Translation Analysis/Report – D. Gray Man (D. Grámann)

Why a manga translation?

I decided I wanted to do a BA project that reflected my interests. I had originally wanted to do an essay about manga and animation directed mainly at people that don’t know too much about them. But lack of proper materials to work with left me with a project that would be mostly about finding books on the internet to order and hope I could find a good one. So I decided to do something more compelling to work on.

As I have been taking translation as my minor with Japanese it would be an obvious choice to do a translation. Now normally if a language major wants to do a translation as his or her final project, they will have to choose an actual novel in most cases that challenges their skill level. Japanese in the University of Iceland is a bit of an exception as it’s a basic course. I.e. students are not expected to have any previous knowledge of the language. On top of that studying Japanese requires the student to start at the very basics of learning the alphabet, both the phonetic one as well as the logographic one. This means that students finishing Japanese should not be expected to be on the same level as the graduates of other languages that are closer to Icelandic. So doing a translation of the same level would be all but impossible for Japanese students.

Me having a lot of interest in Japanese comics (manga) and Anime (Japanese animation), it felt only natural to try doing a translation of that. There were many to choose from, manga having evolved to the state of encompassing almost all genres possible for the comic form.

Why D. Gray Man?

I decided to go with D. Gray Man as it felt challenging without being a case of having to look up every single word spoken. I also thought doing a manga that happened in late 19th century Europe would be a nice theme for the project. Can see how the author uses this foreign setting for the story. The other factors include the obvious fact that I like this manga and felt that it was an integral part in translating fiction to have interest in the subject at hand.
It felt challenging translating D. Gray Man. There were rarely times where I could translate without having to roll the sentence around in my head to get it right. And those few times were easily outweighed by the times I sat for an hour over one or two sentences trying to figure out what was being spoken. I also noticed a difference in my level of understanding the second time I went over it. It was a nice feeling seeing an improvement in my Japanese skills.

Work process.

1. Rough translation/notes.
   This was by far the most time consuming part of the project. Especially since this is my first time doing this at such a scale and probably would do it more efficiently next time round. I translated into a book where I had the translation on the right page and notes on the left. I set up the translation like a script for a movie or a play. It has worked well as most of the translation is dialogue and this way makes it easy to read and edit.
   This is not handed in for evaluation but can be made available for viewing upon request.

2. Polished translation (Quality check).
   This is pretty self explanatory. I go over the translation again as I put it up in Microsoft Word. Erasing any inconsistencies in it and make sure to fix any problems I had skipped or wasn’t happy with the first time round. I also had a couple of my peers go over it for me to give suggestions.
   This is what I hand in for evaluation.

   Now I imagine when doing this officially you will not have to worry about scanning the manga yourself, as the Japanese publisher will most likely sell your publisher the images along with the license. Cleaning the text from the images was in most cases just a matter of using the eraser in Adobe Photoshop on each picture. However there are cases where the text crosses into the images and then you will require more than just basic editing skills. I found some very nice Photoshop tutorials I used to help me and I am happy with the outcome in most cases.

   The raw images (still original text) as well as their cleaned (textless) state will be handed in on a CD with the rest of the project.
4. **Typesetting.**

This is the process of actually putting the text into the manga again. For this you will also need a photo editing program such as Photoshop. A friend had suggested Adobe Illustrator but I found it a bit too limited to my liking so I stuck with Photoshop. It took me a frustrating evening of trial and error before I started to make any progress but I managed to make good progress by the end. When there was a dark background I set a glow around the text to make it visible.

I used the font “Comic Sans” which can often be found in comics. As an afterthought I think it didn’t quite suit this particular comic, which is a bit more solemn than most other comics around. In the ones I have typeset you can notice in one or two places that I have resorted to vertical text. This is due to a decision I made to keep the font size instead of shrinking it to fit better with the image. I will admit that this particular font is especially bad for vertical text but I thought I would keep it as an example of the limitations a typesetter has to deal with when dealing with Japanese to western text conversion.

What I hand in for evaluation from this is what I was able to typeset before having to hand in the project. I would have liked to have finished this but I am afraid my time management was not good enough allow for the time needed.

5. **Publishing.**

It is obvious that I did not have the time or money to do this step of the progress as I am handing the project in part on a CD. But I put it here in any case just as a reminder that there’s not much point in this if you cannot find someone to publish your work. The other option is publishing on the internet, but that is not for the sake of money. I’ll come back to internet manga later.

**Translation problems and solutions.**

1. **Names.**

There are many ways to handle foreign names in translations. A few years ago translating all names was considered the only option and anything else would be the exception. Recently though many translators have started giving names more thought. Not translating a name can
greatly help setting the mood of the work in question. If the story takes place where
culture and customs are noticeably different from the translators, keeping the names foreign to
a certain extent can help the presentation. It will help the reader grasp the story as he notices
right away that this is not a story happening in his own town, even making it easier to digest.

Then you have stories, like D. Gray Man where the characters are all from different
countries. In this case I opted for a sort of hybrid between translated and non-translated
names. There was only one character in this volume with a “native” Japanese name. His name
is Kanda and I decided to leave Japanese names completely un-translated. There were two
Chinese siblings which I adapted to Icelandic grammar without modifying them further. I will
note however that the girls name Linali Lee or Línali Lí in Icelandic writing is very hard on
the reader so I shortened it to Lina Lee or Lína Lí. I think it was a nice solution. For the
English names we have reached the other end where I translate almost completely. I let them
keep their family names though in some cases and I don’t like making up Icelandic names for
the characters. Want to keep the feel the author went with.

