solitude, reflecting the passage of time and the melancholic beauty of a rustic autumn evening. The imagery is more elaborate than in a typical haiku, allowing for a deeper emotional resonance. For language learners, translating tanka can help develop a sense of how extended metaphor and emotional expression are handled in Japanese, as well as provide insights into the historical and cultural context of the poem.

Another type of work, renga (連歌), emerged during the Heian period (794-1185) and was characterized by its form of “dialogue.” One person would recite a part, consisting of 5-7-5 or 7-7 syllables, and another person would provide a response, creating the missing part.

Renga showcases the collaborative and interactive nature of Japanese poetry, reflecting the cultural emphasis on harmony and collective creativity. It’s a fascinating glimpse into how poetry served as a social activity and a shared artistic expression during the Heian period. And an example that contain the first two stanzas is the following:

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| なつくさ 夏草や | Romaji: Natsukusa ya | Literal Translation: Summer grass— |
| つわもの 兵どもが | tsuwamono-domo ga yume no ato | traces of dreams of ancient warriors. |
| ゆめ あと 夢の 跡 | | |

The beauty of renga lies in the interplay between poets, where one verse responds to another, creating a continuous flow of images and ideas. For language learners, translating renga can develop skills in understanding context and interpreting meaning from partial information, as each stanza must relate to the one before while adding a new dimension.

In the 11th century, imayo-uta (今様歌), or “modern songs” gained popularity. These were poetic texts consisting of four lines, each composed of 12 syllables. Later, during the Muromachi period, a shorter form known as ko-uta (小歌), or “short songs” also emerged.

Imayo-uta is a type of poetry from the Heian period, characterized by a rhythmic and musical style. Each line consists of seven syllables, with four lines per verse. As it follows there is an example of imayo-uta by Emperor Go-Shirakawa.

| | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|---|---|
| あそ 遊びをせんとや | う 生まれ | Romaji: Asobi wo sen to ya umareken | Literal Translation: Did I come into this world, |
| けむ たわむ | う 戯れせんとや | Tawamure sen to ya umareken | Only to play? Hearing the children’s joyful voices, |
| けむ あそ | こ 遊ぶ | Asobu kodomo no koe kikeba | Even my heart trembles. |
| き 聞けば | こえ 子どもの | Waga mi sae koso yurugarure | |
| わみ 我が身さえこそゆる | 声 がるれ | | |

Emperor Go-Shirakawa is known for preserving the imayo-uta form. This verse captures the playful spirit associated with the form while also reflecting on the human experience.

Ko-uta refers to short songs typically used in traditional Japanese music performances. They are often linked with geisha culture and express emotions or describe scenes concisely. Kaga no Chiyo was an author of such kind of poetic works.

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| あさがお ,朝顔に つるべ ,釣瓶とられて みず ,もらい水 | Romaji: Asagao ni tsurube torarete morai mizu | Literal Translation: Morning glory, Took the bucket, I borrow water. |
|---|--|---|

Kaga no Chiyo was a well-known poet who used everyday experiences in her poetry, often drawing connections with nature. This ko-uta illustrates her ability to find beauty in simplicity.

There are types of long poems such as choka (長歌) or nagauta (長歌), and short ones like mijikauta (短歌) or waka (和歌). There's also katauta (片歌), a half-poem composed of three lines with a 5-7-7 syllable structure, and sedoka (旋頭歌), which combines two katauta, totalling 38 syllables. (4, p. 8-9).

The literary text below by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro can be considered a chōka, which is a long-form poem with alternating lines of five and seven syllables, ending with two seven-syllable lines. It was prominent during the Nara and Heian periods.

| | | |
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| てんり ,天離る えびす ,夷の ちょうみち ,長道を とお ,遠みかも とり き な ,鳥の ,来 ,鳴くも き ,聞かなくに め み ,目には ,見えねど き めい ,来 ,鳴くしぞ いのちにしあらば またぞかへり来む | Romaji: Amadaru Ebisu no nagamichi o Toomi kamo Tori no ko-naku mo Kikanaku ni Me ni wa mienedo Ko-naku shi zo Inochi ni shi araba Mata zo kaeri kom | Translation: Distant are the lands Beyond the mountains I can no longer bear The birds singing, Though they are unseen, Their calls still reach me. If life allows, I shall return again. |
|--|---|---|

Hitomaro's chōka is filled with longing and reflects the difficulties of journeys. This form allows for extended storytelling and emotional expression.

