

From Manga to Comic: Visual Language in Translation

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There are many books, essays, and studies about the translation of prose literature, poetry, and technical and legal documents; each with techniques, philosophies, problems and solutions appropriate to its particular area of concentration. Very little has been written, however, about the translation of comics. This may be because many feel that comics lack the cultured subtlety of prose or poetry, or the practical relevance of technical or legal documents, and hence are not worthy of formal study. Or perhaps this is due to the general perception that comics are only a textual narrative accompanied by pictures, so that when a translation is made, it is satisfactory to treat the work as though it were simply a standard work of prose. But this is not the case. Comics are no more simply a work of prose than they are simply a collection of unrelated pictures. Comics, under the umbrella of sequential art, constitute their *own* special medium with their own vocabulary, conventions, and use of symbols. They present their own unique problems to the translator, not least of which is the fact that the translator must successfully bridge the gap between not just two languages, but three: present in every form of sequential art is an elusive visual language, which is at once universal and provincial – and for which there are no dictionaries. In Japan, where the comic medium (*manga* in Japanese) grew over time to become one of the most pervasive forms of entertainment and communication, the visual language present in comics reached levels of complexity and sophistication unseen on such large scale in similar productions throughout the rest of the world until relatively recently, and even then due in large part to the influence of these Japanese works. This paper will explore the nature of visual language, how it presents itself in comics, and then apply the resulting framework to the translation of manga.

I.

Visual Language

It is evident that any language which has a written form necessarily qualifies as a visual language, as it depends on one's sense of vision to perceive the various markings that comprise its written structure. Literacy is the competency to decode these various markings in an organized fashion and derive meaning from them. But is this the only kind of literacy? Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, numerous studies were conducted to investigate the concept of visual literacy, which in 1969 was defined by the First National Conference on Visual Literacy as:

A group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing, and at the same time, having and integrating other sensory experiences. . . . When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret visible actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in the environment (Ladevich, 114).

This definition creates a broader understanding of literacy, of which the ability to understand the written word becomes a subcategory. In this broader sense, "visual literacy" can be applied to such things as being able to "read" the position of the sun in the sky to determine time of day, relative position, or season. Every day we "read" the body language, gestures, and facial expressions of those around us. By the same token, we are able to derive information from pictures we see.

In his article *Visual Literacy*, Edmund Feldman describes the process of reading a picture as nearly analogous to that of reading a sentence:

We read [words], first by recognizing them as symbols of real ideas or things; second by noting their arrangement in space; that is, their sequential position; and third by interpreting the relationship between the symbolic meanings of the words and their sequential or syntactic meanings based on their positions in a word string or sentence. Now reading images entails fundamentally the same operation: we have to attend to visual signs. That is, if our eyes are open, we are obliged to notice lines, shapes, colors, textures, and light intensities. Then we have to recognize these as signs combined into forms; we notice how they are arranged in space (syntactic analysis). Finally we read a total image by examining the relations between its form-symbols and their spatial organization (interpretation or comprehension) (197).

Feldman notes that while the reading of an image requires sequential perception, it is not necessarily the rectilinear perception required to read text- when viewing an image, the eye wanders over it in any number of ways, connecting subjects to one another, or following light patterns. Because of the varied ways of viewing an image, several different “readings” of it are possible, though as Feldman observes, “There tends to be a family resemblance among the several readings that an image is capable of supporting (198).” A skilled painter or photographer can compose an image in such a way that he or she can guide the movements of the eye – the order of perception – and therefore the way in which an image is read. If it is possible, with an understanding of how various visible elements can be arranged within a picture, to control the *way* in which the viewer perceives the picture, does this not constitute the mastery of the rhetoric of a form of visual language?

And yet, even in the most carefully constructed image, the artist has no real control over how the viewer goes about reading it. Within a single image, one person may begin his examination from the top, while another may begin hers from the bottom. Still another person may be drawn first to the middle of the image, each ending up with a slightly different viewing experience. The artist can subtly suggest a reading based on composition, but can by no means enforce this suggestion. The reading of an image lacks the specificity of reading words, whose order of perception is governed by laws of grammar. These laws tell the reader *how* to read the words, that is, how to relate them to one another based on where they appear in sequence.

It is the sequential element that makes these rules of grammar work. A single letter by itself has no perceived meaning – or rather, has such a wide range of possible meanings that the mind cannot satisfactorily narrow the possibilities down to derive any kind of meaningful information from it. Several letters in sequence, however, become a word, which has a much narrower range of meaning, though still by no means narrow enough to arrive upon one reading among everyone who sees it. Words in sequence form a sentence, and once this level of complexity is reached, the rules of grammar come into play to govern the meaning of a given sequence. If these rules of grammar are not followed correctly, misunderstanding or ambiguity of meaning occurs.

Following this train of logic, if a single word can be thought of as being equivalent to a single image (each has a fairly limited range of readings, but allows for some variety depending on who is doing the reading) then cannot a string of separate pictures be sequenced to form a meaningful unit in the same way that a string of words can be sequenced to form a sentence? Once this connection is made, it becomes apparent

that in the same way that the grammar of a written language controls the meaning of words based on their relation to each other in sequence, so too is the meaning of a sequence of images dependent on their spatial relationship to one another. In a sense, a visual grammar is established.

This visual grammar derived from the sequencing of images has been put to use throughout human history, from ancient cave paintings to Egyptian tombs, and from Mayan friezes to Medieval European tapestries. In cultures that also had an established written language, writing was often used in tandem with the images to further aid in their reading. This same tradition is alive today in what we call comics. All of these, from prehistoric paintings to what you find when you open your newspaper today, belong to the medium of sequential art.

II.

The Visual Grammar of Comics

Sequential art, as a medium of expression, has been in existence since earliest times, even though the *term* “Sequential Art” has only been coined relatively recently. So what exactly qualifies as sequential art? Will Eisner, who invented the term, defined it as “. . . a literary medium which narrates by the arrangements of images and text in an intelligible sequence (159).” Later, building upon Will Eisner’s work, Scott McCloud would define sequential art as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence (9).” I prefer McCloud’s later definition, because it not only clarifies what can be thought of as sequential art, but also, through its carefully chosen wording, what *cannot* be sequential art. Both definitions exclude prose and other written media, due to their

lack of a pictorial element, but McCloud's definition goes further to exclude film and animation; while in reality they are a series of rapidly projected still images, they are projected onto the same screen, and are therefore not spatially juxtaposed (McCloud admits, however, that the physical strip of film itself *can* be thought of as sequential art). McCloud's definition also allows for the fact that sequential art does not necessarily require any written element whatsoever.

So if sequential art (and by extension, comics) comprises its own medium apart from that of the written word, and is a medium governed by the grammatical laws of visual literacy, what are these laws, and how do they fit together to allow the visually literate reader to make sense of what he sees on the page? The reader must know how to read and decode the information that is presented to him, and how it relates to the world within the comic he is reading: how it governs the passage of time, how it simulates motion, how it informs the reader of subject and object, how it can add adjectival or adverbial qualities to the image, and how each of these elements relate to one another on the space of the page to form a cohesive narrative.

If, as I said before, a single picture can be thought of as a "word," grammatically speaking, then the same can be said of a single panel in a comic. As Eisner states, "The panel is the basic storytelling unit of the comic. Through it the reader experiences the world within (28)." But just as the word can be broken down into letters, so to can the panel be broken down into individual elements. McCloud calls these elements "icons". The "icon," in his sense, refers to any image which can be used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea (27). He divides the icons into three categories: Practical, Symbolic, and Pictorial.

Practical icons are icons used for language, science, and communication. These are letters, numbers, punctuation marks, scientific and mathematical symbols, and so forth. Two practical icons that are ubiquitous in comics and absolutely crucial to their present structure are the panel itself and the word balloon (27).

Symbolic icons are icons that are used to represent concepts, ideas, and philosophies. These can be such things as a cross used to represent Christianity, a company logo, or lines representing motion or sound. Symbolic icons (as well as practical icons) have specific meaning, and this meaning will not change even if the manner of representation changes. Different modes of representing the same symbol can, however, imbue it with different affective qualities (27).

Pictorial icons are those which are made to resemble that which they represent, to varying degrees. A portrait of a person or a drawing of a building would be examples. Because the pictorial icons hold no meaning any more than what they represent, how they are drawn can affect this meaning. A drawing of a face can, by its manner of representation, be made to appear old or young – and they will be two very different faces (27).

