

Scanlation – What Fan Translators of Manga Learn in the Informal Learning Environment

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Abstract: The present paper discusses two pilot studies carried out to see the possibility of the fan community of manga (Japanese comics), in which fan translators translate the original Japanese manga into English (which is called *scanlation*), functioning as an informal learning environment for the Japanese language learning and translator training. Two pilot studies consist of a) comparison of the original Japanese version with the scanlation and official translation, and b) comparison of the original Japanese version with two different versions of scanlation to see the translators' level of Japanese language and the overall translation quality. The results show that in scanlation versions, there were numbers of inaccuracies which would prevent them to be treated as professional translation. Some of these errors are clearly caused by insufficient understanding of Japanese language by the translator. However, the pilot studies also suggested some interesting features of fan translation, such as the treatment of cultural references. The two pilot studies indicate that it is desirable to conduct further studies with more data, in order to confirm the results of present studies, and to see the possible relationship between the types of translation errors found in scanlation and the particular type of Japanese language (informal, conversational) that could be learned from manga.

Keywords: *Translation, Manga, Scanlation, Japanese Language, Fan Community*

1. Introduction

In his ground breaking book *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, Jenkins (2006) points out how fan creativity, online communities and participatory culture have attracted academic attentions today, and have become central to a range of different disciplines (2006:3). One of those disciplines is education, and authors such as Gee (2004, 2011) and Prensky (2010) are pointing out how much students could learn in their "after school" activities, where they could pursue their interest and passion within the (often online) communities where they could act both as mentors and learners. Gee names this type of learning "passionate affinity-based learning" (2011:69), introducing some cases such as individuals acquiring advanced skills (of designing, computer graphics etc.) by participating in online game communities, as examples.

Indeed it seems very probable that the teaching and learning of many types are taking place in these online communities of passionate fans or participants, where there is no fixed teacher-students relationship, but anyone could function as a mentor or learner. In their forthcoming paper, Edfeldt, Fjorddevik and Inose (in press) focused on two of the fan activities and their online communities, namely fan fiction (creation of new stories by fans, by adapting and developing existing storylines and characters from the original) and scanlation (fan translation of *manga* or Japanese comic), in order to discuss the possibility

of their functions as informal learning environment for creative writing and translation respectively. Online communities for these fan activities have various elements that could function to promote learning, such as the existence of beta readers (proofreaders) to comments on the manuscripts before the publication or reviews from other readers on the published work in case of fan fiction, and forum to discuss the translation of certain Japanese phrases in manga or to teach/learn Japanese language in case of scanlation.

Today, Japanese subculture such as *manga* and *anime* (which could be even called popular culture) is functioning as one of the key elements to motivate foreign students to take up Japanese language studies. Fans would like to appreciate the original versions of manga and anime works, or would like to know more about the culture that has become rather familiar to them through the products that they enjoy to consume. The importance of fans' motivation in promoting Japanese language teaching is recognised by the public authority as well, and the Japan Foundation, a public organisation specialised in the international cultural exchange in Japan, opened a web-page for Japanese language study called *Anime/Manga no Nihongo* or Japanese of Anime and Manga (<http://www.anime-manga.jp/>).

In fact, in teaching of Japanese as a foreign language, these subcultural products could function as unique and inspiring teaching materials. This is due to the particular use of Japanese language in these products, which is quite different what one might find in language textbooks. Apart from the abundant use of onomatopoeia and mimetic expressions which are very common in Japanese language, in these products, the language is predominantly conversational. As Japanese is a language which is extremely rich in registers, with its written and spoken forms being rather radically different from each other, *manga* could be a perfect study material of the Japanese language which is "alive", once the students have enough level of grammar to understand the basic structure of sentences. Dalarna University in Sweden, for example, focus on this point and provide a subject of Japanese language called "Reading Manga" which uses only manga as textbooks (<http://www.du.se/en/Education/Courses-A-O/Syllabus/?kod=JP1038>).

