

Linguistic Aspects of Poetry Translation

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

Elizabeth Brown

**Thesis Advisor**  
Dr. Kazumi Matsumoto

**Ball State University**  
**Muncie, Indiana**

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## Abstract

Translation of a piece of literature, particularly of poetry, from the original language to another is a delicate matter. Since all languages are unique, there is no such thing as a so-called direct, or literal, translation. Therefore, it is the task of the translator to take into account the many complexities of language (both the language of the original text and the language into which they are translating the text) and use this working knowledge to craft a translation that is as true to the original text as they can manage. However, this "trueness" is a multifaceted concept that is extremely subjective and hard to pinpoint. Therefore, the translator must take several factors into consideration as they translate the literary work. Two of these factors, as outlined in Burton Raffel's *The Art of Poetry Translation* are that:

- *No two languages having the same syntactic structures, it is impossible to re-create the syntax of a work composed in one language in another language.*
- *No two languages, having the same vocabulary, it is an impossible to re-create the vocabulary of work composed in one language in another language.*

To demonstrate the impossibility of crafting a perfect translation, I have taken three poems that I have written, translated them to Japanese, and analyzed them based on the linguistic differences of English and Japanese. Through this process, I discovered examples that illustrate the difficulties of translating poetry and the specific linguistic differences that cause it.

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## Poetry Translations

### The Prepositions of Love

I'm falling in love  
I'm falling out love  
I'm falling through love  
I'm falling by love  
I'm falling to love  
I'm falling from love  
I'm falling

私は恋に落ちている。  
私は恋の外に落ちている。  
私は恋を通して落ちている。  
私は恋の隣に落ちている。  
私は恋に向かって落ちている。  
私は恋から落ちている。  
私は落ちている。

### The Comma of Pride

Are you proud to be a balloon?  
I am proud to be a llama.  
Are you coming over soon?  
  
Where do I put this comma,

自分が風船なのを誇りに思っている  
の。  
私はラマなのを誇りに思っている  
もうすぐ着くの？  
このコンマをどこに付けようかな、

### Senses and Some Seasons

Sound of colors  
Feel of noise  
Look of texture  
Keep your poise  
The allure  
Of Autumn  
Leaves  
In Summer  
Staples  
In the paper  
Covers  
Hear the blue of  
A nice Spring day

色の音  
騒音の感覚  
感触の見た目  
自分の姿勢を保ち  
夏に  
秋の  
葉っぱの  
魅惑  
表紙の  
ホッチキスの  
芯  
素敵に春の日の青を  
聞きなさい

## Analysis 1: The Prepositions of Love

### The Prepositions of Love

#### The Prepositions of Love: Original

I'm falling in love  
I'm falling out love  
I'm falling through love  
I'm falling by love  
I'm falling to love  
I'm falling from love  
I'm falling

#### The Prepositions of Love: Translation

私は恋に落ちている。  
私は恋の外に落ちている。  
私は恋を通して落ちている。  
私は恋の隣に落ちている。  
私は恋に向かって落ちている。  
私は恋から落ちている。  
私は落ちている。

#### The Prepositions of Love: Original with Translation

I'm falling in love  
私は恋に落ちている。(watashi wa koi ni ochiteiru)

I'm falling out love  
私は恋の外に落ちている。(watashi wa koi no soto ni ochiteiru)

I'm falling through love  
私は恋を通して落ちている。(watashi wa koi wo tooshite ochiteiru)

I'm falling by love  
私は恋の隣に落ちている。(watashi wa tonari ni yotte ochiteiru)

I'm falling to love  
私は恋に向かって落ちている。(watashi wa koi ni mukatte ochiteiru)

I'm falling from love  
私は恋から落ちている。(watashi wa koi kara ochiteiru)

I'm falling

私は落ちている。(watashi wa ochiteiru)

