Japanese–English Onomatopoeic and Mimetic Parallels: the Problem of Translatability

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The subject of this article is the research of Japanese – English mimetic parallels in the key of the problem of translatability. The majority of linguists consider onomatopoeic and mimetic words to be untranslatable lexis, which causes a set of problems when translating. Situation becomes even more complicated as the onomatopoeic words of Japanese, though very widespread, remain low-studied layer of lexis and their translation into English requires quite a translational challenge because of the huge typological differences between these two languages. Nevertheless despite the mentioned above typological differences, the researching method of phonosemantic analysis can give translators the clue to find efficient methods of translating these lexical units, avoiding the loss of expressiveness and semantic meanings.

Keywords: mimetic, onomatopoeic, Japanese language, phonosemantic, untranslatable lexis, mora, phonesthem, isomorphism, translational methods.

Introduction

The subject of the thesis deals with the possible ways of finding the translation equivalents of Japanese onomatopoeic words in English translation version of the Japanese folklore fairy tale "Urashima Taro".

The sound-symbolic words in the Japanese language can be divided into mimetic adverbs and mimetic nominal adjectives, most of them forming idiomatic expressions in combination with the copula /suru/ (Hamano, 1998:11). As some of the words are difficult to translate without context, they can be translated as adverbs, adjectives and verbs although the copula /suru/ and other verbs are omitted.

Unlike most European languages in which onomatopoeic and mimetic words (in Japanese linguistics mimetic is equal to sound symbolic) are not differentiated or are considered to be a privilege of baby talk, in Japanese they are an indispensable component of the language and reveal the subtle sensitivity of Japanese people in the way they perceive the world. People of all ages employ mimetic words in their communication, believing that speech abounded in such words sounds more natural and is full of life compared to that which tends to avoid them. According to the study by Noma (1998:30), Japanese has the second largest layer of such words following Korean with more than 2,000 onomatopoeic and mimetic

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expressions. They overfill everyday speech, literature and media due to their expressiveness and load of information. Although they are never used in official documents, one can hear them in formal situations as well.

The translation studies of this kind of expressions are normally focused on literary translation. For example, Flyxe (2002) analyzes the difficulties of translation of Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions into Swedish and tries to find the reasons for which this lexis often remain untranslated. The author gives various examples of earlier studies, such as Eström (1989) and Hayase (1978), as well as the two studies on the translation of the novel Yukiguni (Snow Country) by Yasunari Kawabata into English. Eström concludes that 60 of the total 200 onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in the original remain without translation, and according to Hayase, 59 of the total 186 are not translated. Flyxe also cites the study by Kubo (1997), where he makes it clear that 78 % of the onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions that appear in the novels of Kenji Miyazawa have been translated without using these types of expressions.

Flyxe declares some reasons why these expressions cannot be translated. For example, it might be so, that in the target language (in this case, Swedish), onomatopoeic expressions are considered to be childish and vulgar, and thus it is impossible to maintain the register of the original text if the translator uses such expressions. Also he points out the absence of the complex phonetic symbolism in the target language, and therefore the impossibility to express the subtle nuances of Japanese onomatopoeia and mimetic words. Flyxe demonstrates the case in which the translator uses the same Swedish onomatopoeia plaskar to translate two different onomatopoeias, bachabacha and bochabocha, which are both water-splashing sounds but the second indicates that the water is deeper than the first. Finally, the author mentions the difficulty of maintaining the style of the translation using these expressions, either due to the excessive "informality" of onomatopoeic or mimetic expressions in the target language, or changes of the structure of the sentences in the process of translation.

Flyxe identifies six methods used by translators: (1) adjectives, (2) adverbs, (3) verbs, (4) explicative paraphrases, (5) onomatopoeia (and mimetic words), and (6) omission.

Minashima (2004) carried out the investigation of the translation of soundsymbolic words and expressions in the novel by Banana Yoshimoto, Kitchen (1991) into English. In the novel, 332 such expressions are identified (286 mimetic words and 46 onomatopoeic words). The most frequent method is to translate them as verbs, although translating mimetic words as adjectives and adverbs is not exception either. Omission occurs in 16.3 % of the cases, and the author considers the possible lack of total comprehension of these words by the translator, pointing out that omission occurs more frequently in cases of mimetic words (17.1 % of total cases), which are more abstract and therefore more difficult for translation than onomatopoeic ones (10.8 %).