These categories of icons are usually easily separable, but this is not always the case. However, the reader must be able to distinguish which iconic elements fall into which category (even if this is happening subconsciously) in order to read the comic properly. McCloud gives the excellent example of a set of wavy vertical lines as an icon. Depending on how they are used, they could for instance, represent smoke emanating from a burning pipe. This would constitute a representation of a visible physical phenomenon, and so be classified as a pictorial icon. The same wavy lines, however, if

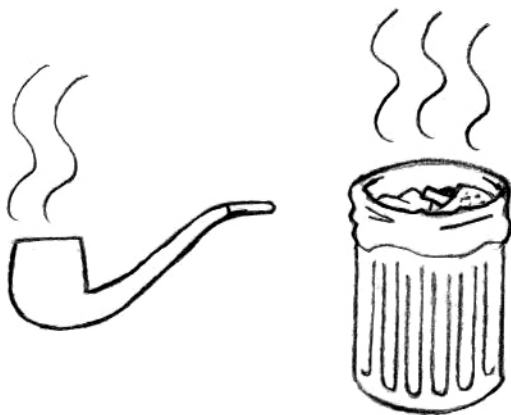


Figure 1 - A single icon can be used to suit multiple purposes. The author depends on the reader's ability to decode visual language to derive their meaning.

placed above an open trash can, take on an entirely different meaning. Suddenly, they represent an invisible concept: the idea of foul odor. They become a symbolic icon.

Such symbolic icons are constantly being invented to represent concepts or ideas that cannot be drawn in a straightforward way like a visible item. Oftentimes, they are introduced without any sort of explanation, and the artist hopes to draw upon the reader's experience and intuition to figure out their meaning. As can be expected, some of these symbolic representations are more successful in capturing their meaning than others. The most successful ones are adopted by other artists and used to portray the same meaning; they are added to the lexicon of visual vocabulary.¹

Another area of representation that can blur the boundaries of pictorial and symbolic meaning is often one of the most important elements in many comics: representation of the human form. While in the first order a depiction of a person is a pictorial icon, this same pictorial representation allows for the inclusion of



Figure 2 - In Yotsuba&!, Author Azuma Kiyohiko introduces the "+++ " symbol with no explanation. He seems to use it to indicate positive attitude or feeling.

1. Note: All panels, sequences, and pages from *manga* in this document – even those in English – are to be read in the Japanese order (from right to left and top to bottom) unless otherwise specified.

highly symbolic elements as well: body language, gesture, posture, and facial expression.

Eisner goes so far as to say that

In comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text. The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of the words. They can by their relevance to the reader's own experience invoke a nuance of emotion and give auditory inflection to the voice of the speaker (103).

The use of body language can be a powerful and effective tool if employed properly. To begin with, unlike invented symbols, they need no explanation, as we encounter them in everyday life. By the same token, because of our extensive experience as human beings in reading others' body language, great care must be taken to accurately represent the intended posture, gesture, or expression. They can, however, be exaggerated for ease of reading, dramatic, or comedic effect.

Even icons, however, can be further broken down into smaller component elements: line, color, and shape. Every icon, and therefore everything printed on the page of a comic is constructed from one of these three components or some combination thereof. While they can only convey meaning and representation when configured to form an icon, by themselves, they have immense expressive potential. This allows them to lend an adjectival or adverbial aspect to a picture, thereby enriching its reading. A sharp, jagged line can give the impression of aggressiveness, a large circle can give the feeling of comfort and safety, and an intense red can feel hot or angry. These affective properties can lend themselves to visually describing a character's physical state as well as adding a layer of mood to the general atmosphere of the comic.



Figure 3a - The unsure, minimal linework of Not Simple helps to reinforce the mood of a story about fragile human relationships...



Figure 3b - While the thick hatching and dense blacks of King of Thorn bring to life a dark, decaying world that is rife with danger and the unknown.

Expressionistic lines and patterns can be used to reflect a character’s inner state as well as his or her outer condition. When a character is removed from its “physical” world and placed on top of such an expressionistic pattern, the affective qualities of that pattern tend to be read by the reader as a reflection of that character’s inner, psychological state, since there is no visual reference to the character’s position within its physical space.

The expressive potential of line, shape and color also extends to the panels, word balloons, and lettering in the comic. A narrow panel with a small field of view can give the reader a claustrophobic feeling, while a wide panel has just the opposite effect- that of



Figure 4a - The feeling of losing an important item...

allowing the reader plenty of room to move around. A diagonal panel can give the feeling of dynamic action. A conventional straight edged border gives a feeling of normalcy, while a wavy border can imply an imagined



Figure 4b – Or a lovers’ embrace...



Figure 4c - Or a shocking discovery can all be conveyed through the expressionistic power of the background.

sequence or a change in tense. A panel with no border at all can give it the feeling of being suspended in timeless, boundless space. The nature of the shape and binding line of a word balloon can tell the reader if a character is speaking in a normal voice, shouting, or thinking. The “tail” of the balloon indicates *who* is speaking. A square box with no indicated speaker is generally read as narration. Words with no balloon at all could represent an inner monologue, an aside, or an off-the-cuff remark. The lettering of the words can give insight into the qualities of a character’s voice. Handwritten text can give



Figure 5 - Closely spaced, progressively smaller diagonal panels packed with visual information add to the feeling of a situation that has quickly gotten out of hand as a horse stampedes through a saloon.

an informal feeling while a perfectly regular computer generated font can give an impersonal feeling. Words representing sound effects strive toward capturing the very nature of the sound they represent in their rendering.

Both pictures and words, when looked at as icons, are no

more than opposite ends of a sliding scale- one end being realistic representation and the other end being the encapsulation of pure meaning, with no representative qualities whatsoever. So, through the device of the icon, one can consider comics to be composed of not a fusion of words and pictures as two separate entities, but a single, unified vocabulary. Even so, Words and pictures are not interchangeable, and effective communication through the comic medium depends on the interplay between these two extremes. In describing this interplay, McCloud writes,

Pictures can induce strong feeling in the reader, but they can also lack the specificity of words. Words, on the other hand, offer that specificity, but can lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures, relying instead on a gradual cumulative effect (135).

Words, belonging to the realm of invisible concept, lend themselves particularly well to describing other invisible, conceptual things such as thought or emotion. Pictures, on the other hand, do a much tidier job of representing that which can be seen with the eye.

The ways in which word and picture can be combined within a panel are nearly limitless. Pictures can be used to merely illustrate a sequence told almost entirely in words, or conversely, words could take secondary position in a sequence that is told primarily in pictures. They can be combined in such a way that together, they convey a message that neither can convey alone, or one could simply be used to amplify the meaning of the other. They could even follow seemingly separate, non-intersecting paths. Through the interplay of word a picture, comics constitute a synthesis of meaning and representation.

Through the interaction of iconic elements, comics define the structure of each individual panel. By the nature of the line, shape and color in the representation, affective qualities can be assigned to an image. But until panels are lined up in a deliberate sequence, they lack the visual grammar that allows the medium to carry a complex narrative. A single panel, when read as one “word” in a



Figure 6a - The narrative can be carried through pictures, as in this example...

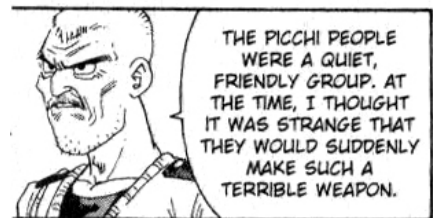
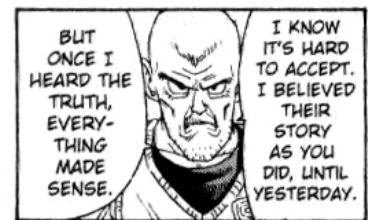


Figure 6b – Or through text, as in this sequence.



Figure 7 - Picture and word may follow seemingly unrelated sequences.

series of panels acts as a sort of practical icon that indicates to the reader that time and/or space is being divided. When several of these panels are lined up together, the reader mentally fills in the gaps between the panels to logically connect them. It is through this mechanic, called closure, that comics are able to simulate time and motion between panels, as well as build a narrative.

As McCloud describes it, closure is the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole (63).” This is possible because as humans, we draw on

our everyday experience to fill in gaps in our perception. Each experience is filed away to memory to be drawn upon when we encounter a similar situation sometime in the future. It is what allows us to learn. For example, in a family portrait, each person may only be visible from the waist up, but we all know from common experience that these people have legs as well. Thus, we can mentally recreate what a head to



Figure 8 - Closure tells you that the other end of the cigarette is likely in someone's mouth, and that the hand is probably connected to the same person's arm.

toe photograph of someone might look like through the use of closure - though each person's mental photograph will be slightly different based on their past experience. In the same way a single picture can be completed with the help of closure, two separate panels in sequence can be logically connected to one another.