The above examples suggest that manga could be useful learning materials, at least for some aspects of Japanese language. However, when the fans translate manga from Japanese into English (the translation into other languages is normally done from the English version), they do not only learn Japanese but inevitably practice translation skills as well.

The fan translated version of manga is called *scanlation*, a neologism from scanning and translation. The practice is often carried out in teams, where there are various members, for examples, someone to provide the scanned original manga ("raw" material), a translator, a proofreader, a cleaner (to improve the colour quality of the images) and an editor. The finished product is circulated by internet, uploaded on various pages that collect the scanlation of many titles. Though there are conflicts with the publishers on copyright issues, and recently numbers of actions have been taken that led to closure of some of the main scanlation pages, the practice seems to continue, as it could provide the translation of new chapters of manga series just few days after its initial publication in Japan, whereas the official translation of a compiled volume could take months before the publication. Another motive for fans to translate/consume is to read many manga works that are never translated and published in foreign markets.

The possibility of scanlation functioning as translation training is suggested by O'Hagan (2008), though the difficulty to design the experiment to test this hypothesis is also mentioned (2008:176). It is indeed difficult to conduct designed experiments, as fan translators work under pseudonyms and it is not easy to know the background of their translator training or Japanese language study experience. However the comparison of the translation quality (by checking the number and types of inaccuracies) between scanlation and official translation, or analysis of the translation techniques used by both, as well as comparison of the various versions of scanlation should be able to give some indication about the level and types of translation skills, as well as the level of Japanese language, that could be acquired through informal learning process obtainable in the fan community.

The present paper compares i) the scanlation and the official translation and ii) two scanlation versions of the same original.

2. Methodology

In the present study, we carried out two parallel pilot studies.

2.1. Study I: comparison of official translation with scanlation

In the first study we compared the official translation and scanlation of the same original text. In order to see the levels of the interpretation of the Japanese language, rather than the uses of various translation techniques, the main focus was on the accuracy of the translation.

2.1.1. Material

The material used is the first chapter of NANA, a shojo manga (manga for young girls) by Ai Yazawa. The first chapter was published on the girls' manga magazine *Cookie* which is published by Shueisha, one of the major Japanese publishers, in 1999. The series is very popular both in and out of Japan, and has been made into TV anime series and a film. The story is unfinished, and due to the illness of the author, the series has been temporarily suspended from 2009. For the pilot study, 10 pages (pp.42-51) from the first chapter of the first volume (2000) were used.

The official English translation is published by VIZ media in United States in 2005. The translation is by Koji Goto. The same pages as the original are used for the comparison.

The scanlation version is by a scanlation group called Takoyaki, and downloaded from scanlation page SPECTRUM NEXUS (<http://www.thespectrum.net/>). The date of the translation is not available, but most certainly before 2005, as the translation does not coincide at all with the official version mentioned above. The same pages as the original are used for the comparison.

2.1.2. Criteria

In order to see the level of interpretation of the Japanese language, in this small pilot study we limited to focus on the inaccuracies in translation rather than techniques used in the

translations, though some characteristic translation techniques will be briefly referred to in the Discussions section.

The translation was judged inaccurate when the meanings of original and translation texts did not coincide. This includes seemingly intentional changes by the translator in order to avoid the word plays or particular cultural terms, though omitting Japanese name suffix (such as *-san*, *-chan*, *-kun* which could express the type of relations/emotional distance between two people) was not considered to be an inaccuracy. The omission of onomatopoeia and mimetic words written within the image (and not used in the dialogues) as “sound effects” was not taken into consideration either.

2.1.3. Method

Both the official and scanlation translations were compared to the original version, and inaccurate translations of dialogues were extracted. The types of inaccuracy were then analysed, to see if they seemed to be intentional partial change/omission, complete change of contents, or simple errors due to the misinterpretation of the original text (such as translating what would be the opposite meaning of the original text).

2.2. Study II: comparison of two versions of scanlation

The second study was based on the findings of the first study. In the first study, it became clear that the scanlation version was much less accurate than the official translation (see the section 3. Results). However in order to see whether this result was applicable to the translation quality of scanlation in general, the two different versions of the scanlation of the same original text were compared to the original, checking their accuracy and techniques of translation.