There are three main exceptions from this. First is the Millennium Count, but that is the
simple fact of it not actually being a name but a nickname for the enemy. The next one is
Alan’s master, Cross Marion. I kept his given name as Kross, confusing as it may be. But I
didn’t like his last name so I took the liberty to change it into something that fitted a bit better
into Icelandic. The third exception is Allen and Mana Walker. I translated Walker into
Gengill. Now Gengill isn’t really a proper word but the meaning is still clear. The word
“mana” has a deep cultural connection in the geekier parts of society, most notably when
talking about magic and mystical powers. Due to this I left his name unaltered as I felt it had
too much hidden meaning to tamper with. Allen Walker is the main character and I felt it was
a nice way of separating him a bit by keeping his name mostly unaltered, especially as his
origins are unknown.

There is also a fourth exception I should mention; the “innocence” keeper Hebraska. This
is probably a coincidence but it was really similar to the Icelandic word for Hebrew, or
hebreska. And since she is the keeper in this rather religious, albeit borderline blasphemous,
manga I felt it fitting to give her this name which is able to remind people of the bible, since
Hebrew is one of the older biblical languages. A rather simple play on words I am rather
happy with.
2. Basic restructuring of sentences and the difference of Japanese and Icelandic.

I’m going to make an attempt to go into the finer details of converting Japanese into Icelandic. The main problem with translating Japanese into western languages is the lack of the equivalent to the name endings –kun and –san and so forth. These endings let the reader know easily what kind of relations the characters have and what status they have within an organisation. This is especially hard to translate into Icelandic where using anything similar like Mr. and so forth seems very formal. Not something you can use in everyday situations like it is done in Japanese. So what can be done to translate this?

The only proper solution I managed to come up with was to weave the endings into the sentences of the characters. This is a very delicate thing to do and I won’t claim to have managed this all too well, it is just something a translator will have to hone their skills at doing. The main problem with this that obvious things become hidden. Work titles need to be crow bared into conversations and attitudes become less obvious without resorting to changing the text a fair bit.

The main problem a translator will face is the fact that the structure of Japanese sentences is completely different from Icelandic ones. You can not do the same as you do with English, German and other related languages where you cling to the text and only change order where needed. With Japanese you will have to find the meaning of the text, the tone of the sentence and who speaks it. Then you can make a sentence in Icelandic that does the same job. It is a much more dynamic translation than most have come to be used to as you are not copying into another language as much as you have the blueprint to a story you have to build. The translator is much closer to being an author than with most other translations, and has to be careful not to overstep his role and start fiddling with the texts meaning more than is needed. This is a question of training as well as always showing respect for the text you are translating.

Another problem that I ran into, mainly due to the nature of this particular manga is the use of swearwords. Icelandic swearwords are most of the time related to Christianity and the devil and with the story in the manga I was very well aware that these swearwords could feel a bit off to the reader. This is again a question of a delicate touch on the half of the translator.

Finally there is the problem all translators face: puns and wordplay. Luckily there weren’t too many of these in this manga but I have seen cases of them being on every other page. The solutions I have found best is just to simply have a little footnote explaining the back-story of the phrase. It both helps preserve the humour, open the reader to foreign cultures and make the job of the translator less frustrating.
3. Pros and cons of text bubbles.

Text bubbles can be very limiting. They limit how much a translator can stretch the content he is working with. With most translations the text gets longer by around let's say 15%. But when there are text bubbles, sometimes you just can’t afford that. The translator will have to find a way to shorten the text without it sounding funny. This is something that has to be done as an afterthought when the text is being set into the pictures. I will note that the typesetter and the translator are most likely two different people so being able to work together and respect each other's work is essential. I know it may sound like an obvious thing but people can very easily get protective of their work when it is such a creative item and not showing enough delicacy or respect can turn your work into a nightmare very quickly.

The pros of a text bubble are the way they can be used to underline the mood and help the flow of the story. This is more in the hands of the author than the translator but the translator and typesetter have to be aware of how they are being used each time. Size of the text, the font, the colour and shape of the bubble and the direction of the original text are all things you have to be aware of when you are working with comics/manga.

Of translation and scanlation groups on the internet.

It didn’t feel right to do this project without mentioning scanlations. Scanlation groups are a team of people that split the work process I went over earlier to bring free translations to fans of manga through the internet. The speed and quality vary but I think it is a great sign of generosity to do all this work for nothing in return. There are also freelance translators that hand out translations which scanners and typesetters can use for their work, as well as other non-Japanese speaking translators who want to translate into their own language.

There are a number of reasons for how this community exists, why people go and work so hard for no returns other than the thanks of their peers.

1. The official publishing companies are slow, often months and even years behind the Japanese publishers. Fans of manga decide they can’t wait and go and do it themselves.

2. Many people can’t afford printed copies of the manga or simply prefer the digital form.
3. Likeminded people group together. Nothing better than a community that shares your interests and helps each other.

4. The Japanese to English translator marked is bloated. It can be hard to get a job so many translators come to these internet communities to hone their skills as well as pick up tricks from other people.

5. Official translations are often done by people that don’t have passion or respect for the work they are doing which can cheapen the end result, making it so that unofficial, free translations from the internet are often better.

All that matters is that the scanlation community on the web is very much alive, with dozens of releases each day in any number of languages. I want to bring a part of the world of manga to Iceland. Get the average person to read manga, not just kids and people 11 and up that just happened to find something interesting when looking for pokemon on the internet. Manga should be more than a subculture in Iceland, there is so much potential for growth. Japanese comics are already selling well in English format so there is without a doubt great opportunity present to start selling manga in Icelandic. The market is there, it just has to be started up.

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