

PRELIMINARY DIRECTIONS IN COMPILING A RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS TRANSLATING BETWEEN ENGLISH AND JAPANESE FOCUSING ON WORDPLAY



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Rosemary Reader

ORCID: 0000-0002-2491-3432

University of Kitakyushu

Abstract

This article considers the issues that arise in translating between different languages and cultures with a focus on wordplay. Finding appropriate equivalences can be a complicated process that goes beyond linguistic limitations to cultural interpretations of meaning. Wordplay can serve as an aspect that exist as additional elements of information and a means to create a specific atmosphere within the narrative. This can often be reliant on cultural cues, especially in the case of children's fantasy series wherein culturally specific references to folktales may be subtly interwoven into the tale using wordplay. This can then lead to complications when being translated. As such, this is a venture into how the wordplay in *Harry Potter* has been translated into Japanese with the intent to use this data to create a resource for students studying translation between the two languages by acknowledging the conflicting needs of clarity and amusement.

Key words

British English, Japanese, Harry Potter, wordplay, translation

Introduction

The cultural dimensions of language can be felt in literature similarly to the effects that there can be with regards to the interaction between language and culture that exists in interactional discourse. When translating literary works between languages it can become an extra dimension of complications that tend to only increase in their complexity and issues as the distance between the two languages and cultures in question grows. The variety of methods available to a translator to deal with this vary, depending on the materials on offer in both source and target languages and cultures but also the audience and genre of the works in question. At times there may not be a direct equivalent available when translating words or phrases, and even when there

is the nuances and significance attributed to words or phrases may differ wildly and lead to subtle alterations in meaning and tone.

A major element that can arise and cause issues when translating can be that of humour. This can obviously lead to difficulties when the major objective of a work of literature is to be humorous and to amuse, but humour is often also used to create a sense of mood or ambience within a text and provide additional information with culturally sensitive cues. As such, some additional information regarding aspects beyond the most basic interpretation of the text may be lost or prove to be difficult to convey in translated form.

When it comes to novels and media intended for adults, there is a greater degree of potential leeway when it comes to such issues as adults both can be expected to have a greater general knowledge of the world and other countries, as well as there being a greater ease with which translator notes or additional explanation can feasibly be inserted into the narrative with the intent of facilitating explanations to ensure understanding. However, when it comes to literature for children this cannot be relied upon in the same way. Despite this many children's novels use wordplay and elements of humour to provide additional and implicit information that often hinges heavily upon pre-existing awareness of cultural elements such as the great presence of British culture and mythological background in the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. Despite these issues, translations are still carried out and the series is still popular in Japan despite the cultural climate being different and the extensive use wordplay in combination with the humour inherent in some of the passages being complicated to translate.

Therefore, this article serves to be a preliminary consideration of the issues involved with translating this sort of wordplay by focusing on the way some of the examples in Harry Potter are translated from English into Japanese by focusing on the first book in the series, and the possibility of using this as a means to create a resource that might benefit students translating between English and Japanese who may encounter such challenges by provoking thought and discussion as well as providing easily-accessible examples.

1. Literature Review

Eco (2001) uses the example of a simple cup of coffee to illustrate the cultural significance and differences that exist between cultural interpretations even when a direct translation for the words involved easily exists. He discusses how to an Italian a cup of coffee refers to a small cup that contains a small volume of black coffee that can be drunk in one go. As such, an Italian may go to a coffee shop, buy a cup of coffee and down it in one. In contrast, an American may view a cup of coffee as a large volume of coffee that is diluted with milk or cream as well as a sweetening agent. Therefore, an American going to a coffee shop to buy a cup of coffee may expect to sit

around sipping it leisurely as they read a novel (Eco 2001, 17-18). Consequently, while the phrase “cup of coffee” can be translated between English and Italian the phrases and sentences that surround it may be reliant on cultural interpretations and therefore awareness of this issue is required to ensure the entirety of the text is translated in a way that both expressed the original intent as well as making sense to the target audience beyond the original language and culture.

This adds in complications beyond a pure consideration of the words and demonstrates the importance of constant cultural awareness when translating, and that even subtle cultural differences can cause such misunderstandings. This obviously has relevance beyond translation for entertainment purposes given the need for cohesive understanding in the world over linguistic and cultural borders.