### **Introduction:**

I originally wrote "The Prepositions of Love" as a way to play with language. I switched out the preposition "in" from the phrase "falling in love" with other common English prepositions. I did this in order to see how this change would affect the meaning and feeling of the phrase. In the final line of the poem, I simply remove the proposition all together, creating the statement "I'm falling." I found that by changing the prepositions, the poem became a sort of bleak commentary on the journey one takes when they fall in love. All but one of the prepositions ("to" from line 5) take on a negative connotation. This is because the image they invoke is of a movement away from "love," which is a feeling and state that many, if not most, desire to obtain. The addition of the final line provokes even more negativity, as it implies that the narrator has lost the love they had at the beginning of the poem and is now falling, which is a frightening and dangerous state in which to be.

### **Analysis:**

Japanese and English have very different syntactical structures. In English, word order indicates parts of speech<sup>1</sup>, while in Japanese, parts of speech are

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<sup>1</sup> See Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013), p. 216

indicated by particles that follow directly after the word that they are marking<sup>2</sup>.  
Word order matters in Japanese, but is generally not as restrictive as in English.  
A very basic example of the difference in syntax between Japanese and English is the position of the subject and verb. In English, the verb must immediately follow the subject unless modified by an adverb. However, in Japanese, the subject is the first element of the sentence (though it is often omitted if understood) and the verb, at least in standard language, must be the last element of the sentence. To demonstrate this, here is an example in both languages with a subject, a verb, and an object:

Example 1: Tom eats fish.

Subject: Tom

Verb: eats

Object: fish

Example 2: トムは魚を食べる。(Tomu wa sakana wo taberu)

Subject: トム (Tomu)- Tom

Subject marker: は (wa)

Object: 魚 (sakana)- fish

Object marker: を (wo)

Verb: 食べる (taberu)- eats

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<sup>2</sup> See Yamaguchi, T. (2007), p. 188

In Example 1, the object is the last element of the sentence because the subject and verb cannot be separated except by an adjective. If we were to insert the object between the subject and the verb, it would be ungrammatical:

Example 3: Tom fish eats\*

However, the object does come between the subject and the verb in Japanese. This is because the verb, in standard language, must always be the last element in the sentence. Likewise, if we try to mimic the structure of English and write this sentence with the object as the final element, it would be ungrammatical:

Example 4: トムは食べる魚を。 \* (Tomu wa taberu sakana wo)

If we look back at Example 2, we see that there are 5 elements in the Japanese sentence: the topic of the sentence, the topic marker, the object, the object marker, and the verb. Now, if we look again at Example 4, we see that the topic marker and object marker move with their respective nouns, as if they are one element. This is because a particle cannot stand on its own and the nouns that are followed by the particles need the particles to indicate their meaning. In Japanese, particles are essential to indicate subjects, objects, directions, places of action, and many other parts of a sentence. While English does not have particles, it does have special words called prepositions that indicate location and direction. These prepositions have a similar function to some Japanese particles, though they act a little differently within a sentence.

One of the biggest differences in how prepositions and particles act is their position next to their complement, or word that they are modifying. Though there are some exceptions, English prepositions, as indicated by their name, are positioned before their complement. On the other hand, Japanese particles are postpositional and are therefore placed after their complement. So, when translated into Japanese, it would be appropriate to change the title, "The Prepositions of Love," to "The Postpositions of Love" - "恋の助詞 (koi no joshi)."

Only one of the lines in "The Prepositions of Love" has a single preposition that corresponds to a Japanese particle. In line 6, the phrase "I'm falling from love" is translated to "私は恋から落ちている。 (watashi wa koi kara ochiteiru)."

The preposition "from" corresponds with the Japanese particle "から (kara)"

Another phrase uses a single particle, but the nuance is slightly different. In line 1, the phrase "I'm falling in love," is translated to "私は恋に落ちている。 (watashi wa koi ni ochiteiru)." This phrase exists in Japanese, and has the same meaning as the English phrase. However, the Japanese particle "に," indicates direction, so the literal meaning is closer to "I'm falling in the direction of love," which is slightly different than the simple preposition "in" in the English phrase. So, the Japanese particle "に" has a slightly different nuance than the English preposition "in," which is not to fall *towards* love, but rather *into* love.