Theoretical framework

In the thesis the following contractions are used: CV stands for mora, X means variable which can be anything (verb, particle etc.), /N/ indicates the syllable-final nasal that constitutes a full mora, and /Q/ signifies the first half of a geminate cluster, and it also constitutes a full mora.

The understanding of translational aspect of mimetic words is related with researches in the field of phonosemantic. The most extensive research on sound-symbolism in Japanese has been introduced by Hamano (1998). She analyzes the phonosemantic associations of

CV and CVCV-based mimetic adverbs and draws important conclusions about the semantic features attributed to consonants and vowels. Hamano claims that whereas consonants appear to be positionally differentiated, vowels do not. She further argues that consonants act independently from each other in words. The symbolisms exhibited by the initial and the second consonants, as well as by vowels are shown below in tables 1 and 2 respectively.

In Table 2 above the values +/- mean 'presence' and 'absence' respectively. Hamano specifies that "initial vowels generally control the semantic dimension of the shape of the first object or movement", whereas "second vowels control the semantic dimension of the size/shape of the second object or movement". The vowel /e/ is an exception in both cases (Hamano 1998:172–3).

However, the assertion that sounds in words evoke associations on their own seems dubious.

Table 1. Sound（consonants） – Meaning relationships according to Hamano（1998）

	First consonants in CVCV	Second consonants in CVCV
/p/	taut surface; light; small; fine	explosion, breaking, decisiveness
/b/	taut surface; heavy; large; coarse	
/t/	lack of surface; tension, subduedness light; small; fine	hitting of surface, coming into close contact, complete agreement
/d/	lack of surface tension, subduedness; heavy; large; coarse	-
/k/	hard surface; light; small; fine	opening, breaking, swelling – in-out movement
/g/	hard surface; heavy; large; coarse	-
/s/	non-viscous body; quietness; light; small; fine	soft contact; friction
/z/	non-viscous body; quietness; heavy; large; coarse	-
/h/	weakness, softness, unreliability, indeterminateness	breath
/m/	murkiness	-
/n/	Viscosity, slimness, sluggishness	bending, elasticity, unreliability, lack of force, weakness
/y/	leisurely motion, unreliable motion, swinging motion	sound of many sources, haziness – childishness
/w/	human noise, emotional upheaval	Softness, faintness, haziness
/r/	-	rolling; fluid movement

Note: (-) indicate that the given consonant never or rarely occurs in the position

Table 2. Vowel symbolic semantics

	protrusion	line/tenseness	small	large
/i/	-	+	-	-
/u/	+	-	+	-
/o/	-	-	-	-
/a/	-	-	-	+
/e/	Vulgarity			

Counterexamples to Hamano's classifications in Table 1 and 2 can easily be found while analyzing the meanings of the words containing the same sounds. For example, according to the classification in (I), in CVCV-based sound-symbolic adverbs, /m/ as an initial consonant expresses "murkiness", whereas as the second consonant it has no particular meaning. Some of the words with initial /m/ are まざまざ /maza-maza/ (clearly, vividly), めきめき /meki-meki/ (remarkably, fast), もやもや /moya-moya/ (hazy, murky), むかむか/muka-muka/ (retch, go mad). Obviously, "murkiness" is not their common semantic feature.

Statement of the problem

Most of linguists tend to refer onomatopoeic words to the sphere of untranslatable lexis, which is defined in the dictionaries as lexical units of a source language which do not have any regular (dictionary) compliances in a target language. Though widespread the class of onomatopoeic words remain the byways of linguistic investigations and often require the translator's challenge.

The situation becomes even more complicated when the process of translation concerns the onomatopoeic systems of two typologically different languages such as Japanese and English. The problem became the subject of quite a number of research papers and scientific articles, but for a long period of time was considered to be unsolved until the it became the interest of phonosemantic studies. The method of phonosemantic analysis, elaborated by S.V. Voronin, which in its essence presents the trinity of phonosemantic, etymological and typological analysis, made it possible to reveal the correlation between the semantic structure of an onomatopoeic word and the phonetic means of its formal organization, demonstrating the unity of the form and meaning for certain semantic groups of words. Numerous phonosemantic researches brought the serendipity of finding the universal features of this phenomenon in many languages, which were typologically different, that made it possible to assume that finding the corresponding equivalent of an onomatopoeic word in the target language or, if there is no one, to choose the proper translation method in order to compensate the loss of an onomatopoeic word when translating. Thus phonosemantic studies gave a great impact to the theory of translation in the sphere of such layer of untranslatable lexis as onomatopoeic words.