Translating humour can be a complicated task necessitating the loss of some of the original. This can arguably be seen in the manner in which even when translated clips of Monty Python comedy videos were considered to be less funny by Japanese people watching Japanese translated versions when compared to British people watching the British originals of the same clips (Reader 2018). This is not to say that the translations themselves are lacking but more that the transfer of the comedic aspects can be hard to achieve in a manner that is appealing to the target audience. Some aspects of humour are deeply entrenched in the source culture and therefore transferring them may be beyond the scope of the words themselves. As such, translating certain elements that may have cultural or humorous significance between British English and Japanese can be harder than the words themselves imply.

Wordplay, which often intersects with humour, is not only reliant on the meaning that is inherent to the words involved and the relationship they hold to the culture within which the language exists. Structural elements of the language can be crucial aspects of wordplay involving both the visual impact of words and sentences on the page as well as similarities in pronunciation of different words. These are aspects of language use that may flow smoothly and add hugely to the impact of the passage in the original language but may not carry through to other languages and cultures with ease, especially if the gulf between the source and target language is large (Bellos 2011).

This is not to say that there are not methods with which humour can be translated. Wakabayashi (2021) lays out clearly both the issues inherent in translating humour as well as the methods available to translators who encounter such circumstances in the specific instance of translating between Japanese and English. Whilst obviously the most ideal solution is to translate a pun in the source language into a pun in the target language, there are other alternatives available if this is not feasible within the constraints of the text, cultures, and languages. Removing the element of the pun from the word in the target text may at times be

most appropriate, just as sometimes using a rhetorical device as a replacement may be a good option. Similarly, omitting it entirely in cases where the pun has no greater purpose than to be a pun could be the simplest solution. Likewise, the use of editorial techniques to explain elements of wordplay or humour in footnotes or as additions in the text itself can help support translation choices. It is also the case that puns may be inserted into alternative sections of a passage where they fit due to the language choices available, as an option when they cannot be retained in their original place (Wakabayashi 2021, 196-197).

In keeping with this aspect of the cultural element of language being both important and also a potentially sensitive topic, the initial books of the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, written originally in British English, were translated into American English for the American audience. The aim of this was to ensure that American children experienced the same thing as their British equivalence, and so British terminology was altered to more familiar American versions (Nel 2002, 261). The most obvious translation was that of the title of the first book, going from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, which lacks the alchemic implications of the original. While some of this is to ensure that words unfamiliar to Americans were replaced with some that were commonly used in American English, Nel (2002) also discusses the way cultural sensitivities and predications were also a motive for some alterations, and whether or not this is an ideal use of translation given the series setting being geographically and culturally within the British Isles. This means that on occasion wordplay that exists in the original such as the naming of Professor Binns referring to his classes being boring and rubbish by having his name similar to "bin" from "dustbin", in the American translation all the "dustbins" are "trash cans" so this connection can be easily missed (Nel 2002, 281). Even when translating between British and American English the language and culture can be such that important background references may be distorted or misunderstood, and wordplay may not transfer across either due to linguistic differences requiring a change or cultural aspects altering the nuance.

In this vein, Jentsch (2002) discusses how various elements including carefully chosen names that have a wealth of subtle meaning may be a difficulty for translators. She considers the variation in the techniques taken in the translation of the first few Harry Potter books from English into French, German, and Spanish including the decision to change names and terms in some circumstances rather than retaining the originals (Jentsch 2002, 291). She also looks at several the examples of wordplay that run throughout the narrative, which are impossible to fully capture in translation though multiple instances of maintaining the same playful atmosphere of the original (Jentsch 2002, 293). In addition, the matter of the name "Tom Marvolo Riddle" being an anagram of the phrase "I am Lord Voldemort" is both highlighted as an aspect of wordplay likely to have caused difficulties for the translators as well as

noting the manner in which the French translation simply altered the name to “Tom Elvis Jedusor” to both maintain the anagram whilst also managing to include a double meaning with the surname being close in pronunciation to the French for “game of the curse” (Jentsch 2002, 293-294). These are languages that use the same alphabet as English, and historically have both linguistic and cultural connections with British English. As such it can only be assumed that the complexities of translation into languages and cultures that are less closely linked is likely to lead to greater issues.