2.2.1. Material

The material used is the chapter 170 of *Bakuman*, a shonen manga (manga for young boys) by Tsugumi Ohba (story) and Takeshi Obata (drawing). This manga started in 2008 and the chapters are published in *Shonen Jump*, a weekly manga magazine for young boys. The series, like *NANA* used in the study I, is very popular both in and out of Japan, and has been also made into TV anime series.

The chapter 170 was published on the *Shonen Jump* no.15 (2012) whose official on sale date is the 12th March 2012. This means it will take several months before this chapter will be compiled and published as a volume, and will take even more time for the official English version to be published outside Japan. However, the scanlation versions were uploaded few days after the publication of the original in Japan.

As it often happens, the popular series are scanlated by more than one group at the same time. In this study, we used two English scanlation versions of the *Bakuman* chapter 170. The first version (Scan1) is scanlated by a group Red Hawk and the translator is Kanon64, and was downloaded from the website MangaHead (<http://mangahead.com/>) on the 16th March 2012. The second version (Scan 2) is scanlated by a group A3S, and the translator is TEISHOU. It was downloaded from the website Mangainn (<http://mangainn.com>) also on the 16th March 2012.

2.2.2. Criteria

The translation was judged to be inaccurate when the meaning of the translated text did not coincide with the original text. It was judged an error when there was clear misinterpretation of the original text.

To see the translation techniques used in both scanlation versions, we looked into the translation of some of the assumingly “difficult” Japanese terms in the original as well, such as onomatopoeia and mimetic words, cultural terms and Japanese name suffix (-*chan*, etc.).

2.2.3. Method

Both scanlation versions were compared to the original version, and inaccurate translations of dialogues were extracted. The types of inaccuracy were then analysed, to see if they seemed to be intentional partial change/omission, complete change of contents, or simple errors due to the misinterpretation of the original Japanese text. For the comparison, 5 pages (pp.189-193) of the original text and the corresponding parts from both versions of scanlations were used.

To see translation techniques used by the translators, some examples of onomatopoeia and mimetic words, cultural terms and Japanese name suffix were extracted from the whole chapter.

3. Results

The followings are the results found from abovementioned two pilot studies.

3. 1. Study I

The Table 1 below summarises the numbers and types of inaccurate translation found in both official and scanlation translations of NANA.

Table 1. *Inaccuracy in Official and Scanlation Translations*

	Official Translation	Scanlation
Total Number of Inaccurate Translations	6	19
Of Which: Partial Change	3	3
Of Which: Total Change of Context	2	13
Of Which: Interpretation Errors	0	3
Of Which: Other	1	0

In the Table 1, Partial Change refers to the cases that the context of the translated dialogue was not changed, but there were partial omissions or changes of the exact contents. Total Change of Context is when the content of the translated dialogue was completely unrelated to the original. Interpretation Errors refer to the cases where it was clear that the translator

misinterpreted the original Japanese text, for example, when the translated text meant opposite of the original.

3. 2. Study II

In the Study II, where two scanlations of the same original were compared, we could find some interesting translation techniques adopted by one or both translators in order to surpass some of the assumed difficulties of translation.

For example, the onomatopoeia and mimetic words written directly within the image are considered one of the translation problems where translators must adopt various techniques (Inose, 2009 etc.). Of the two scanlations, Scan 1 (Red Hawk) chose to adopt various techniques, such as translating them into English equivalents where it was possible to change the letterings, and when it was impossible, the translator made a note outside the frame such as “SFX:BUMP!” (to translate the Japanese onomatopoeia *BON*). Putting translator’s note each time the onomatopoeia is written might not be acceptable in the official translation, but this translator Kannon64 has translated almost every single onomatopoeia and mimetic expression used in the original in this way. His translation was accurate as well. In the official translation of manga, it is normal that these expressions are left untranslated with original Japanese lettering. The Scanlation 2 (A3S) opted to leave these expressions untranslated.