The space between panels, or the gutter, as it is called in comic jargon, acts as a kind of glue that holds the sequence of panels together. It is a space that exists outside the world of the comic, which exists within the boundaries of the panel. In each panel, the reader is shown just a snippet of the world inside; when panels are shown in sequence, the reader is given an ordered

set of these snippets. Each panel tells the reader a little more about what is happening, but these panels can be spaced at highly irregular intervals both

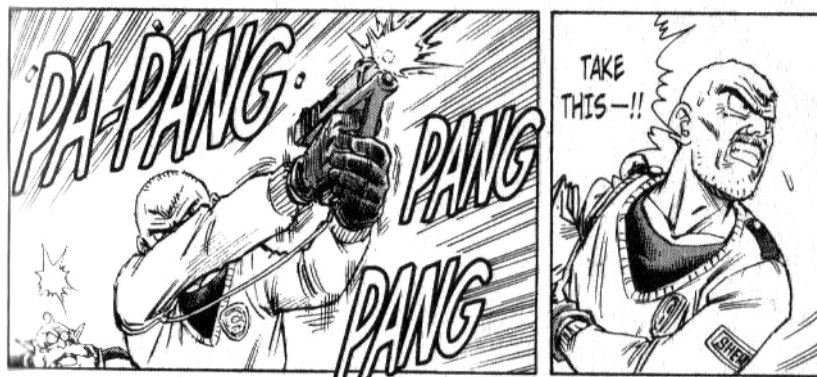


Figure 9 – Closure leads the reader to fill in the gaps in this sequence (read right to left); the omitted part is the actual action of drawing of the gun.

temporally and spatially. That which is not shown to the reader happens between panels in the gutter. The reader fills in these informational gaps mentally by drawing on past experience to produce a logical sequence.

The amount of reader involvement and visual literacy required to make these logical jumps varies depending on the nature of the panel to panel transition. The most straightforward type of transition is one which shows only a momentary lapse between panels. A tape of cinematic film is an excellent example, as very little changes between each individual frame. Perhaps the second most straightforward transition type is used to

simulate motion and action. The series of images shows a subject engaged in a number of positions which, when read in sequence, result in the performance of an action. A subject to subject transition involves the direction of

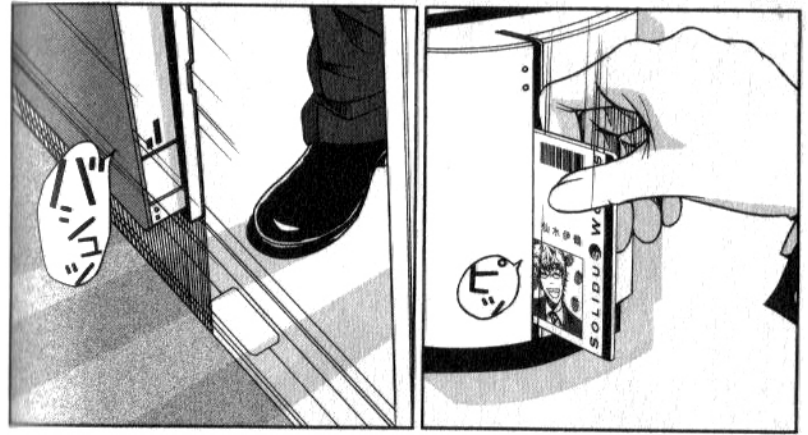
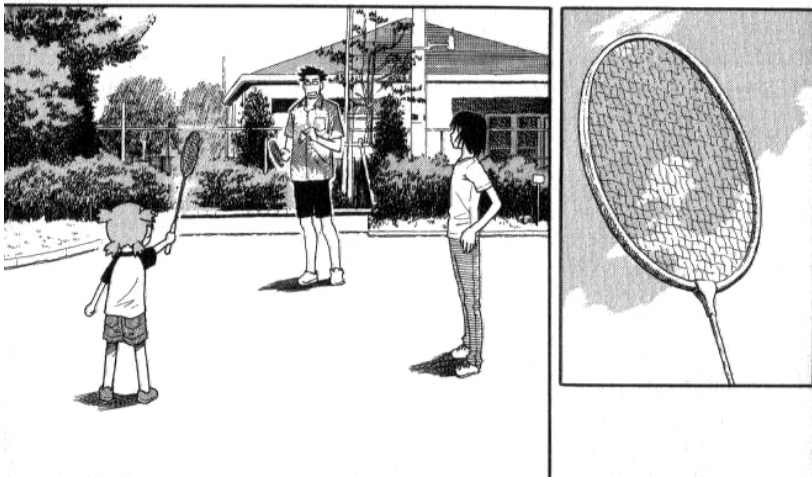
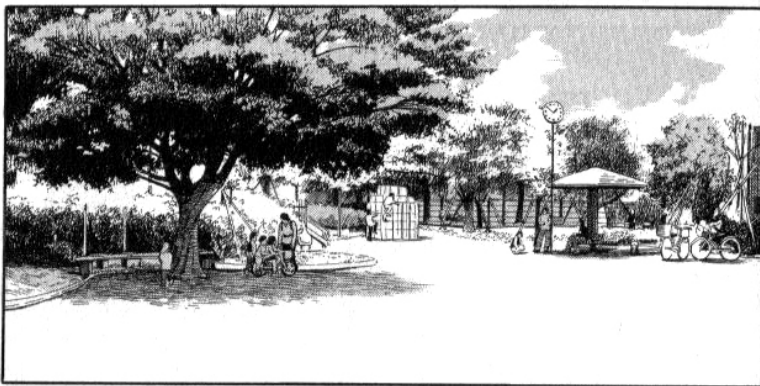


Figure 10 – An example of a subject to subject transition. The reader understands that the door opening is a direct result of the card swipe, even though neither can be seen in the same picture.

a reader’s view to different subjects within a scene, while still depending on a time lapse between panels. A Panel which shows someone speaking and a second showing someone else giving a response causes the reader to conclude that the two people are engaged in a conversation with one another, even if each panel shows only one speaker at a time.



Beginning with this stage, greater leaps of logic must occur in order to connect the panels in a meaningful way. Transitions may also result in a change of scenery; crossing large distances of time and space. Other transitions may show a reader different aspects of a single scene, bypassing time entirely to instead examine different aspects of a place, mood, or idea. “Rather than acting as a bridge between separate

Figure 11 - An aspect to aspect transition sequence. It sets up the scene by showing the reader only glimpses, with no hint as to the passage of time.

moments, the reader here must assemble a *single* moment using scattered fragments (79).” It is also possible for a transition to be a non-sequitur, with no apparent logical connection to the panel before it whatsoever.

The artist, who wishes to control the narrative, must be careful to strike the right balance between showing too much and showing too little. If too many panels are used, he can give a very complete narrative, but it may tend to drag on with what a reader may perceive as too much unnecessary information. If the artist shows the reader too little of the scene, however, the result may be too open to differing interpretation. Of course, these properties can be used purposefully to produce either a cinematic, slow pace, or deliberate ambiguity. The artist tries to show just as much as he needs to, depending on closure and the common experience of his audience to fill in the gaps in more or less the same fashion.

The closure phenomenon is not unique to comics, but it is probably used more often and with more required participation on the part of the reader in comics than any of the other forms of media which employ it. Electronic media such as film and television also make use of closure, but they depend more on persistence of vision than a voluntary logical process. They leave no room for interpretation between images. Comics, on the other hand, require the reader to fill in the blanks using past experience (or the occasional leap of faith) as a guide.

I have already touched on how the use of closure can be used to simulate the passage of time. This works by causing the reader to infer a lapse of time between panels. Representing the passage of time within a single panel, however, requires other strategies. One of the most common of these strategies is to introduce another element which cannot

exist without imposing a sense of time – sound. Word balloons and sound effects each give a sense of duration that an otherwise silent panel might not have. Dialogue, especially, imposes a sense of timing; we know from a lifetime of conversations about how long it would take to say any given phrase. Furthermore, if more than one person is speaking inside a single panel, issues of action and reaction are introduced. A response to a question cannot be given before the question is asked.

The importance of spatial relationships in comics also means that space itself can be used to introduce a sense of time. A small panel seems to indicate less time than does a larger one perhaps because less time is necessary to comprehend the content within it.



A large panel is capable of holding far more information, and so can take the reader a longer time to comprehend, perhaps even adding a montage effect. Even if an empty small panel is compared to an empty large panel, however, the large panel will still have the feeling of representing a longer duration of time, due to the nature of comics as a spatial medium. In a sense, in comics, space is equivalent to time.

Figure 12 – The large panel occupies more space on the page, so it imparts a sense of a greater duration of time compared to the two smaller panels.

Sense of time can also be altered by manipulating the relationship between the “real” world inside the panel and the void between them, the gutters. Absence of a panel border gives the panel a somewhat timeless quality, as its content is no longer clearly separated from the intermediate space between panels, which exists outside of the time within the panels. Another method of producing a timeless quality in



Figure 13 – The absence of a panel border seems to separate that panel from the flow of time. It can give the panel a timeless dreamy quality or make a moment seem to drag on forever.

a panel is to use a “bleed.” This is when the content of the panel, unconstrained by a border, runs off the page, “bleeding” into the space of the real world. These kinds of panels are good for establishment or setting mood; as they leak into the world of the reader, they in turn help to pull the reader into the world of the comic, producing a lingering effect that can be felt even after the reader continues to read beyond that panel. This lingering, involving effect tends to be compounded as more edges bleed off the page.