Waka (和歌) is an ancient term for poetry that includes forms like tanka and chōka, examples of which were presented. It emphasizes the aesthetics of Japanese poetry. Ono no Komachi is one of the most famous poets from the Heian period. Her waka reflects the ephemeral nature of beauty and life, next is an example of her waka.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| はな いろ 花の 色は うつ 移りにけりな いたづらに わ み よ 我が身 世にふる ながめせしまに | Romaji: Hana no iro wa utsurinikeri na itazurani waga mi yo ni furu nagame seshi ma ni | Translation: The color of the flowers Has faded away, While I gazed out idly On a rainy day. So too has my beauty. |
|---|---|---|

In the 18th century, *kyōka*, a poetic work similar in structure to *tanka* but characterized by its humorous nature, emerged. Over time, the first part of the *tanka* poem evolved into a distinct type of poetry with a 5-7-5 structure, initially known as *hokku* (発句), and later renamed *haiku* (俳句). Michel Revon, a 20th-century French Japanologist, noted that *hokku* refers to the form, *haikai* to the content, and *haiku* to both the form and content (Strochi, 2017: 11).

According to translator and linguist Vera Markova, *hokku* is a lyrical work reflecting the life of nature and humans in their uniqueness and compatibility, against the backdrop of the cyclical seasons. Japanese poetry is structured around syllables and rhythm, without rhyme, but with particular attention to the sound and rhythmic organization of the three lines. The brevity of *hokku* makes it seem monumental compared to a European sonnet. Despite the limited number of words, the impact is remarkable, allowing the reader's imagination to flourish. The poet expresses, along with the lyrical self, feelings of sadness suggested by the autumnal landscape, which the reader can share (Markova, 2022: 13).

Everything superfluous is excluded in *hokku*; nothing remains solely for aesthetic purposes. Even the grammar used is unique, with forms that, although not varied, carry significant semantic weight, sometimes combining multiple meanings. Epithets are often avoided, and the created semantics can be considered an extended metaphor, as the meaning is hidden in the context (Markova, 2022: 6).

These can be considered the most widespread and frequently translated types, thus forming the foundation of Japanese poetic works.

Challenges of Translating Japanese Poetry

Susan Bassnett emphasizes that translating poetry requires a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, as well as their cultural contexts. She argues that poetry translation not only involves linguistic skills but also a creative engagement with the text, making it a rich learning experience for language acquisition. This process helps translators and learners appreciate the subtleties and nuances of language, fostering a deeper connection to both the original and translated works (Bassnett, 2002: 92).

The translation process itself is extremely complex, considering all the nuances and specificities that must be accounted for. As previously mentioned, culture plays a crucial role as well. Working with two related languages is considerably easier than with those that have very few commonalities. Regarding the Japanese language and culture, even though it has become increasingly popular in recent centuries, there are many cultural differences and gaps. Therefore, the ability to translate a text in a way that conveys the same message requires special skills and a deep knowledge of both the source and target languages and cultures.

In relation to the poetic translation of Japanese texts, this was discussed in Adrian Pinnington's work entitled *Reflections on the Usefulness of Poetic Translation*. The differences in the structures of the two languages necessitate the transfer of information through different linguistic means. For example, what is intentionally emphasized in English can be expressed using different grammatical structures in Japanese. This requires the translator to convey the rhythm, rhyme, alliterations, assonances, onomatopoeias, symbolism, and other means of poetic expression (Pinnington, 1988:52).

The core of classical Japanese poetry extends beyond the simple humour in nature descriptions. According to literary critic Alexandr Dolin, tanka and haiku aim to distinguish figurative thought, using symbols like peace reflected in a drop of water. For Japanese poets, grasping the timeless laws of nature is crucial to their creativity (Kulanov, 2017).

In the past, Japanese poetry was introduced to European culture by Silver Age poets like Valery Bryusov and Konstantin Balmont. Without knowledge of the Japanese language, they worked with interlinear translations, which were often only partially complete and formalistic. These interlinear translations, even by native Japanese speakers, frequently subordinated national identity to oriental exoticism, a trend highlighted in European culture from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. They failed to convey the original spirit and era, focusing instead on the “beautiful” sound. Additionally, professional poets faced with formal interlinear translations infused their own worldview and poetic decisions into the translations.

Now, let's explore the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese language, highlighted by various translators and linguists, and discuss the difficulties they create. The use of commas in Japanese, similar to English, varies according to personal preferences. In prose, the absence of commas would be unusual in both Japanese and English. However, in the context of poetry, such as haiku, the lack of commas is perfectly normal in Japanese, especially in such a concise form (Midorikawa, 2020:423).