As well as this, there is another approach to the sound-symbolic effect in Japanese mimetic words based on native Japanese speech, which is presented by relatively complete and generally acknowledged resources of sound-symbolic forms, such as Giongo-Gitaigo Jiten, Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary, Kokugo Dai Jiten, New College Japanese-English Dictionary and Progressive Japanese-English Dictionary. First, all the CVCV-based mimetic words available in the corpus (about 380) were divided into two groups: a group of words with same initial mora and a group of words with same second or post-second moras. Second, the words falling into the same group were closely examined to prove existence or non-existence of common meanings. Altogether 199 CVCV-based mimetic words were put into categories based on similarities in meaning. Next, each category was assigned descriptors. The number of descriptors varies across categories: for some only one descriptor was sufficient, whereas for other categories more than one descriptor was needed to represent all the words included.

It became clear that many of the words containing same phonological clusters have similar meanings. Similar meaning in this respect does not refer to synonymy. It indicates a common semantic feature in words. As a result,

37 phonaesthematic patterns typical of Japanese CVCV-based mimetic words were identified. The term phonaesthematic describes the presence of sequence of phonemes shared by words with some perceived common element in meaning. Firth (1930) first noticed this phenomenon and coined the term phonaesthesia indicating the role of the ablaut implied in a series like drip: drop: droop: drape (Grew, 1998:2). The sequence of phonemes was called phonaestheme (Grew, 1998:1). Phonaesthesia has not been paid enough attention to due to the fact that it opposes Saussure's theory of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Similarly, no attempt has ever been made to apply the phonaesthematic approach to the Japanese sound-symbolic system. Also, that kind of approach can be applied to translational aspect of linguistics.

The general mistake in the translation practice is that translational equivalents of onomatopoeic words are usually looked for in the dictionary system of a certain language, while they should be given a conceptual treatment.

In most cases classical methods of comparative analysis do not give us an access to the entire depth of the concept standing behind the mimetic word. Proceeding from the incorrect preconditions, linguists believe that natural soundings objectively sound equally, so they should be reflected in different languages equally, irrespective of the phonological system of the language. They consider that identical sounding should be heard equally by representatives of different nations, but the fact it doesn't makes them consider sound-symbolism to be untranslatable lexis.

Discussion

The detailed consideration of the translation strategy of sound symbolic lexis of the Japanese fairy tale "Urashima Taro" into English makes it possible to formulate the tasks and define the problems the translator might face while translating sound symbolic words, as well as anticipate the possible ways of their solution.

何(なに)かとおもつて浦島がのぞいてみると、小さいかめの子を一ぴきつかまえて、棒(ぼう)でつついたり、石でたたいたり、さんざんにいじめているのです。

/Nani ka to omotsu te Urashima ga nozoite miru to, chīsai kamenoko o ichi-piki tsukamaete, bō de tsutsui tari, ishi de tatai tari, **sanzan** ni ijimete iru nodesu/

*Urashima decided to see what is going on. He saw that they were **torturing** a baby turtle, hitting it with sticks and throwing rocks.*

In this text fragment the translator conveys the meaning of the Japanese version of the text using an English verb "to torture", which is marked with stronger connotative meaning. According to Japanese-English online dictionary Denshi Jisho gitaigo さんざん/sandzan/ has the following meanings: severely; harshly; utterly; terrible; scattered; disconnected. In the Japanese version it bears the function of an adjective. In the combination with the verb いじめる /idzimeru/ the phrase has the meaning which can be translated into English as "to bully harshly". However, the translator uses the verb "to torture", which also has a sound symbolic origin. According to Margaret Magnus (Magnus 2001), the American researcher in the field of phonosemantics, /tr/ in the initial position of monosyllables means movement, as the energy of the sound /r/ gets the direction which is set by interdental / t/ (travel, trip, to troop, to track). However, when a vowel appears between these two sounds, the seme of the directed movement vanishes, being transformed into the seme of a rotary motion (in the direct or metaphoric meaning), as in the words turn, torque, tortment and torture. The etymological analysis of the verb "torture" showed the following: torture – late 15c. (implied in torturous), from M.Fr. torture "infliction of

great pain, great pain, agony," from L.L. torture "twisting, writhing, torture, torment," from stem of L. torquere "to twist, turn, wind, wring, distort" (see thwart). The verb derived from the noun in 1580s. The way the translator chose may be considered as equivalent translation as the meaning of the Japanese gitaigo was conveyed by selecting an equivalent in the target language.