The visual grammar that governs the reading of comics and sequential art is just as complex as the grammar that governs the reading of a written language. An artist who can master this grammar is capable of telling a story in a way that it cannot be told



through prose or film, or any other medium, for that matter. It depends on an understanding of the interplay between pictures, words, and symbols, and the expressive power of the lines, shapes, and colors used throughout the production. Most importantly, this is a medium which derives its most powerful narrative properties from the arrangement of items in deliberate sequence. Through proper sequencing, comics can represent time and motion in a medium which possesses neither. A vast visual vocabulary is at work, and hence a refined visual literacy



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Figure 14 – In a bleed, such as the top panel in this figure, the panel continues off the edge of the page. The feeling at the moment of tense, fearful indecision before she slams the computer down on his head lingers even after the action is complete.

is needed to make sense of it all.

III.

The Development of *Manga*

Comics are capable of relating a narrative just as complex, serious, or thought-provoking as any other medium. Historically, however, they have not often been used to

this end. In America, especially, the comic medium was seen as a mere diversion for children (and oftentimes a bad influence). In large part, this conception of comics as only suitable for juvenile entertainment shaped their development as a medium in the United States. As a result, the “Superhero” genre soon became the dominant category in the medium. These morality plays with clear-cut roles always ended with a victory for justice and a restoration of the status quo. Over the years, they grew in complexity and range of theme, but in large part, they remained confined by the boundaries of the genre. Of course there were many underground artists who employed the medium to other ends, but they seldom, if ever, found mainstream success, thanks to the continuing association of comics with children.

In Japan, however, this has not been the case. While *manga* for children are, of course, widespread and enjoy a wide readership, so too do *manga* produced for older audiences. The subject matter of Japanese *manga* also cover a far wider range of genres than do their American counterparts. From the beginning of the postwar era until the mid 1990s, the *manga* medium grew to become one of the most pervasive forms of entertainment and communication in Japan. In 1994, there were twelve different *manga* magazines that could boast circulation numbers above one million. At the same time, the highest selling Japanese current affairs magazine reported numbers of about 900,000 (Kinsella, 2000: 48). What is it about the *manga* medium as it developed in Japan that caused it to attain such a prevalent position among public media? How did it overcome the stigma that haunted it overseas?

To address these questions, let me begin with a brief overview of the development of the *manga* industry in Japan. Many scholars who wish to lend weight to *manga* as a

form of Japanese cultural expression labor to trace its roots to surprising depths of history - as far back as the early 12th century (Schodt 209). For my purposes, however, it is sufficient to begin this examination with the postwar era, though it is by no means the first appearance of *manga* in Japan's history.

With the end of the Pacific War, the Japanese people began the process of rebuilding, both physically and culturally. In looking for diversion from the hardships of everyday life, a huge new audience looking for cheap entertainment grew as migrant workers from the country began to pour into the cities looking for opportunity. They found this entertainment in the *manga* industry, which was also just beginning to get back on its feet. As paper was still a relatively scarce commodity, most *manga* was borrowed from specialty rental bookstores.

Many of the artists who worked for the rental *manga* companies were of similar age to the young male migrant workers who were the medium's primary consumers. They saw an opportunity to take leave of the cartoony style of most *manga* productions, and began to develop a more realistic, hard-hitting style that would appeal to their readership. This new style was dubbed *gekiga* (劇画), or "dramatic pictures" in reference to its more realistic style and themes. Many of the stories were period dramas. Among the most popular of the *gekiga* titles was *Secret Martial Arts of the Ninja* (忍者武芸帳) by Shirato Sanpei, published in eight rental volumes between 1959 and 1962 (Kinsella, 2000: 27). The story featured

"Invisible organizers who fight to the death against the oppressive rule of the fief lords," and "[took] the standpoint of the peasants, the beggars, and the still more discriminated against Buraku people (27)."

The primary readers of *gekiga* identified with the downtrodden peasants of the stories they read, and the rental *gekiga* business boomed during this period.

While the *gekiga* genre began to take over among young men, monthly *manga* magazines catering to younger audiences made their reappearance. It was during this period that Japan's "God of Manga" Tezuka Osamu made his first publications. Tezuka, along with other contributors to children's magazines, made use of a more cartoony style reminiscent of American animators Walt Disney and Max Fleisher. In addition, Tezuka was a pioneer of story serialization, in which a single narrative is drawn out over several publications with persistent continuity between each. This allowed for the development of more complex narratives, in contrast with the self-contained episodic nature of American comics at the time. It also led to less text and more art per issue, allowing for greater freedom in visual storytelling (Schodt 248).

During this period, the term *manga* referred specifically to these more child-oriented productions, while the term *gekiga* was reserved for the more adult-oriented productions. Sharon Kinsella writes,

While *manga*, in this sense, has been perceived as a clean and healthy form of children's entertainment, *gekiga* has been associated with poorly educated young urban workers and anti-establishment politics (2000: 29).

This distinction would rise to great importance during the student movements of the mid to late 1960s.

By the end of the 1950s, larger publishers began to release affordable weekly *manga* magazines, which quickly put the rental *manga* industry out of business. During the 1960s, the *manga* market grew rapidly, aided in part by the widespread introduction

of television into Japanese homes and the fledgling animation industry, which adapted hit *manga* series for television. Rather than working at cross purposes to one another, these animated shows helped to stimulate interest in the *manga* titles, drawing in readers who might not otherwise have been interested. During this same period, publishers of children's *manga* magazines, hoping to keep the attention of their now adolescent audience and attract new readers, began hiring artists known for their *gekiga* style. Their gamble worked, and their readership swelled.

In 1964, the alternative *manga* magazine GARO was first published. It featured stories by many of the *gekiga* artists who had been out of work since the rental *manga* industry went under. Many of the titles featured within had a leftist slant, including *The Legend of Kamui* (カムイ伝), by the well known Shirato Sanpei, who was an avid student of Marxist theory (Kinsella, 2000: 31). *The Legend of Kamui* was another success for Shirato, and by 1970,

“GARO was closely involved with the political activities of students and the anti-AMPO (US-Japan Security Treaty) movement. Though initially becoming popular amongst blue-collar workers during the 1950s, the historical themes of Shirato's series eventually converged with the themes of *Zengakuren*, the students' movement (31).”

Due to its connection with the student movements, several demonstrations organized by small right-wing organizations were held calling for a ban on the sale of *manga* in general, and *gekiga* specifically. The widespread readership of *gekiga* by the new generation of young students helped to cement the status of *manga* as reading material for adults as well as children.

The advent of the 1970s led to a cooling of the politicization of *manga*, and new advances in artistic experimentation within the medium. New genres of *manga* aimed at a young female audience began appearing, with themes of romance and narratives that relied more heavily on characterization than action. This led to new development in methods of representing characters' inner psychological states. GARO magazine turned its attention to more avant-garde productions that explored themes of dreams and social psychology. While these more experimental *manga* featured in GARO did not have the same level of widespread success of the more politically charged *gekiga* of years past, they did have a considerable influence on later generations of artists and expanded the range of possible themes that could be explored through the medium.

Also in the early 1970s, offset printing and photocopying equipment fell drastically in price, and so became available to the mass public. Former radical students who were unemployable due to their past activities, or people who were interested in youth culture or niche subcultures began setting up small, privately-owned publishing companies producing a wide range of specialist magazines, many of which also featured *manga* (Kinsella, 1998: 294). Artists whose work was too experimental to secure employment at a major publishing company, or who did not wish to work at the maddening pace required for a regular weekly feature, found a new home at these small magazines, often doing freelance work.

Amateur artists who produced their own *manga* as a hobby rather than a profession also had access to the services of these small publishing companies, and so, for the first time, they too were able to produce and distribute copies of their work. This began on a small scale, with the amateur productions generally only being available to

acquaintances of the artist, but before long, networks began to form. In 1975, three young *manga* critics established Comic Market, a three-day convention for the purchase, sale, and celebration of amateur *manga*. With a centralized venue in which to distribute their productions, the amateur *manga* culture began to pick up steam.

Amateur *manga* clubs and organizations began to develop and expand in size, and the community grew more vibrant and diverse. In particular, the amateur *manga* culture gave female artists an opportunity to express themselves, as they typically had a harder time finding employment in the commercial sector. In time, the culture came to be dominated by female participants.

New genres began to appear that could not exist in the commercial *manga* sphere. Parody, based on existing commercial titles, took known characters and placed them in situations or circumstances that would not normally be found in their commercial works. Though oftentimes humorous in nature, this was not always the case (Kinsella, 2000: 113). *Yaoi*, usually written by and for women, is generally characterized by homosexual romance between lead male characters. While the characters are ostensibly male, in their rendering they tend toward androgyny, combining traits of both sexes. *Yaoi* as a genre is also known for paying no heed to conventional narrative structure (Kinsella, 1998: 301).