Yuliasri and Allen (2019) explore the necessities of considering the issues that arise when translating humour by looking at the way humour can be perceived to have been lost in the Indonesian translation of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Not only do they identify what aspects of humour children within the target age considered to be funny, but they also then assessed the manner in which examples of such humour had been translated (Yuliasri and Allen 2019, 122). While the examples given show that wordplay and puns when translated literally lost the humour identified in the source text, insults appeared to retain their humour even when translated literally (Yuliasri and Allen 2019, 124). While it may not be the main point of the books, the element of humour that exists within the narrative can be both translated into the target text to varying degrees of humorous interpretation and in many cases a need to generalise to ensure that the core meaning of a passage was translated in a way that was understood by the audience led to a dilution of the humour that had existed (Yuliasri and Allen 2019, 126). This demonstrated the way in which children all over the world who read Harry Potter in their own languages will be reading subtly different interpretations of the British original and the variation in the presence of humour in the form of wordplay may play a role in the perception of the novels in their entirety.

The website and project *CJV Lang Harry Potter Project* has the aim of documenting and comparing a variety of the translation choices of the *Harry Potter* series when translated into Japanese, Vietnamese, and both Simplified and Traditional Chinese. This shows that there is a degree of interest in the choices taken by translators, with a section dedicated to a few examples of wordplay. This allows for a comparison of the manner in which wordplay has been maintained in translation or not across the languages, as well as the situations in which there may appear to have been a potential mistranslation of wordplay that may have disguised the meaning (CJVLang 2020).

2. Data and Discussion

Translation comes with many difficulties, one of which is wordplay. This can range from overt to subtle and can be humorous in nature or can be nuanced references

conveying significance to the story. In one's native language it may be immediately obvious but grasping every aspect may be more challenging in a second language regardless of ability. Observing my students translating from their native Japanese into English, it is one of the elements that can cause frustration when the source text is so naturally obvious but it at times proves to be impossible to locate a true equivalent that would work in their translation. During class they are able to support each other in coming up with solutions and I too provide options that may be possible whilst acknowledging the complexity of it. Each case is different in respect to how feasible it is to carry over both the meaning and the element of word play as well as the decision regarding what aspects are most important for prioritization.

Consequently, I thought it might be useful for my own consideration to explore the way in which examples of English wordplay have been translated into Japanese to appreciate the thought process from the perspective of translating out of a native language. It also seemed to me that there was potential for compiling annotated examples that could be useful to students to have a range of examples that may have been treated differently depending on the context of the source. It would also mean that naturally written English examples of wordplay would be highlighted in context for explanation and consideration alongside a Japanese translation, allowing students easy access to examples of wordplay that can help build confidence when wanting to use it themselves.

With the intent of turning aspects of this into a resource for students, the medium of text seemed like a more practical choice rather than video or other formats due to it already being in a format that would be flexible and easy to use when it comes to helping students. The written word would also lend itself to specific types of wordplay that might be lost in other formats, such as homophones, and therefore would be useful as an annotated study guide. Other formats also have potential but will be left until after the preliminary stages where the focus will be entirely on a single written text.

Several options were considered regarding the text to use and ultimately the Harry Potter novels seemed like a good option for preliminary work. One important reason for this would be accessibility and familiarity. They are widely known and translated in addition to having films made of them, meaning that it may be more accessible to students if the resource used feels familiar. It is also lastingly popular across age groups, meaning that it may be more interesting and engaging for students to use as enjoying the source material appears to add extra joy into practicing translations as part of class. As a teaching aid and resource, something that naturally piques student curiosity and passion is highly beneficial. Beyond that, the fact that the books are widely available in both the Japanese translations and even the English originals in libraries as well as to purchase meaning that any students with a desire

to further explore context around the wordplay or other aspects of translation in connection to it would be able to acquire the means to do so with relative ease.

The data is taken both from the British English *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling and the Japanese translation done by Yuko Matsuoka. The Japanese romanisation and translation back into English is done by the author. The original British examples are labelled as “Source Text” and the Japanese translations are labelled as “Target Text” as while the Japanese translation was published in 1999, two years after the English original which was published in 1997, the authors are of course the same and it therefore seems clearer and more comprehensible.

▪ Example 1:

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him?

(Source Text, p. 112)

ウッド?ウッドって、木のこと?僕を叩くための棒のことかな。ハリーはわけがわからなかった。

Uddo? Uddo tte, ki no koto? Boku wo tataku tame no bō no koto kana? Harī wa wake wawakaranakatta.

Wood? Wood as in wood/tree? A stick to hit me with maybe? Harry didn't know.

(Target Text, p. 222)

This example hinges on wordplay, with the name of a character leading to initial misunderstanding in the moments leading up to his introduction as Harry does not immediately recognise his name as being a name. Rather he interprets it as a common noun or an object within Hogwarts that he is not familiar with.