While Japanese does have single postpositional particles that can function similarly to English prepositions, that is not always the case. Many of the prepositions in the original English poem did not have a simple corresponding particle in Japanese. Even though not all English prepositions have

corresponding postpositional particles in Japanese, there are still ways to describe direction by using a few more words. The following are explanations of how this works:

Line 2: I'm falling out love

私は恋の外に落ちている。(watashi wa koi no soto ni ochiteiru)

Japanese does not have a particle to indicate the direction “out.” In fact, in English, the word “out” cannot be used by itself to indicate direction; one must use the phrase “out of,” so this line is grammatically incorrect in English. However, the meaning is still understood. In order to indicate the direction of “out” in Japanese, we have to say “外に落ちている (soto ni ochiteiru),” which literally means, “falling to the outside.” The Japanese word “外 (soto)” means “outside,” and the following directional particle “に” indicates that the narrator is falling in the direction of outside. So, when literally translated into English, the Japanese version of line 2 means “I am falling to (in the direction of) outside of love.”

Line 4: I'm falling by love

私は恋の隣に落ちている。(watashi wa tonari ni ochiteiru)

Line 4 has a syntactical structure identical to that of line 2. Japanese does not have a single particle corresponding to “by” or “next to.” So, by using the noun 隣 (tonari), which means next to, and using the directional particle に, I made the phrase “隣に落ちている (tonari ni ochiteiru), which means, “falling (in the

direction of) next to..." Just as in line 2, the structure of this sentence is much different than the structure of the English sentence in that it uses a second noun modified by a particle to indicate direction as opposed to a single preposition or particle. The use of this structure also causes the Japanese translation to be more specific in its description of "falling" than in the English original.

Line 3: I'm falling through love

私は恋を通して落ちている。(watashi wa koi wo tooshite ochiteiru)

The word "through" is a preposition in English, but it is a verb in Japanese. Since "through" is a preposition in Japanese, it can simply be used to modify the noun "love." However, in order to convey the same meaning in Japanese, the "通す (toosu)" must be used in a verbal compound to modify the verb "落ちる (ochiru)." "通す (toosu)" means "to allow to go through" and "落ちる (ochiru)," means to fall. In this compound, "通して落ちている (tooshite ochiteiru)," "落ちる (ochiru)," is the core element. "通す (toosu)" is modifying "落ちる (ochiru)." This expresses the manner in which the verb, "落ちる (ochiru)," is being carried out<sup>3</sup>. So, 通して落ちている (tooshite ochiteiru), means "falling by means of going through." The connotation is slightly different than the English original because it is more specific, but it still captures the meaning.

Line 5: I'm falling to love

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<sup>3</sup> See Yamaguchi, T. (2007), p. 121

私は恋に向かって落ちている。(watashi wa koi ni mukatte ochiteiru)

Just as in line 3, I also used a compound verb in line 5 because the preposition “to” in English, which describes a motion of moving towards love, does not have a corresponding particle in Japanese. However, this motion can be described with the verb, “向かう (mukau),” which means “to face or to go towards” Just like in the compound verb in line 3, “落ちる (ochiru)” is the main element and “向かう (mukau),” is modifying it. So, the compound verb means, “to fall towards...” While the Japanese translation uses a verbal compound and the original English uses a preposition, the meaning is not significantly impacted.

Although Japanese and English have different syntactic structures, it is still possible to retain meaning during translation. However, certain syntactic differences, such as the difference between English prepositions and Japanese particles, make it necessary to allow for slight changes in nuances. By considering these things, the translator can craft a fairly accurate translation, but certain syntactic differences make it impossible to make a “perfect” translation.

## Analysis 2: The Comma of Pride

### The Comma of Pride

Are you proud to be a balloon?

I am proud to be a llama.