Back on the commercial side of the *manga* world, other new genres began to appear. In 1983, *Section Chief Shima Kosaku* (課長島耕作) began its nine year serialization. This series, rendered in the realistic *gekiga* style, followed the life of Shima Kosaku, a low-level company executive rising through the ranks. As its popularity spread, the character of Shima became a heroic model of an ideal manager, avoiding petty office politics and striving to adhere to an ethical code. He became a new kind of *manga*

protagonist who appealed to a more white-collar audience. The *gekiga* style also allowed for a realistic portrayal of goings-on within the company. The style which had been previously associated with anti-establishment activity was now being put to use in a way which portrayed the establishment in a more sympathetic light. The popularity of *Section Chief Shima Kosaku* led to an explosion of similar productions, all with the intention of appealing to a more business-oriented audience.

In 1986, *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* (Japan Economic Times) published *Japan Inc. An Introduction to Japanese Economics in Manga* (漫画日本経済入門). It was, just as its title suggests, a peek into the inner workings of the economy, based on a series of seminars that had previously been published in the newspaper (Kinsella, 2000: 70). *Japan Inc.* was translated into English and French and quickly won the admiration of international critics for the apparent ease with which it made a dry and sometimes cryptic topic such as economics easily digestible for a wide audience. The success of this title set the ball rolling for another new genre which came to be known as “information *manga*” (情報漫画). These *manga* touched on a wide variety of subjects, from business and politics to education and literature, and even the occasional foray into documentary or biography. They utilized real-world facts, figures, and current events to inform and educate their audience.

These productions continued to be lauded overseas as an achievement in literary and artistic culture for Japan. Hoping to capitalize on this wave of critical success, publishers who had never been interested in publishing *manga* due to its association with juvenile or subversive themes began scrambling to release critically acclaimed titles of their own. Foreign literary classics such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Romeo and Juliet* were

released, rendered in the style typical of girls' *manga*. An ambitious 48-volume work entitled *Manga History of Japan* (漫画日本の歴史) was released at the rate of one book a month from 1989 to 1993. The work was drawn by Ishinomori Shotaro (who had also drawn *Japan, Inc.*), with input from a team of more than 50 academic specialists from numerous fields. The work was recognized by Japan's Ministry of Education and Culture as "suitable for educational purposes in state schools (Kinsella, 2000:73)."

By the end of the 1980s, *manga* had become a powerful cultural force in both the commercial and amateur sectors. International acclaim for commercial *manga* productions set it on par with other great literary traditions around the world, proving that the medium could be used for important, culturally significant purposes. At the same time, the amateur *manga* scene had grown exponentially. In 1992, over 250,000 fans and amateur artists attended Comic Market, making it the largest public gathering in Japan (Kinsella, 1998: 298).

Over the years of its development, *manga* has shown itself able to address an incredibly wide variety of themes and subjects in a wide variety of visual styles. These developments took place in relative isolation from the comic communities of America and Europe, leading to a distinctly Japanese visual grammar. Over the years, more visual vocabulary was added to the lexicon and the visual grammar used to relate the *manga* narrative became more refined. Over time, as *manga* began to attract more international attention, it was only natural that overseas audiences would be interested in reading these works in their own language. Translators suddenly had more work translating *manga* from Japanese as well as conventional prose and poetry. But they soon found that translating *manga* was not the same as translating a novel.

IV.

Comics in Translation

Before jumping right in to issues that translators face when trying to render *manga* in another language, however, allow me a brief consideration of the nature of translation in general and the inescapable problems it creates in rendering the work of one language in terms of another, and how these apply to the comic medium.

There are countless scholars who have, over the years, debated the nature of translation, its purpose, its methods, or whether a work in translation can even be considered equivalent to the original. To my mind, in the words of George Steiner,

Each act of translation is one of approximation, of near miss or failure to get within range. . . . The case against translation is irrefutable, but only if we are presented, in Isben's phrase, with the 'claims of the ideal.' In actual performance these claims cannot be met or allowed (Leighton 448).

In other words, no translation can ever capture the full range of meaning present in the original work: in removing it from its native context, layers of meaning related to issues of language, culture, and history (among many others) which are a part of the common experience for the original audience are lost on the audience of the translation. Even so, it is the job of the translator to produce a work "which has the same effect on its new readers as the original had on its readers," or at least get as close as possible (449).

In trying to make a text accessible to his audience, the translator tries to localize such linguistic and cultural differences, imbuing them with what Lawrence Venuti calls a "domestic inscription." In a sense, this domestic inscription involves the mediation of foreign elements, by either changing or removing them, and replacing them with similar

elements that appear in the domestic (that is, the translation's target) arena. Perhaps a "better" or more "accurate" translation would try to communicate these elements to the domestic audience at the expense of easy accessibility. Yet even translators who strive to preserve the "foreignness" of a text can only determine what constitutes this foreignness in terms of their own culture, so even these decisions are influenced by their domestic background. There is no way to avoid this cultural contamination.

Even so, translation does occur. Meaningful information is transmitted across language boundaries, even while some of the information contained in the original text is lost. This means that there must be two kinds of information present in any text: that which must remain intact in order to establish effective communication on a basic level, or, the *invariant*, and that which is left out or changed in order to facilitate the transmission of the first type, or the *remainder*.

What constitutes the invariant? Once again, this is highly dependent on culture, as in different places or epochs, there may be different standards for what constitutes necessary information. In general, however, if one were to translate a novel, such things as plot, the events of the narrative and their sequence would likely be left the same. Dates, names of people and places, and actions are also likely to remain intact. Even elements of an author's narrative form such as writing style, paragraph breaks, or the general length in pages of a work may be considered important to the spirit of the original (Venuti 470). I must stress, however, that all of these are subject to variation according to the culture of the translation and the intentions of the translator.

The remainder, however, is a little more difficult to pin down in nature. Venuti writes of remainders:

They exceed communication of a univocal meaning and instead draw attention to the conditions of the communicative act, conditions that are in the first instance linguistic and cultural, but ultimately embrace social and political factors (471).

In simpler terms, the remainder can perhaps be defined as culturally-specific leftovers that are subject to domesticating change. At the language level, examples of this may be regional dialects in speech, clichés, slogans, archaisms, puns or double-meanings, to name a few. At a deeper level, however, the remainder could be the intentions of the original author, the historical context of the work, or the political climate at the time of its original publication. All of these things have an effect on how the original native audience reads and perceives the text. In dealing with such remainders, the translator may choose to either leave them out and find a way to work around them or replace them with *domestic* remainders. Once again, Venuti writes,

The foreign text is rewritten in domestic dialects and discourses, registers and styles, and this results in the production of textual effects that signify only in the history of the domestic language and culture. The translator may produce these effects to communicate the foreign text, trying to invent domestic analogues for foreign forms and themes. But the result will always go beyond any communication to release target-oriented possibilities of meaning (471).

Language is inextricably tied to the time and place from which it originates. Translation of any work removes it from its original native context, stripping away any linguistic, literary, historical, social, or political implications it may have had in its original form. These are replaced by the domestic linguistic, literary, historical, social, and political contexts, which can result in a wholly different work in terms of its style, message, and

significance. The function of translation has often been likened to a pane of glass: it should be as transparent as possible so as to allow the unhindered passage of a message. But no matter how transparent the glass is, it is still there; a barrier blocking the complete transmission of the original work. If you stand in front of a window, you may be able to see the world outside, but you cannot feel the breeze or hear the birds. That is the nature of the remainder.

It is the translators' job to navigate these invariants and remainders to produce a work which is intelligible and meaningful to their domestic audiences while still producing a work that can be recognized as equivalent to the original. The translator may choose to take great liberty in the localization in an effort to extend the work's appeal in the domestic sphere, or perhaps even remove any telling characteristics that might tie the work to a particular time or place in an effort to universalize it. But in doing this, the translator risks imposing his or her own voice on the story at the expense of the original author. On the other hand, in an attempt to remain as faithful as possible to the original work, one may translate very closely, doing one's best to produce an exact echo of the original author's voice. This method may indeed produce a faithful translation, but it may be opaque or inaccessible to a domestic audience with no knowledge of the original context. These two extremes represent the two ends of a scale: one being a very free translation and the other a very literal translation. As Lauren Leighton notes:

It is correct to describe the free end of the spectrum as kinds of translation which bring the work to the reader, and the literal scale as kinds of translation which bring the reader to the work (452).

With a licentious translation, the reader need not know any information about the original context of the work because it is presented in such a way that this knowledge is unnecessary to its understanding, even though much of the meaning and significance of the original may have been lost. A literal translation, however, requires more work on the part of the reader to learn about the circumstances of the original production in order to make sense of the translation. The translator may work at either end of the spectrum according to the nature of the original text, the original author's intentions (as well as the translator's own), or the makeup of the domestic audience.