The next text fragment also presents the example of equivalence of translation.

その奥(おく) にきらきら光つて、目のくらむような金銀のいらかが、たかくそびえていました。

/Sono oku ni **kirakira** hikatte,-me no kuramu yōna kingin no ira ka ga, takaku sobiete imashita/

*Behind the gate he saw **glittering** roofs made of gold and silver*.

In this example the translator conveys the Japanese adverb きらきら /kirakira/, belonging to a class gitaigo, by the English verbal adjective "glittering". According to Japanese-English online dictionary Denshi Jisho, this Japanese gitaigo has the meaning: to glitter; to sparkle; to glisten; to twinkle. Some attention should be brought to the validity of the sound graphic origin of the word "glittering" used in the target language. According to the researches of such authors as V. Kuzmich, S. V. Voronin, O.A.Bartashova this adjective is a sound symbolic word. According to Margaret Magnus who made the thorough analysis of the group of sound symbolic lexicon with /gl/ , the words with the combination /gl/ in the initial position has four types of meaning: 1) the reflected or diffused light (glare, gleam, glim, glimmer, glint, glisten, glister, glitter); 2) indirect use of eyes (glance, glaze/d, glimpse, glint); 3) a reflecting surface (glacé, glacier, glair, glare, glass, glaze, gloss); 4) other lighting or visual effects (globe, glower).

Besides these groups, M. Magnus allocates some other categories, connected with sliding, volumes, perception etc., however, prevalence of the lighting effects is obvious. Etymological research confirms the following: "glittering – c.1300, glideren (late 14c. as gliteren), from a Scandinavian source, cf. O.N. glitra "to glitter," from glit "brightness", from P.Gmc. *glit-"shining, bright" (cf. O.E. glitenian "to glitter, shine; be distinguished," O.H.G. glizzan, Ger. glitzern, Goth. glitmunjan), from PIE *ghleid-(cf. Gk. khlidon, khlidos "ornament"), from root *ghel-"to shine, glitter" (see glass). Related: Glittered; glittering. The noun is c.1600, from the verb.to glitter".

The Japanese mimetic word きらきら　する /kirakira suru/ has a synonym, which also has a sound graphic origin: ぴかぴかする /pikapika suru/. Comparing these two verbs, we see that both words have intense front row vowel /i/ in roots, which when combined with noisy and explosive occlusive sounds, such as /p/ and / k/, forms a phonestheme conveying the meaning of glow, luminescence. Thus we can speak about the equivalence of translation as the translator considers the psycho-acoustic perception of denotation and finds the most suitable sound symbolic equivalent.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the distinctions of Means of Sound Imitation in different languages really seem considerable if their comparison is made in the traditional way, which has become obsolete – at the level of separate phonemes. The features of isomorphism, which dominate over the features of allomorfism in onomatopoetic words in any couple of languages cannot usually be identified at the level of concrete phonemes. «Considerable phonetic distinctions» usually appear insignificant or completely absent if the only thing you see behind a separate phoneme of an onomatopoeic word (root) is the (psycho) acoustic type to which it belongs (Bartashova,

2002; Razumovskaya, 2006). The understanding of psycho-acoustic structure of denotation allows to predict the structure of the corresponding onomatopoetic word. Similar "prediction" is valid only at the level of phonestheme, but not at the separate phonemes level.

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Японо-английские звукоизобразительные параллели: проблема перевода звукосимволической лексики

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Статья посвящена вопросам изучения звукоизобразительных параллелей между японским и английским языком, в частности проблеме перевода звукосимволической лексики. Долгое время данный тип лексики относился к безэквивалентной и непереводимой. Однако развитие такого направления лингвистики, как фоносемантика, а также глубокое изучение вопроса этимологии звукосимволических слов позволяет переводчику решить данную проблему. Авторы статьи полагают, что наиболее эффективным методом перевода такой лексики является поиск звукосимволических эквивалентов в языке перевода. Материалом исследования послужила японская народная сказка "Urashima Taro".

Ключевые слова: звукоизобразительность, звукосимволическая лексика, японский язык, фоносемантика, переводоведение, фонемотип, фонема, мора, семантика.