Japanese has a different sentence structure compared to English, following a subject-object-verb sequence. This difference can create difficulties in translating long sentences, especially when illustrative sequences need to be preserved (Minna no Nihongo, 2013: 242).

The disparity in word order between English and Japanese significantly complicates interpretation and translation, impacting speed, coherence, and natural flow. Hiromichi Uchiyama examines these challenges, noting that such translations often adopt a “minimalist” style. They tend to be literal, aside from awkward inversions, particularly in the final line. This mirrors the essence of haiku—brief, relatable, and vibrant (Uchiyama, 1991: 3).

A completely different example is the strictly academic translation, which aims solely to help the student understand the original. Translators who seek to create something entirely satisfactory engage in what can be called “translation as creation”; a more extreme example of this, in literary terms, is “imitation”, where a theme or argument of a foreign writer is adapted to express the translator's own worldview. Academics generally handle the first type of translation, while poets engage in the second. After highlighting the difficulties faced by translators of Japanese poetry, we must admit that, at first glance, the history of translating Japanese poetry into English seems like a great success.

Observing the opinions of early scholars who wrote about Japanese poetry, it is surprising how negative they were. For example, William George Aston wrote in his pioneering work that “narrow in scope and resources, this (Japanese poetry) is notable for its limitations - for what it lacks rather than what it has.” Adding on the subject of haiku, that it would be absurd to claim a prominent position for haikai in literature. This does not

mean that Aston considered Japanese verses worthless, but simply that he regarded them as inferior to European poetry.

A similar sense of dissatisfaction can be observed in the great Victorian Japanese scholar Basil Hall Chamberlain, who remarked about tanka that “the narrow limits of the thirty-one-syllable form contributed to the same undesirable end” – allowing everyone to write verses, but making it almost impossible for true poets to say anything of value (Cheetham, 2011: 599).

The difference is clear in the contemporary enthusiasm of poet and translator Kenneth Rexroth. Many cultural factors, in addition to literary ones, contribute to this shift in opinion. Today, American poets are still more likely to read poetry in English or French than in Japanese or Chinese. Consequently, Oriental influence is mainly seen through translation.

The very essence of haiku captures an ineffable state of mind in a mysteriously symbolic way – “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant.” Translating haiku requires a minimalist approach, though it’s challenging to convey the nuanced relationship between imagery and vocabulary in translation. This complexity necessitates effort and ambiguity, exemplified by Adrian Pinnington’s English translations of Japanese poetry (Pier, 2009: 57).

James Dwyer expresses his appreciation for Basho’s (1644-1694) innovative transformation of the spiritual and courtly poetry of his era into what we now know as haiku. (Dwyer, 2008: 45).

In the field of literary translation research, particular attention has been given to the issues related to translating poetry, more so than any other literary genre. Most studies on this topic either evaluate different translations of the same poems or present personal statements from translators about how they approached these challenges. Generally, studies on poetry and translation rarely discuss methodological issues from a non-empirical perspective, even though this approach could be the most valuable and necessary (Razumovskaya, 2010: 540).

Linguists, translators, and translation theorists pay special attention to the development of the theory, form, and content of poetic translation, along with the aspects related to the linguistic theory of poetic texts. Veronica Razumovskaya highlighted this concern in her work on *Types and Strategies of Translation*, emphasizing that issues in poetic translation are part of a broader range of literary translation questions but stand out due to their specificity, leading to differing opinions among theorists and practitioners about the viability of such translation.

One of the most notable translation challenges, mentioned by translator Ewald Osers in his work *Some Aspects of Poetry Translation*, illustrates the differences in the second-person singular. In modern English, there is only one pronoun “you,” which can be used in any context, from formal to informal. In contrast, other European languages distinguish between colloquial and formal forms of address, such as “tu” and “vous” in French or “tu” and “dumneavoastră” in Romanian. This discrepancy poses a challenge in the translation process, especially in poetry.

Regarding the Japanese language, it avoids the use of pronouns in favor of names, status, profession, and when these details are unknown, lexemes like:

- 君 (きみ, kimi): Informal, usually used among close friends or family members.
- あなた (anata): More formal than “kimi,” but can be perceived as distant or even slightly rude if used incorrectly. It’s often used between spouses or in contexts where the appropriate level of formality is unclear.

- お前 (おまえ, omae): Very informal and can be considered rude or even insulting if used incorrectly.
- 貴様 (きさま, kisama): Extremely rude and insulting.

The translator must consider context, situation, and the recipient of the message to choose the appropriate form.