Are you coming over soon?

Where do I put this comma,

自分が風船なのを誇りに思っているの。

私はラマなのを誇りに思っている。

もうすぐ着くの。

このコンマをどこに付けようかな、

### The Comma of Pride: With Roman Letters

Are you proud to be a balloon?

自分が風船なのを誇りに思っているの。(jibun ga fuusen na no wo hokori ni omotteiru no)

I am proud to be a llama.

私はラマなのを誇りに思っている。(watashi wa rama na no wo hokori ni omotteiru)

Are you coming over soon?

もうすぐ着くの？(mousugu kiku no)

Where do I put this comma,

このコンマをどこに付けようかな、(kono konma wo doko ni tsukeyou kana,)

### Introduction:

When writing "The Comma of Pride," I was mostly concerned with the rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme in this poem is one that is very common in English: A, B, A, B. I started off with the first two nonsense phrases and then finished the poem by continuing with another nonsensical rhyme pair for each. I also played with punctuation by placing the discussed comma at the end of the last line instead of a question mark. In this analysis I will focus on how rhyme scheme,

syntactical formation of questions, and cultural ideologies affect the translation of this poem.

### Analysis

When translating “The Comma of Pride” into Japanese, the rhyme scheme was mostly lost because I focused on retaining the meaning. The loss of rhyme scheme is in large part due to the fact that Japanese and English are unrelated languages and therefore have vastly different sounds as well as lexicons<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, when translating a piece of poetry based on meaning, it is highly unlikely that the words that rhymed in the original will still rhyme in the translation.

The first English rhyme pair is “balloon” and “soon” from lines one and three.

Line 1: Are you proud to be a balloon?

自分が風船なのを誇りに思っているの。(jibun ga fuusen na no wo hokori ni omotteiru no)

Line 3: Are you coming over soon?

もうすぐ着くの？(mousugu kiku no)

In Japanese “balloon” translates to “風船 (fuusen)” and “soon” translates to “もうすぐ (mousugu),” which do not rhyme. Even the words “llama” and “comma,”

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<sup>4</sup> A lexicon is our mental dictionary. Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013)

which are foreign loan-words taken from English, do not rhyme in Japanese. Although the first vowel sound in llama and comma are spelled differently in English, they produce the same sound. However, when these words were adopted into the Japanese language, more attention was paid to the spelling than to the pronunciation. "Llama" becomes "ラマ (rama)" and comma becomes "コンマ (konma)," which also do not rhyme.

However, because of the syntactic<sup>5</sup> structure of the Japanese language, the translation of the English rhymes into Japanese does not actually matter. As previously mentioned in my analysis of "The Prepositions of Love," the verb must always come at the end of a Japanese sentence. So, the words that create the rhyme in English at the end of the sentences actually change positions in the sentences in the Japanese translation. The words that would need to rhyme, in the case of this particular poem, would be the verbs, because they always occur at the end of the sentence. The verbs, in dictionary-form, in this poem are "be" (as in "proud to be"), "coming," and "put". In Japanese the verbs are "思っている (omotteiru)," "聞く (kiku)," and "付ける (tsukeru)." Note that 思う (omou) does not actually mean "be," but rather "to think or believe," (this will be explained later on in this analysis). All of these verbs, end in an u-sound, and therefore create a simple rhyme with their final syllable. However, the endings of these verbs must

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<sup>5</sup> Syntax is a system of words or principles that describe how we organize words into phrases and phrases into clauses. Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013)

conjugate or receive a marker in order to convey the correct meaning. This eliminates that rhyme.

The first two lines, even though they contain the same verb, do not rhyme in Japanese:

Line 1: Are you proud to be a balloon?

自分が風船なのを誇りに思っているの。(jibun ga fuusen na no wo hokori ni omotteiru no)

Line 2: I am proud to be a llama.