Another interesting example is the “information” for the readers of original version written in the margin. As the original is published in the weekly magazine, it is quite common that some advertisement and other information for readers are written in the margin of the page. Kannon64 chose to translate all of this as well, for example the advertisement “16th issue will be out on Monday, March 19th! (Day will differ according to region)” – here the 16th issue is referring to the Shonen Jump no.16 (2012), which is the following issue to the no.15. Obviously this information would not be interesting for the readers of scanlation. However this translator chose to not to omit this, most probably in order to make his readers feel as if they were reading original version in Japanese Shonen Jump magazine. TEISHOU, the translator of the Scanlation 2 opted to omit it.

As for the cultural terms, both translators choose to leave Japanese titles and name-suffix such as *sensei* (teacher, but here used to address to manga artists and it means more of a “master”), *senpai* (elder member of the school and other communities), *-san* (equivalent to Mr. Mrs. Ms. etc., and used to address to others in semi-formal relationships) and so on. This seems to happen quite often in the scanlation but not in the official translation. Other cultural terms, such as fictional product names are maintained in Japanese as well, sometimes with the translator’s notes to explain the meanings of these names.

As for the inaccuracy of translation, the result is summarised in the Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Inaccuracy in Scanlation Versions 1 and 2*

	Scan 1 (Red Hawk)	Scan 2 (A3S)
Total Number of Inaccurate Translations	8	20

Of Which: Partial Change	1	3
Of Which: Interpretation Errors	7	17

In the Table 2, Partial Change refers to the cases that the context of the translated dialogue was not changed, but there were partial omissions or changes of the exact contents. Interpretation Errors refer to the cases where it was clear that the translator misinterpreted the original Japanese text, for example, when the translated text meant opposite of the original. Unlike in the Study I, there was not any case where the context of dialogue was changed completely in translation.

4. Discussions

From the two pilot studies carried out here suggest that scanlation, or fan translation, tend to have errors and inaccuracies quite often. Though the official translation of Study I did have 6 inaccurate points, there was not any misinterpretation of the original Japanese text whereas all 3 scanlation versions (from the Study I and II) had misinterpretations of original text which led to the mistranslation. Though Scan 1 of Study II by Kanon64 showed some impressively accurate translation in parts as will be discussed later, this scanlation also has 7 interpretation errors in 5 pages of manga, which would not be acceptable standard as the professional translation.

The interpretation errors seem to occur when the structure of the original Japanese sentence is rather complicated, the nuance is insinuated without finishing the sentence (as it often happens in the Japanese conversational language), when it has to be understood from the context if the noun is singular or plural (as Japanese language does not have plural form), or idioms and other special expressions are used. We see some examples.

(1) Original (NANA):

Jikan ga tateba tatsuhodo omoikaeseba omoikaesuhodo kareno ikkyoichido ga subete usodatta youni omoete...

(As more time passes, as I recall it more and more often, I feel everything he did was a lie...)

Translation (scanlation):

If the time passes by, it will pass through...if I think I will remember it...he was lying to me...with each and every move he made.

The structure of the original Japanese text is rather complicated, having verb form such as *tateba tatsuhodo* (The more the time passes). The translator seems not to have been able to understand the structure.

(2) Original (Bakuman):

Telebi niwa denai to aredake...

([I have made it to you] so clear that I am not going to appear on TV...)

Scan 1:

I 've said so many times that I won't go on television...

Scan 2:

So that's what you want me to appear on TV for...

Unlike the example (1), the original sentence structure of the example (2) is not complicated. However, the sentence is finished in half, as it often happens with the spoken Japanese, and the other person is expected to guess the message. Scan 2 above could not get the unspoken message, so the translation does not make sense, though the translator understood the context of what is being talked about. Rather than grammatical knowledge, what is required here is the knowledge of the real use of spoken Japanese, which might be difficult to attain if the translator is studying Japanese only by himself, as it often seems to be the case with fan translators. However, the Kannon64 interpreted and translated perfectly in the Scan 1.