The translator must always be wary of the fact that no matter what medium he or she works in, be it prose or poetry, film or animation, or comics or manga, there will always be a certain amount of information which cannot be adequately transmitted across the language barrier. The quality of the work is largely determined by how the translator handles this information in the translation with respect to both the original work and the domestic audience, and this requires a certain amount of artistry.

Because comics as a medium share numerous characteristics with prose, they share many of the same problems when it comes to their translation. But comics depend on visual language as well as textual language, and so they also present many difficulties of their own. Among the similarities that comics share with prose literature is the use of text in its narrative structure. Essentially, any problem that a translator of prose could run into also has the potential to be found in comics. Representation of regional dialect, puns, double-meanings, onomatopoeia and other problems that arise from the reproduction of spoken or written language are common to both. Prose and comics also

share many narrative elements that are generally considered invariants, such as plot, character, setting, and a reliance on deliberate sequence in their telling.

As I have already demonstrated, the narrative structure of comics relies very heavily on the sequential pictorial element, which is absent in prose literature. The pictorial element uses visual grammar to relate its share of the narrative, and so any attempt to alter the nature of the picture in turn changes the visual language of the work. For this reason, the pictorial element must be considered an invariant with primacy over the text in most cases.

The inviolable nature of the pictorial element brings a whole host of new problems to the translator, however. In many cases, visual language does not require any special treatment or change in order to be understood across a language barrier. For example, a series of images depicting an action will generally result in the reader understanding the nature of that action no matter the language of the text – provided the images are read in the same sequence in all cases. But because the pictures act as a permanent inscription of the original context of the work, elements which are unfamiliar to the domestic reader are bound to appear sooner or later. Translation problems arise if cultural remainders are present in the image itself, or if the image is highly interdependent with a textual remainder.

The use of symbolic icons in comics presents many problems as well. Pictures are received information. Very little expertise is necessary to understand their meaning. They mean no more than what they are; a representation of a visible object. Usually, no explanation or special accommodations need to be made by a translator on their behalf. Words, on the other hand, are perceived information. They are a purely conceptual

vehicle through which meaning is communicated. They bear very little, if any resemblance to that which they represent. Special knowledge is necessary in order to decode and make sense of them. A translator is aided here by dictionaries, imperfect though they may be. Symbols fall between these two extremes. They generally use a visible, pictorial element to represent an intangible concept. They are, in a sense, a very rudimentary form of textual language, and therefore often unique to the culture which gave rise to them. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that two different cultures employ similar symbols for different meanings, which can lead to confusion in translation. For symbols, the translator has no recourse. Even though they are pictorial, their meaning is not necessarily clear to the domestic reader. And there are certainly no dictionaries in which the meanings of such visual symbols are compiled. More often than not, these symbols are left just as they are without explanation, the translator depending on the ingenuity of his audience to deduce their meaning; after all, they usually have to do the same with newly introduced visual symbols that appear in native works as well.

A translator who wishes to transfer a comic from one language to another has much to deal with. On top of all of the issues that a translator of prose might encounter, the presence of the visual language of comics only complicates things further, as anyone who has tried to translate *manga* from Japanese to English has discovered.

V.

From *Manga* to Comic

In translating a manga from Japanese into English, the translator has to deal with all of the idiosyncrasies of the Japanese written language as well as the visual language elements which are specific to the Japanese audience. Visual language depends on commonality of experience to communicate, and so while some aspects of it may be common to all readers, others are specific to the Japanese experience. Naturally, these Japanese-specific remnants appear most often when they are related to that which relates *all* Japanese readers: The Japanese language itself.

The Japanese language is composed of a relatively small library of possible sounds when compared to other languages. Only a limited number of different syllabic combinations can be made, and as a result, many homonyms occur. Naturally, puns are a prime source of humor in Japanese. Humor is often culturally specific, but few kinds of humor are as language dependent as puns. When the translator encounters these, some real creativity is required to find a workaround. If the pun is just used as a throwaway joke, the translator may just forego the humor completely for the sake of narrative continuity. Other times, however, the narrative is dependent on the possible misunderstanding. In these cases, the translator must find a set of words to try to mirror the Japanese homonyms. Finding a pair of homonyms that have similar meanings in two different languages, however, is a very tall order. Usually, whichever of the two words is more important to the narrative is selected and translated, and a homonym for the translated word is shoehorned into the narrative. This can present continuity errors, but the translator has little choice.



Figure 15 – An example of a translated pun. *Honyakuka* and *konnyakuya* are replaced in English with “Translator” and “Train Spotter”.

Figure 15 is an example of a translation that had to deal with a pun. In this scene, the older girl has asked the younger girl what her father does for a living. Her response is the basis for the pun. In actuality, her father is a translator, which in Japanese is *honyakuka* (翻訳家). However, she claims that her father is a *konnyakuya* (こんにやく屋), or someone who makes *konnyaku*, which is a kind of Japanese food. After she says that her father is at work in a nearby room, he emerges to ask if she’s hungry. The pun is impossible to carry over into English perfectly, not only because there are no two homonyms in English which carry the same meanings as the Japanese, but because the normal reader of English has no idea what *konnyaku* even is. The translator begins by isolating the most essential bit of information for the joke: that the father works as a *translator*. Then the translator must find a word that sounds similar enough to “translator” to replace *konnyakuya*. In the end, “train spotter” is chosen. For the purposes of this scene, this translation is successful in recreating the little girl’s humorous

mispronunciation of her father's work. However, this translation turns out to be not quite as successful in the big picture. In a later chapter of this series, the same three characters happen to be in a grocery store together, and the older girl, remembering that the father is supposedly a maker of *konnyaku*, begins to ask him questions about which kinds of *konnyaku* are best, and what methods of preparation are preferable. The English translation of this scene follows the Japanese very closely, as there is no way around the discussion of *konnyaku* this time around. However, this means that in the English version, the questioning about *konnyaku* seems quite out of the blue and without reason, since the English audience had no knowledge of the *honyakuka* / *konnyakuya* pun the first time around. They only hear the second half of the joke.

Non-standard dialects also present the translator with difficulty. These dialects can be related to a particular region, age group, or subculture. The Japanese language also has differing language forms based on sex and social position. Dialects can be dealt with in a number of ways. One of the most common is to make use of varied dialects within the domestic language. The translator may make use of a domestic mode of speech which can be roughly equated to that found in the original language. An old man who frequently speaks in archaisms may use similarly old-timey speech in translation. Complications arise, however, for other such non-standard dialects. Regional dialects are, by their nature, used to represent the particular way in which residents of a particular area speak. When a reader of the original work sees this dialect, all of the notions and preconceptions that he has of the residents of that region are brought to mind. The domestic audience of the translated work has no conception of these layers of meaning. Japanese also has a particular register of speech that is decidedly feminine in nature. There is no suitable

equivalent in English, and so these speech forms are usually ignored entirely and translated into standard speech.



Figure 16 shows an example of dialectic speech. These (nonconsecutive) panels occur after the girl watches a gangster movie on television. She arms herself with a water pistol and proceeds to deal out some vigilante justice, complete with plenty of gangster-speak. In this case, the English follows the Japanese rather closely in spirit if not in exact meaning. The translator chose to draw a line of equivalence between the gangster speech found in Japan and that found in America. The first panel's line “いいわけはじごくできく” translates loosely as “I’ll listen to your excuses in hell,” which is close to the official translation. The second panel’s “もうようじはない” translates more literally as “I have no more use for you” than the

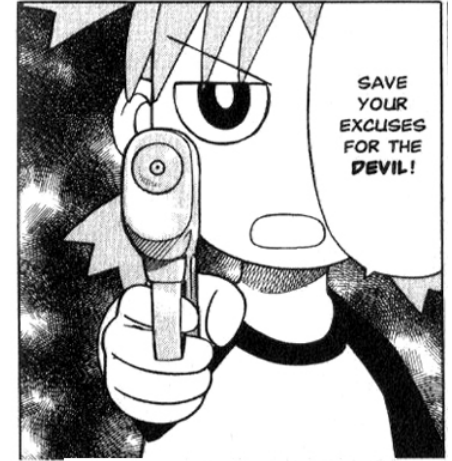


Figure 16a – The gangster-style published “It’s curtains for you”. In the third panel, the line “いのちをたいせつに” can be translated as something like “Cherish your

Figure 16b – becomes similar gangster speech in English.

life” in English. Even though these lines are not the most semantically accurate transfer from Japanese into English, both versions sound like lines from a gangster movie. Since

all the lines are something she says right before shooting someone, their literal content is not as important as the impression they need to give: that she is emulating a movie gangster. Since the girl learned this speech style from a movie, that is the most important element to preserve in translation.