私はラマなのを誇りに思っている。(watashi wa rama na no wo hokori ni omotteiru)

This lack of rhyme is due to the fact that the first line is a question and the second line is a statement. In both the first and the second lines the verb “思う (omou)” is conjugated to “思っている (omotteiru)” to indicate that the thinking or belief is an ongoing state. In the first line, the informal question marker particle “の (no)” is added to the end of the verb to indicate that it is a question. In the second line, however, no final particle is added to the end of the sentence.

Since both the first and the third lines are questions, they both end with the informal question marker particle “の (no).” This “の (no)” is also preceded by an u-sound, so even though the final words of the phrases in the Japanese translation do not directly correspond to the final words of the phrases of the original English poem, lines one and three still rhyme. However, the rhyme

between lines two and four is lost in the Japanese translation. This changes the original rhyme pattern of A, B, A, B in the English poem to A,B,A,C in the Japanese translation.

Every language is affected by the culture by which it is spoken. This cultural aspect of semantics<sup>6</sup> is very important to consider when translating poetry. In Japanese culture, honor and humility are extraordinarily important, and this is reflected in the Japanese language. In Japanese, there are several different verb conjugations that change depending on the person with whom you are speaking. There are also special words used when addressing people of much higher status than you to honor them and humble yourself. This culture of honor and humility is displayed in this poem in the phrase “誇りに思う (hokori ni omou),” which is used in this translation for “proud to be.” However, this phrase does not directly translate to “proud to be.” The first element in the phrase, “誇り,” is a noun that means “pride” or “boast.” The second element is the particle “に,” which, in this case, indicates the target or result of an action. The third element of the phrase is the verb “思う,” which means “to think” or “to believe.” So, the sense of this statement is that pride is the result of the subject’s thoughts or beliefs. Japanese does have a direct verb, 誇る, which means to have pride or to boast. However, using this verb makes the speaker sound very brash and too forward. Therefore, the inclusion of the verb “思う” in this phrase serves the

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<sup>6</sup> Semantics is a system of rules underlying our knowledge of word and sentence meaning. Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013)

purpose of humbling the speaker. It is less direct and implies that the “pride” is only in the speaker’s own thoughts or beliefs.

Syntactical differences between two languages can make it impossible to retain a rhyme scheme while still maintaining the meaning. Because of this, the translator must decide whether to concede rhyme scheme to retain meaning, or concede meaning to retain rhyme scheme. In the case of this poem, I decided to focus on meaning. The fact that two lines of the poem still rhymed (to an extent), was simply luck. The last example in this analysis also demonstrates the effect of culture on language. Every culture has their own cultural values, which can affect how language is used or the nuances of certain words. A translator must take this into account because if they are solely focused on making a word-for-word translation, they may, unintentionally, translate a word or phrase into something that carries a much different meaning to the people in the culture that speaks that language. Both of these factors make it impossible to create a perfect translation that retains both original meaning rhyme scheme. The translator must take this into account and decide what is most important to preserving the original meaning and intent of the poem.

### Analysis 3: Senses and Some Seasons

#### Senses and Some Seasons

Sound of colors	色の音
Feel of noise	騒音の感覚
Look of texture	感触の見た目
Keep your poise	自分の姿勢を保ち
The allure	夏に
Of Autumn	秋の
Leaves	葉っぱの
In Summer	魅惑
Staples	表紙の
In the paper	ホッチキスの
Covers	芯
Hear the blue of	素敵な春の日の青を
A nice Spring day	聞きなさい

#### Senses and Some Seasons: With Roman Characters

Sound of colors

色の音 (iro no oto)

Feel of noise

騒音の感覚 (souon no kankaku)

Look of texture

感触の見た目 (kanshoku no mitame)

Keep your poise

自分の姿勢を保ち (jibun no shisei wo tamochi)

The allure

Of Autumn

Leaves

In Summer

夏に秋の葉っぱの魅惑 (natsu ni aki no happa no miwaku)

Staples

In the paper

## Covers

表紙のホッチキスの芯 (hyoushi no hocchikisu no shin)