(3) Original (Bakuman):

Shin no kanban ka!
(A real flagship!).

Scan 1:

A real flagship!

Scan 2:

A sign?!

Another type of interpretation errors happens when idioms, collocations and other special expressions are used. Here the word *kanban*, which literally means a signboard, is used figuratively to mean the flagship (of a manga magazine). In other word, it tmeans the most popular, catching, etc. The Scan 2 translator did not understand this and translate the word literally, which does not make any sense. However here again, Scan 1 translated it very accurately.

Interpretation errors in scanlation versions are the errors that are easily explained, as they are due to insufficient knowledge of Japanese language (of grammar, use or particular expressions) of the translators. However in the Study I, there were numbers of cases where the translator of the scanlation version changed the context completely. This type of inaccuracy is more difficult to understand, though in some cases it must have happened because the translator could not understand the original text. In many cases the translator just invented dialogue, which was possible partly because of the presence of the images, but obviously would be totally unacceptable in the professional translation.

(4) Original (NANA):

Ii kanji, sono tsukkomi guai.
(Rather nice, that sharp comment of yours)

Scanlation:

Y'know, it feels good to know that you're a nice guy.

The translation has not anything to do with the original. Sometimes the translator invented the message of not only one balloon, but several sequence of them, and thus created the whole dialogue.

These two pilot studies suggest that there are number of inaccuracies in the translation used in the scanlation. Even though the translation of the Scan 1 of the Study II is much more accurate compared to others, it still has too many errors to be used as a professional translation. When we focus on the overall quality of the translation, it may be possible to say that it is difficult to reach the professional level of accuracy by translating only within the fan community, though there is no doubt that the presence of readers (“clients”) and abundant opportunities to translate could function as the ideal OJT environment for the translator training. It should be also mentioned, that though numbers of inaccuracies have been found, the speed of the translation by fan translators seem to be very fast, which in itself is very professional. As it was shown in the Study II, it is quite common that the scanlation version is uploaded only few days after the publication of the original in Japan.

Though numbers of inaccuracies were found, what fan translators might be able acquire through the scanlation practice is not to be disregarded. If the motive of learning Japanese language, which is not exactly an “easily accessible” language for many native English speakers, is to appreciate better and translate the original version of the manga works for the fellow fans, as some scanlators’ community sites suggest (e.g. Mangahelpers.com), it would be providing the learning based on passion, as stated by Gee (2011).

Another point to be mentioned about the fan translation is its possibly more “foreignizing” attitude compared to the professional translation. This is suggested by Inose (2012), and also by some examples in the Study II of the present paper. “Foreignization” (Venuti 1995) in translation is shown by the attempts by translators to retain the foreign elements in their translation, rather than replacing everything by culturally equivalent elements of the target culture. In case of manga translation, which O’Hagan (2006) called a “cultural battle”, this is shown by the translators’ attempts not to omit anything, such as word-plays, onomatopoeia and mimetic words, and cultural references. When it seems to be impossible to translate them into natural English without losing some meanings, they often use translator’s note to explain what the original means. This could be what Jenkins calls “pop cosmopolitanism” (2006:162), and they might be acquiring more open attitude towards another culture through translating manga.

5. Conclusions

The two pilot studies discussed in the present paper suggest that though the online fan community could provide informal learning environment for the fan translators of manga, it might be rather difficult to achieve the overall translation quality required of professional translators just by translating there. However some skills such as the speed of translation, treatment of cultural references or the use of translators’ note seem to be acquired through this practice. As the overall accuracy of the translation could vary very much depending on each fan translator, it would be necessary to carry out further studies with more data.

As it was mentioned in the Introduction section, the manga could be unique material to learn Japanese due to its particular use of conversational language. It could be a rich

resource to learn about grammatical changes, registers, idioms etc. that are used frequently in spoken Japanese. In further analysis of the errors of translation found in scanlation versions, this point should be taken in consideration to see whether these fan translators, who supposedly have more opportunities to learn Japanese through manga compared to normal students, might show strength in understanding the more informal, oral forms of Japanese language.

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