In her work, Olga Grunina explores the difficulties encountered in the translation process, highlighting that translating works of fiction represents a distinct challenge for the translator. This challenge stems from the need to find suitable words and expressions that faithfully reflect the original author's intent (Grunina, 2019: 73).

Ecaterina Bozhko highlights that the main challenge in poetic translation lies in balancing the original meaning with the required form, noting that exact and literal translations are rare in this context. The focus is primarily on conveying the main idea and meaning of the original work. One of the major challenges in translation theory and practice is recreating the original rhythm. Translation experts emphasize the importance of rhythm transfer in the translation process, as it represents the intonational essence of poetic verses (Zemova, 2019: 267).

Sugeng Hariyanto, in his article “Issues in Poetry Translation” explores and outlines the numerous challenges involved in translating poetry. These challenges encompass linguistic, literary, and aesthetic difficulties, as well as problems related to poetic structure, metaphors, sound, and sociocultural factors (Hariyanto, 2003: 10).

Sugeng Hariyanto notes that social and cultural issues arise, particularly in expressions containing terms specific to a certain culture. These sociocultural problems relate to words or phrases connected to the four major cultural categories: ideas, behavior, products, and ecology. For example, terms that define beliefs, values, customs, or cultural artifacts can pose significant challenges in the translation process. Some examples from Japanese would be:

- “Komorebi” (木漏れ日) refers to the effect of sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees. This poetic term captures the beauty and serenity of this natural phenomenon. Literally translated as “light that leaks through trees”, *komorebi* is often used to describe the tranquil and contemplative atmosphere created by the interplay of light and shadow in forests or gardens. It's a lovely way to appreciate the subtle, yet profound moments of nature.
- “Shinrin-yoku” (森林浴) literally translates to “forest bathing” and refers to the practice of spending time in nature, especially forests, to enhance health and well-being. This concept is all about immersing oneself in the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest environment to reduce stress and rejuvenate the mind and body.
- “Itadakimasu” (いただきます) literally translates to “to receive” or “to accept” and is used before beginning a meal. It is an expression of gratitude and appreciation for the food and the efforts of everyone involved in its preparation, including farmers and cooks. This practice embodies the spirit of thankfulness and respect for sustenance.
- “Yoroshiku” (よろしく) is a multifaceted expression that can have various meanings depending on the context. Some possible translations include: “Please take care of me”, “We count on your cooperation”, “The pleasure is mine” or “It's a pleasure to meet you”, “Please give my regards”. This versatile phrase is used to

convey politeness, gratitude, and a sense of mutual respect in different social interactions. It's truly a cornerstone of Japanese etiquette.

But the opposite situations also occur: for example, the word “yesterday” can have several equivalents in Japanese: 昨日 (kinou), 先日 (senjitsu), 昨日 (sakujitsu), 前日 (zenjitsu). Similarly, the word “to wear” can be translated as 着る (kiru), 履く (haku), 被る (kaburu), 掛ける (kakeru), する (suru). The appropriate verb is selected depending on the clothing item being worn. For instance, kiru is the most universal and refers to clothes worn on the upper body like shirts, dresses, and jackets, while haku is used for pants, skirts, and footwear.

Conclusion

The journey of learning Japanese through poetic translation offers a profound and multifaceted experience, embracing the unique features of the language, such as its distinct grammar and syntax, and the cultural nuances embedded within kireji, kigo, and on. By engaging with various types of poetry, from haiku to tanka, learners not only develop a deeper understanding of the language but also immerse themselves in the cultural and aesthetic richness of Japan, everybody chooses his own path and creates a personal language biography.

The studying process, combined with the art of translation, reveals the complexities and beauty of Japanese. Translation strategies must balance the preservation of original meaning with the constraints of form and rhythm, making the task both challenging and rewarding. Through this practice, learners confront the inherent difficulties of translation, including the adaptation of metaphors, sound symbolism, and cultural references, which enriches their linguistic sensitivity and cultural appreciation.

Moreover, the act of translating poetry from Japanese profoundly evolves a translator's language skills. It demands a nuanced understanding of syntax, a broad vocabulary, and an ability to convey emotional resonance. As translators navigate these poetic intricacies, they refine their linguistic abilities and deepen their connection to the language, ultimately transforming their own expression and understanding of both Japanese and their native language.

In conclusion, poetic translation is not just an exercise in language learning but a transformative journey that enhances linguistic proficiency, cultural insight, and poetic sensibility. It underscores the dynamic interplay between language and culture, illustrating how deeply intertwined they are and how they shape our perception of the world. Through this immersive approach, learners become not only proficient in Japanese but also attuned to the poetic and cultural rhythms that define it.

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