Hear the blue of

A nice Spring day

素敵な春の日の青を聞きなさい (suteki na haru no hi no ao wo kikinasai)

### Introduction:

When I wrote this poem, I was playing with language by pairing the senses of hearing, touching, and seeing with something that is usually perceived through a different sense. One does not hear color; therefore there is not a “sound of color.” One does not feel noise through the sense of touch; therefore there is no “feel of noise” (though one could argue that people can feel the vibrations of sound). Lastly, texture is usually perceived through touch as opposed to sight. However, a “look of texture” does exist, because one can observe what an object looks like and make conjectures about what its texture might be. For example, humans can see the bumps on a basketball and can thus conclude that its texture is bumpy.

After creating this original setting of contradiction, I moved into describing seasons with the use of more contradiction, stemming from the original lines: “Hear the blue of a nice Spring day.” Within this description of seasons, I use a seemingly random line “staples in the paper covers,” in order to add even more contrast. I also include another rather ambiguous contrast through the use of **enjambment** in lines five through eight. In my analysis of this “Senses and Some Seasons,” I will be focusing on how the sense of contrast in this poem was affected during the translation process. I will also focus on the role that semantic differences played in my translation.

## Analysis:

In the Japanese translation of “Senses and Some Seasons, the initial conveyance of contradiction in lines one through three does not change. With the exception of “feel” in “feel of noise,” the English words had accurate, corresponding vocabulary in Japanese. This, along with the simple syntactic structure of the sentences, retained the original flow, meaning, and feeling of contradiction of the original poem. However, after these first three lines, the differences between English and Japanese cause the meaning and feeling of the poem to become slightly altered.

Starting with line five and continuing until the end of the poem, I used enjambment to create more contradiction and ambiguity, as well as to establish rhythm. While I still use enjambment in the Japanese translation to maintain a structure similar to the original and establish a rhythm, it does not have the same effect of ambiguity. This is because of the different syntactical structures of English and Japanese. First, let’s look at a non-ambiguous example of enjambment in lines nine through eleven in the original English poem:

Staples

In the paper

Covers

These three lines all compose one sentence: “Staples in the paper covers.” I translated this sentence to “表紙のホッチキスの芯 (hyoushi no hocchikisu no shin).” In my “side to side” translation above, I maintain the enjambment of the original, but give the translation in sentence form because the lines do not match

up. To demonstrate this, here is the Japanese translation of lines nine through eleven, including the enjambment, with the English “equivalent” next to each line:

表紙の (hyoushi no): the book cover's

ホッチキスの (hochikisu no): stapler's

芯 (shin) staple

The elements of the sentence are reversed in the Japanese translation, so the side-by-side translation is misleading (this is why I include the original, the Japanese, and the side to side translation). While some of the meaning changed in the translation, which I will discuss later, the purpose of the enjambment to establish rhythm was not lost. However, the purpose of the enjambment from lines five to eight (in the original poem), which was to produce ambiguity, is lost. Here are the lines from the original poem:

The allure  
Of Autumn  
Leaves  
In Summer

These lines can be interpreted in two ways: “The allure of autumn. Leaves in Summer.” or “The allure of autumn leaves in summer.” With no punctuation, the reader has to decide which way to interpret the lines. However, this ambiguity is completely lost in the Japanese translation. As noted in my analysis of “The Prepositions of Love,” Japanese relies on particles to convey parts of speech, while English relies on word order. Since Japanese words are marked by particles, the parts of speech in the sentence are very clear. Therefore, it was impossible to make this sentence ambiguous, and I had to decide which

interpretation to use in the translation. I chose the first interpretation, in which all four lines are part of one sentence. I chose this because of the fact that autumn leaves do not exist in summer, and this is coherent with my theme of contradiction.

Another interesting aspect of translating “Senses and Some Seasons” into Japanese was the semantic differences between Japanese and English. According to Denham and Lobeck in their book *Linguistics For Everyone*, semantics is “a system of rules underlying our knowledge of word and sentence meaning.”<sup>7</sup> One area of study within the semantics is lexical semantics. Lexical semantics is “the formal study of the conventions of word meanings<sup>8</sup>.” It is this aspect of semantics on which I will be focusing.