The Japanese language also uses three different character sets: kanji, hiragana, and katakana. In fact, one might even count roman alphabetic characters, which also appear frequently in *manga*. The way these three character sets interact with one another can tell the native reader a lot about the nature of the narrative, or the characters they apply to. English, which is comprised of only one character set, has no analog. The translator has to find some other way to replicate these subtle interactions. Someone who, in the Japanese, speaks with a lot of Chinese-character compounds may have a very highly educated feel to his speech. To mirror this in English, the translator may choose to render this character's speech using numerous long words with Latin or Greek derivation. Katakana, which is often used to write loanwords from other languages, may also be used to render the speech of a Japanese-speaking foreigner to emphasize its foreign sound. Katakana may also be used simply to make something stand out from the rest of the text. In translation, different lettering styles may be employed to try to reproduce these effects.

The interaction of the three Japanese character sets can be seen in figure 17. In this scene, two Americans (the blonde girls) have burst into a university club meeting room unexpectedly, much to the surprise of the Japanese students there. The girl with long blonde hair begins insulting people in rudimentary Japanese, and she is then scolded by her Japanese friend in this panel. The first line (the top right) is written vertically with the normal mix of characters. This is because it is spoken by a Japanese student. The

second line, spoken by the Japanese girl with long hair, is also written with the normal mix of characters, but it is written horizontally instead of vertically. This horizontal orientation (the same as English) seems to indicate that she is speaking Japanese in such a way as to make it easier for a foreigner to understand. The girl with long blonde hair speaks only in katakana (both in this panel and others in the manga), which reflects her relative deficiency in the Japanese language. The other American's speech is written with the full range of character sets, implying that her Japanese is better than her friend's. However, it is written horizontally, which seems to indicate that even though her Japanese is good, it probably still sounds like that of a foreigner. The final line is written vertically like the first; it is spoken by another Japanese student to himself.



Figure 17 – The nuances of meaning imparted by the interaction of three writing systems and two reading orientations in the Japanese are absent in the English version.

understand. The girl with long blonde hair speaks only in katakana (both in this panel and others in the manga), which reflects her relative deficiency in the Japanese language. The other American's speech is written with the full range of character sets, implying that her Japanese is better than her friend's. However, it is written horizontally, which seems to indicate that even though her Japanese is good, it probably still sounds like that of a foreigner. The final line is written vertically like the first; it is spoken by another Japanese student to himself.

In translation, these many nuanced layers of meaning are lost. English has only one character set, and is only written horizontally. As a result, all of the written differences that were plainly visible in the Japanese are completely absent in the English. In translation, everyone's speech has essentially the same visual reading. The only place where the translator attempted to retain the feeling of difference in speech was the line spoken by the long – haired American. Her speech is rendered in Romanized Japanese

with a footnote. Through this device, the reader understands that she is speaking Japanese, and probably not very well, since everyone else who speaks normal Japanese has their speech written in normal English. Even so, the visual impact of her written speech is more or less the same as everyone else on the page, since they are all using the same character set.

Compared with English, Japanese employs onomatopoeic expressions far more often and for a greater range of uses. Whereas in English, onomatopoeia is used solely for the representation of a discernable sound, In Japanese, it is often used in an adjectival or adverbial fashion as well (Kimizuka 12). Not only these, but a sizable portion of Japanese onomatopoeia are not replicative of an actual auditory sound at all, and can instead represent a condition – even the condition of silence! Adverbial onomatopoeia can be rendered in English with a corresponding adverb, or by careful choice of the particular verb used in translation. While English has a comparative dearth of onomatopoeia, it has far more verbs which are more or less synonyms, but have nuances in meaning which distinguish them from one another. In translating onomatopoeia that *are* employed as sound effects, the job is relatively simple. The translator may choose an equivalent onomatopoeic expression in English, or just render it as an exact transliteration. Ideally, when used in conjunction with the picture, even unfamiliar expressions will be easy for the domestic reader to understand.

Figure 18 is a particularly interesting example of the translation of onomatopoeic expressions. It comes from a bilingual *manga* published in Japan for students of English. The translator is British. In the sequence, a couple is going through a haunted house and they happen to run into some friends. Some sound effects have been carried over into



Figure 18 – The use of onomatopoeia in Japanese can be so different from English that a translation of the full range of its expression can lead to some interesting English glosses.

English as similar onomatopoeic expressions: *でろんつ* (*deron*) becomes *bloop*, the sound of the monster popping up. Some others, however, have been translated into English as more descriptive of the situation rather than as mere auditory enhancements. The *どーん* (*do—n*) in the center panel is translated as “sudden sinister

sight” instead of anything resembling a sound. Even so, this is an accurate translation in that that is more or less how it is used in the Japanese: the sound is used to aurally describe the manner in which these two appear. In the panel below it, *ドキドキ* (*dokidoki*) is rendered as “heart going pit-a-pat with fear”. *ドキドキ* is often used in Japanese as an onomatopoeic expression for a heartbeat. It may be used in conjunction with any condition that could get one’s heart beating, including fear, love, or physical exertion. So, this translation, like the one before it, is correct in that it is accurately communicating the information that is present in the Japanese onomatopoeia, even though it isn’t necessarily a “sound” in English. This method of translating onomatopoeia from Japanese is scarcely seen, since these renderings are not really sound effects in the strictest sense when translated into English. One is far more likely to see a literal

transliteration of the Japanese sound or a suitable English substitution. The explanation for the odd translations in this example may be that since the target audience was Japanese learners of English, it was less important to make the *manga* read like a comic than to address in English the exact range of expression present in the onomatopoeia.

The use of sound effects in conjunction with picture brings forth other problems, however. Oftentimes, the rendering of the sound effect uses the expressive power of line or shape in order to add a feeling of the nature of the sound. In these cases, the sound effect itself becomes part of the picture. It cannot simply be erased and written or drawn

over with an English equivalent because the characters differ in shape. Furthermore, in its rendering, it contributes to the message of the picture. To alter it would be to change the picture, resulting in a distortion of the message.

The most common means of dealing with this problem are to either leave it alone, leaving their visual message intact, or to leave the sound effect in whole, but to make a small transliteration of the sound either in the margin or an empty spot within the panel. In figure 19, a page from the English edition of King of Thorn, only the sounds enclosed in word



Figure 19 – The more pictorial the sound effect becomes, the more difficult it becomes to change it without significantly altering the visual language of the whole.



Figure 20 – In this panel, the Japanese sound effect has been left untouched, while a tiny “FLAP” has been inserted next to it. This leaves the visual language of the original intact while still making the sound readable to an English speaking audience.

balloons have been translated. This renders the sound effects essentially silent to English readers, as even though they can see the sound effect, they cannot read, and therefore, *hear* it. The sound effects take up a lot of space on the page, especially in the last panel where their

very size indicates the volume of the sound. They cannot be removed and replaced with English sound effects without significantly redrawing the pictures. Figure 20 shows an example in which the sound was left intact, and a suitable English equivalent was unobtrusively added next to it. In cases where the sound effect can be cleanly removed without interfering with the rest of the picture, such as figure 21, it is usually erased and rendered in English characters of a visual style similar to the Japanese. The long sound



across the top represents the loud, unending tolling of a bell tower that has kept the characters awake all night. Because the sound just skirts the top edge of the panels, it can easily be replaced. The visual language of the lettering style in English also helps to reinforce the sound.



The wavy line used to write each letter mirrors the reverberation of the bell. The smaller sound effects in the first panel cover up nothing but white space, so they

Figure 21 – In this case, all of the sound effects in the Japanese have been erased and replaced with English equivalents.