Believing himself to be in grave trouble with his teachers, Harry is made aware of the fact that the teacher who has apprehended him would like to borrow “Wood” with regards to Harry's breaking of the school rules. Consequently, he assumes that “Wood” must be a cane leading to corporal punishment, rather than a fellow student named Oliver Wood. With the phrasing in the English this misunderstanding makes sense and Wood is not the only character whose name has overt or implied meaning that arises in such situations.

However, in Japanese the meaning is less clear. The names of the characters in Japanese are transcribed into the *katakana* script to keep in phonetically similar to the original “Wood”. While an adult might recognise the word and the meaning, to a child this may be more challenging. However, for the sake of this interaction, garnishing one character in a British novel with a fully Japanese name to provide a clear meaning might be overkill. As such, the translator has neatly inserted the phrase that ultimately means “wood as in wood?” into Harry's musing to ensure that

the reader understands why Harry is thinking such things without having to reply on the audience correctly interpreting the wordplay that exists with a greater degree of clarity in the source text.

This is a good example when it comes to the importance of names generally within texts and possibly in particular within childrens literature where the significance or foreshadowing may be more immediately obvious. In some cases translators may opt to change the names, which can preserve some of the significance but also opens up discussions about why and when this method is useful. This means that an example such as this could be a good one for provoking discussions centring on the translation of names and inspiring students to be extra aware of the potential significance or hidden meaning that might exist in the names of characters they encounter whilst translating, even if they eventually decide to leave them unaltered.

▪ Example 2:

There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*
(Source Text, p. 152)

「すつうを みぞの のろここのたなあ くなはで おか のたなあはしたわ」

Sutsuuo mizono norokoko notanaa kunahade oka notanaahashitawa

(Target Text, p. 303)

The inscription is presented as words that appear mystical and alien so that the reader has no knowledge of their meaning, but upon reversing the sentence the true meaning becomes apparent as “I show not your face but your heart’s desire” though this is left for the reader to deduce rather than spelling it out in the relevant passage of the narrative.

Reversing translated text to produce nonsense words similar to the English is a form of wordplay that might be reasonably straightforward in many situations, however there is an added degree of complexity when the alphabet of the languages in question differs. Japanese tends to be written with *kanji*, Chinese characters that traditionally have ideogrammatic meaning, though it is not the only script and rarely used exclusively in modern Japanese. As the aim of the reversed sentence is to obscure the meaning initially, to write it normally and then reverse it would still have the meaning on display. As such, it can be seen that the translator has opted to leave the whole sentence in the *hiragana* script that provides pronunciation but not further hint of meaning. Upon reversing this, the engraved inscription in the narrative has a similar impact to the original English version, and it can be read backwards and understood in the same way as the source text sentence. The spaces in the English,

creating the semblance of words, do not match up to where the spaces would fall if the letters were reversed into the hidden sentence. Similarly in the Japanese the spaces are not connected to the actual word boundaries contained within the sentence.

In this way Japanese has an advantage in that while *kanji* make up a large amount of the characters commonly used in constructing sentences, other scripts without meaning attached to the characters also exist that can also be used. Indeed, there are ways in which translating into Japanese can be aided by the existence of multiple scripts that can be used together in quite flexible ways.

In addition to the manner in which the wordplay is handled, the actual name of the mirror in question is an example of there being potential for deeper implications and wordplay in the translation than in the source text. In the English original the mirror is named “the Mirror of Erised” with “erised” being “desire” backwards. In Japanese it becomes “*mizono kagami*”, with “*mizono*” being “*nozomi*”, meaning “desire”, in reverse. As mentioned, this is all left in the *hiragana* script so that no extra information is given to “*mizono*”. However, unlike the source text this translation can be interpreted as having a double meaning as it can be read to mean “ditch mirror” allowing for extra dimensions of meaning to be interwoven into the name and the purpose of the mirror (CJVLing 2020).

Riddles such as this, where there is a reliance on the structure of the words themselves such as backwards reading in this case, as well as anagrams and the use of homophones, can also be a challenge to translate. These sorts of word games may crop up in a variety of genres, ranging from fantasy to mystery, and it can be of vital importance to the plotline that the translation fits in and is correct in relation to the rest of the story. This example seems to be one that could be of use when it comes to raising the issue of riddles and secret or hidden meanings and how to translate them. It provides an example in English and then a Japanese translation of that, which shows both the contrast in how this is achieved in the two languages as well as helping to inspire students to think about what sorts of technique may be more commonly used in both languages due to the different linguistic structures.