While the connection between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, with the exception of onomatopoeic words, the human brain understands, organizes, and retrieves words through semantic features and semantic fields. Semantic features are classifications of word meanings based on binary features. Semantic features of words are indicated with [+/- a trait]. For example, something can be [+/- human]. A girl would be [+ human], while a cat would be [- human]. Semantic fields are categories under which words that are associated by their meanings are classified<sup>9</sup>. Every language has its own lexicon, and this lexicon is directly affected by culture. Though there is much overlap, not every language will have the same exact semantic features and fields. This means that many words will

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<sup>7</sup> Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013), p. 292

<sup>8</sup> Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013), p. 296

<sup>9</sup> Denham, K. E., & Lobeck, A. C. (2013), p. 296-301

not have an exact equivalent in another language, particularly for words describing abstract concepts. Even when talking about physical objects, people, or animals, a word can invoke a different connotation in another language, thus changing the meaning. For example, the word “cow” in English simply means a farm animal. However, in India, where the cow is considered sacred, the word “cow,” or “gaay” in Hindi, holds more meaning than just “farm animal.”

When translating “Senses and Some Seasons,” I had to take into consideration, the subtle nuances of meaning as I tried to decide which Japanese word or words best captured the meaning of the original English. To demonstrate this, I will explain the semantic relationship of the words used in this poem line by line. The lines containing enjambment will be considered as one phrase<sup>10</sup>.

Line 1:        Sound of colors

色の音 (iro no oto)

There were no significant semantic differences between the English and Japanese words in line one. “Sound” and “color” are both fairly simple concepts, and neither culture has any significant connotation attached to either word.

Line 2:        Feel of noise

騒音の感覚 (souon no kankaku)

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<sup>10</sup> Since I am not a native speaker of Japanese, I do not fully understand all of the nuances and connotations of every Japanese word, so the decisions about which words to use in the translations were made with guidance from my thesis advisor, Dr. Kazumi Matsumoto, who is a native speaker of Japanese.

The Japanese language has many words for “feel.” Most of these words have to do with emotion or atmosphere. However, in this line “feel” is meant to be physical. However, when translating this word, I also had to consider the next line.

Line 3:        Look of texture

        感触の見た目 (kanshoku no mitame)

When translating this poem, I originally considered “感触 (kanshoku)” to be the best translation for “feel.” However, I also found that it was the best translation for “texture.” In Japanese, the word “感触 (kanshoku)” captures more than one meaning. Jisho.org, an online Japanese dictionary defines 感触 (kanshoku) as “feel (i.e. tactile sensation); touch; feeling; sensation; texture (e.g. food, cloth).” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines feel as “the quality of a thing that is experienced by touching it.” It also defines texture as “the way that something feels when you touch it.” In English, “feel” focuses on the person’s experience when interacting with a physical object, while “texture” focuses on the physical object that is being experienced. These very subtle nuances, that are distinguished in English, are captured in one word for Japanese. I decided that “感触 (kanshoku)” worked best as a translation for “texture” and then chose “感覚 (kankaku)” as the translation for “feel.” However, “感覚 (kankaku)” holds a different meaning than “feel” as intended in the original poem. “感覚 (kankaku)” refers only to the experiencer within their own body; it does not include a physical object, such as the English word “feel.”

Line 4: Keep your poise

自分の姿勢を保ち (jibun no shisei wo tamochi)

There were no significant semantic differences between the English and Japanese words in line 4.