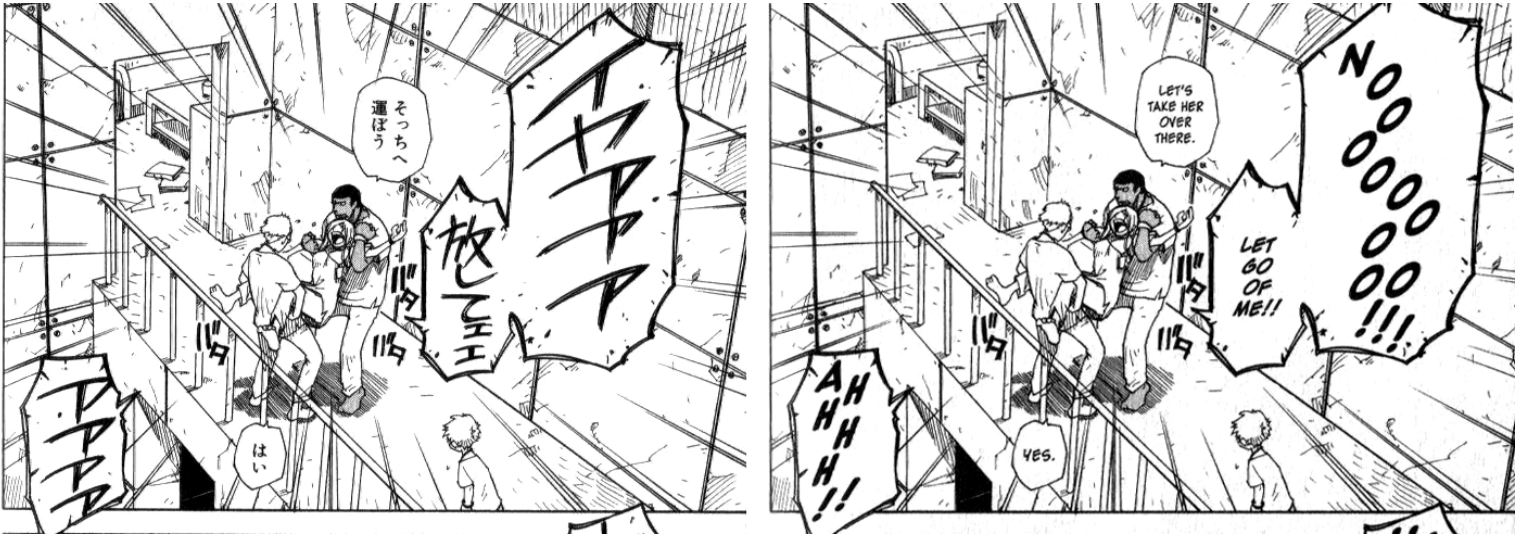


Figure 22 – A survivor breaks down after the gravity of her situation sinks in. Her desperation is voiced in part by the font used when she screams. This lettering style is not carried over into English.

too can be removed and replaced without affecting the rest of the picture.

The translator must also be wary of lettering style inside speech balloons. The style of the lettering lends certain qualities to the voice of a character in the same way that it can attribute certain qualities to a sound effect. As seen in figure 22, it is not always appropriate to employ a standardized machine font to balloon lettering when translating, as this can destroy the affective quality of the original. While the English translation is suitable as far as *what* she is saying, it does not succeed in conveying *how* the line is spoken. The machine font removes the visceral, horrified quality of the scream that is present in the heavily scribbled text of the Japanese.

Japanese *manga* is read from the top right corner of the page to the bottom left, and lines of text are arranged vertically. This stands in stark contrast to English, which reads from top left to bottom right, with text in horizontal lines. The visual grammar of comics is dependent on reading the panels in proper sequence, so for the sake of narrative coherence, this sequence cannot be altered. This leaves the translator with two choices: either force the readers of the translation to adopt the Japanese sequence of reading, or

flip all of the images horizontally so that they may be read in the traditional English sequence. Both systems have found use.

The vertical arrangement of text however, leads to problems which are not so easily solved. This vertical arrangement leads to tall, thin balloons which are often unsuitable for containing horizontal text. This may result in frequent hyphenation as words run out of room, making for a cumbersome read. In these cases, word choice becomes very important to the translator. He can either choose mainly short words, which limit his vocabulary and therefore the expressive potential of the characters, or set the type in a smaller font size in order to afford himself more room. Smaller font however, can change the message given to the reader by the visual language. The smaller font may lead to an excess of white space in the balloon, which in tandem with the small font size causes the voice of the speaker to seem rather quiet. At best, the words seem poorly matched to the balloon. Another possibility would be to redraw the balloon into a shape more conducive to containing English, but this presents many of the same problems as the alteration of sound effects: the balloons themselves play an integral part in the visual language of the panel. Their shape and rendering contribute to the quality of the speaker's voice, and to alter them would change these qualities. Their placement within the panel is also carefully thought out so as not to interfere with the pictorial elements contained within. It may not be possible to redraw the balloon without covering up important visual information.

Figure 23 is an example of the balloon/text problem. The girl has found herself stuck in the bathroom due to a broken lock, so she calls to her father for help. The text in the first balloon is sized and arranged appropriately within the balloon, because it is not

unusual to read vertically in English for a word or two; but even a short sentence, like that in the second balloon, is hardly ever written vertically. The horizontal orientation of the text in the second balloon causes it to fit poorly. It is clear that the balloon was meant to hold vastly different text. Furthermore, it seems as though the sentence could have been printed at least somewhat larger, but for whatever reason, the translator chose to leave it at this size. As a result, the visual language of the panel has been changed even more than necessary. The gross disparity between the style of the text in



Figure 23 – What is plainly read as a loud cry in Japanese becomes much less clear in translation.

the two balloons in English causes only further muddling of the intended visual language, since the similar balloons seem to indicate similar speaking styles.

Similar to panel order, the word balloons in each panel must be read in the proper sequence if they are to make sense. It may seem like a simple thing to translate the contents of each balloon one at a time, but the grammar of the Japanese language presents another problem for the English translator. English generally follows a subject-verb-object word order, whereas the order in Japanese is usually subject-object-verb. Hence, the action of a sentence is not necessarily clear until the end. This may not present

significant problems when translating on a sentence by sentence basis, but in a comic, one sentence spoken by a character may be broken apart: it may be distributed among more than one balloon, or within more than one panel. Sometimes it is even distributed across more than one page. The translator must find a way to preserve the pacing that is created by the interaction of the text and the balloons. This may not always make a big difference, but in situations where it is important that the verb be the last element of the sentence revealed, careful sentence construction is necessary.

In figure 24, both balloon order and word order come into play. In the top panel, there are two blocks of text. In the original Japanese, the first block tells the reader when



Figure 24 – The translator must be wary of the pacing that is created by both the balloon order and the word order.

the action is taking place, and the second block tells the reader what action occurred at that time. In the English, however, this is reversed; the first block tells the what and the second tells the when. This is likely because this order sounds more natural to the English speaker, who is used to sentence construction in which the primary verb usually comes earlier in the sentence. The English sentence can be rearranged so that the information is revealed in exactly the same order as the Japanese, but for the purposes of this panel, it is unnecessary. In the last panel on the page, however, the final verb carries more weight. This page is the last page of the introduction to the volume, and as such, ends on somewhat of a cliffhanger. The girl who is speaking is surprised to hear news of the “Southern Master” (which should be translated as “Thousand Master”), whom she believed to be dead. In the Japanese, her utterance ends with “生きている”, which can be equated to “alive” in the translation. However, the word “alive” appears twice in the translation, despite its Japanese correspondent appearing only once at the very end. The pacing that is built up by the word order in Japanese is thrown by both the early appearance and the redundancy of the verb in English. This sequence would have worked equally as well in English had the first “alive” in this panel been eliminated, replicating the pacing of the Japanese.

As with any other type of translation, the translator must also consider his audience. The audience for *manga* translation in English has grown and changed over the years, and as a result, so have the expectations for what makes a good translation. Older works reflect the translator’s expectations that the primary audience for his work would be the same as the audience for American comic books. This is reflected in how the translator dealt with the various problems that arose in translation. Panels were flipped so

1995



2004



Figure 25 – Publisher VIZ originally released the English edition of *Battle Angel* in 1995, with the pages arranged in the English reading order. They later released a new edition in 2004 which read according to the Japanese order. In addition, changes were made to the lettering, balloon shapes, sound effects, and in some cases, the script.

that they read in the same order as American comics. Peculiarities of Japanese language were erased so as to avoid alienating and confusing the audience. As the market grew, American readers suddenly had access to *manga* that covered a much wider range of genres and themes than had been previously provided to them by American comics. This in turn attracted more and varied readers, many of whom may have had no previous interest in the comic medium. As time passed, it became clear that many readers of translated *manga* were interested in it because of its foreignness, and were willing to put forth more effort toward reading the work on its own terms. As a result, translators began

trying to preserve elements of this foreignness in translation. These days, it is difficult to find *manga* in translation that does *not* use the original panel order. Oftentimes, certain words may be left in the original Japanese, with an appendix page explaining their usage. These choices may indeed help to preserve qualities present in the original text, but they also reflect a domestic judgment as to what constitutes the “Japaneseness” of these *manga*. As always, the domestic remainder can never be completely erased.

* * *

The translation of comics is just as difficult as the translation of any other medium. The translation of Japanese *manga* into English, in particular, requires special considerations on the part of the translator. Not only does one have to contend with the differences between the Japanese and English languages, but one must also be wary to preserve the carefully constructed visual language within. The visual language of Japanese *manga* evolved over many years and has reached a high degree of subtlety and sophistication, such that it has proven itself proficient of expression within an extraordinarily wide range of genres, and capable of exploring a wide range of themes, from the mundane to the deeply introspective and philosophical. This has been recognized internationally and *manga* has been lauded as an important form of Japanese cultural expression. But *manga* is not uniquely Japanese; it is merely a medium of expression. This same medium has been in use throughout the world for ages. However, it was not until the rest of the world took notice of Japanese *manga* that its potential and range of expression was widely accepted. Since then, writers and artists the world over have chosen this medium to express themselves, borrowing from the immense visual

vocabulary that developed in Japan, as well as the visual vocabulary of their own countries. This vocabulary will continue to grow and change, and with it, the expressive potential of the medium.

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