▪ Example 3

‘P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we’re all wearing ours, even Harry got one.’

(Source Text, 149)

「監督生の P!パーシー、着ろよ。僕たちもきてるし、ハリーのもあるんだ。」
Kantokusei no P! Pāshī, kiro yo. Bokutachi mo kiterushi, Harī no mo arunda.

P for supervisor! Percy wears it, we’re wearing ours and Harry has one too.

(Target Text, 296)

Here is another small aspect of wordplay performed by the characters that cannot be translated over. In the English original the fact that both Percy's name and the word "prefect" (which Percy is very proud to be) start with a "P" allowing his younger brothers to tease him about this. Of course, even allowing for the differences in alphabet leading to the idea of a word beginning with a specific letter more complex, the word that is used as a translation of "prefect" is "*kantokusei*" which regardless of alphabet differences does quite clearly not begin with a "P" despite this phrase remaining in the translated text. This does also in part connect to the cultural differences that exist with regards to the structure of education that may exist in different cultures and therefore the significance of Percy defining himself as a prefect.

In a preceding sentence leading up to this utterance within the novel, there is another example of wordplay based around the specifics of the pronunciation and visual of the English versions. The phrase "lumpy jumper" is used and in English they sound and look similar to create a particular effect. However, neither the Japanese for "lumpy" (in this instance, *mokkori* is used) nor the Japanese for the British English "jumper" (which is *sētā*, a loanword from American English) have similarities in pronunciation or the visual effect of the manner of their spelling. It may not contribute significantly to the understanding of the plot, but it may be a subtle difference in the creation of the mood of the story as a whole and that scene in particular. It is also an example of a piece of wordplay that is noted as being lost in the translation from British English to American English, with the American term "sweater" being used instead (Nel 2002, 280).

Both alliteration ("P for prefect") and rhymes ("lumpy jumper" being a half rhyme) are forms of wordplay that can be interwoven into narratives without being overly explicit. This means that the loss of the wordplay often will not lead to any significant loss of meaning within the story, but it may alter the impression that the reader is left with.

This example also seems like a good one for students to begin thinking about the manner in which parts of sentences are connected to each other and the way in which translations may wish to adapt or not to accommodate these connections and references. It could also be a good example to kickstart discussions about what the target audience of a translation may have as their general background knowledge as well as an acknowledgement that it may differ from their own. Similarly, concepts such as relevance of sounds and interpretations of words (such as positive or negative) can be brought up alongside literary functions such as alliteration and rhyme. This would be helpful for students to continue to develop their own understanding and explore their potential as translators.

3. Conclusions

In this manner the variety of issues that arise when translating something not only from a specific language but also a specific culture is understandably more complex when there is a greater degree of distance between the two. This undoubtedly causes great stress to translators and means that no matter their good intentions there is always something that is likely to be lost. In the case of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* translated into Japanese, as with all languages there are aspects where subtle elements have to be sacrificed to ensure that a comprehensive translation is achieved. While at times wordplay may be omitted or rendered in a way that causes it to lose the connection to context of the novel, at times it is also seen that it can be retained when circumstances permit it.

This seems like a collection of examples that could be of great use in creating a resource to support students translating between English and Japanese by providing examples that can spark thought and discussion. It can be helpful both with regards to those studying translation into Japanese as it provides examples within a familiar medium of a well-known novel and can be helpful to those studying translation into English by showing naturally occurring examples of wordplay with annotated translations to fully explain the entirety.

There are plans to expand this project into a collaborative one that will progress beyond the *Harry Potter* series a resource to support students studying translation between English and Japanese in a manner that it both educational and engaging. In the future, in addition to featuring Japanese original texts alongside their English translations the reverse will also be included. There is also a hope to move beyond novels to other mediums so that issues that arise in them can also be explored and annotated in a manner that helps provide depth and guidance to our students.

Ideally this should eventually be expanded with future research to not only trace the consequences of some of the translation choices made in the first book of the series as the narrative progresses and elements are revealed to have been significant, but also to consider the issues in the reverse with the flexibilities of the Japanese language being different from English allowing for alternative forms of wordplay that may be hard to translate in the same way that some aspects of wordplay in English can be problematic. Similarly, assessing what impact some of the necessary changes made for translation might have had on the impression left on readers would also be an important aspect to consider in this context. Such an exploration of the consequences of translation choices would be interesting and useful both academically and practically.

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