Lines 5-8: The allure

Of Autumn

Leaves

In Summer

夏に秋の葉っぱの魅惑 (natsu ni aki no happa no miwaku)

Aside from the word “allure,” there were no significant semantic differences between the English and Japanese words in lines 5 through 8. The word “allure” in English, which, according to the Merriam- Webster Dictionary, means “power to attract”: a quality that attracts people can have different connotations depending on the context. In the context of this poem, it simply means that the autumn leaves are attractive. However, “allure” can also carry a sexual connotation when used in certain contexts. When translating this word into Japanese, I had to be careful to choose a word that did not carry any sexual connotations. I first attempted to use the word “誘惑 (yuuwaku),” but this word carries more of a connotation of seduction, or temptation. Because of this I chose to use the word “魅惑 (miwaku),” which means “fascination” or “charm” as opposed to “seduction.”

The Japanese writing system is composed of three alphabets. Two of these are phonetic and one, called kanji, is pictorial. Kanji, which are symbols that represent whole ideas and words, were adopted into Japanese from Chinese beginning in about the sixth century<sup>11</sup>. The two words discussed in the previous paragraph are both comprised of two kanji. Their first kanji differs, but they share the second kanji: “惑 (waku).” “惑 (waku)” means “beguile, illusion, or perplexity. The first kanji in “誘惑 (yuuwaku)” is “誘 (yuu)” which means “entice, lead, tempt, or seduce,” while the first kanji in “魅惑 (miwaku),” “魅(mi),” means “fascination charm or bewitch.” In this example, the use of kanji to establish meaning allows the Japanese word to be more precise in meaning than the English word.

Lines 9-11: Staples

In the paper

Covers

表紙のホッチキスの芯 (hyoushi no hocchikisu no shin)

These three lines contain the phrase “paper covers,” which is an odd phrase in English. It can invoke the image of either a paperback book cover, or plastic covers for paper. Since the meaning is so ambiguous and odd in English, that made it difficult to translate into Japanese. I decided to use the word “表紙 (hyoushi),” which means “book cover.” It is difficult to translate a phrase based on meaning, when there is no natural meaning attached to it. Therefore, I decided to

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<sup>11</sup> Yamaguchi, T. (2007), p. 40

translate it to “book cover” because it captures the concept of “cover” and partially conveys the concept of “paper” because books are made of paper.

The word “staples” also did not translate directly. The Japanese word “芯 (shin)” can mean “staple,” but the context has to be clear. In the first use of the word, according to Jisho.org, it can mean a wick of a candle, pencil lead, or stuffing. In the second use, it can mean core, heart, or center. So, if I only translated “staples” as “芯,” the phrase would read as “表紙の芯,” which would mean “the core of the book cover.” Therefore, I had to specify what kind of “芯” I meant by saying “ホッチキスの芯,” or the “staple of the stapler.”

Lines 12-13:            Hear the blue of

A nice Spring day

素敵な春の日の青を聞きなさい (suteki na haru no hi  
no ao wo kikinasai)

There were no significant semantic differences between the English and Japanese words in lines 11 and 12.

Semantics may pose the most difficult challenge for a translator. Certain words do not have a perfect counterpart in the language to which the work is being translated. Therefore the translator must be well-versed enough in the language to be able to understand the differences between words that would seem to be matches and which words would be more appropriate. This task can be extremely difficult for a non-native speaker, so great care must be taken to ensure that the chosen words will communicate the correct meaning and feeling.

Semantic differences between languages makes it impossible to maintain exact meaning to create a perfect translation; however the translator still has the ability to capture the meaning in a different or creative way.

## Conclusion

Throughout this process of translating and analyzing poetry, I was able to discover first-hand some of the reasons that creating a “perfect” translation is impossible. Through these analyses I was also able to gather many pieces of evidence supporting the two points made in Burton Raffel’s *The Art of Poetry Translation*:

*Translation:*

- *No two languages having the same syntactic structures, it is impossible to re-create the syntax of a work composed in one language in another language.*
- *No two languages, having the same vocabulary, it is an impossible to re-create the vocabulary of work composed in one language in another language.*

These translations and analyses demonstrate the considerations a translator must take in order to preserve as much of the “trueness” and original meaning of a work as possible.

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