

# Translating Japanese onomatopoeia and mimetic words

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*Abstract. The present study identifies the methods used in translating Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic words in literature into Spanish and English. From the novel *Sputnik no koibito* by Haruki Murakami, which was used as the data source, almost 300 cases are extracted and nine methods (using adverbs, adjectives, verbs, nouns, idioms, onomatopoeia in the target language, explicative phrases, combinations of words and omission) are identified. Each method is analyzed with some examples, considering its effectiveness in transmitting the meaning of the original expressions.*

## Introduction

Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions, although used very frequently in all levels of the language, are considered to be among the most difficult challenges for those learning Japanese, and for translators. The present study aims to identify and analyze the methods used to translate Japanese onomatopoeia and mimetic words into Spanish and English, using a novel by Haruki Murakami as the study material.

In the present paper, some basic information about Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions will be provided, along with consideration of the use of these expressions in literature. We then discuss the methodology of the study, the results, some analysis with examples, and the conclusions.

## Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic words

Onomatopoeia and mimetic words (*giongo* and *gitaigo*, respectively) are used very frequently in all levels of Japanese—from conversation to the quality newspaper. However the peculiarity of these expressions, especially the mimetic word that does not exist in Spanish or in English, causes the utmost difficulty for foreigners learning Japanese. In this first section of the paper, a brief explanation will be given of these expressions, such as definitions, grammatical functions, forms, uses and effects, and so on.

*Japanese onomatopoeia and mimetic word: definitions*

Kojien (5<sup>th</sup> edition 1998), one of the most prestigious Japanese dictionaries, offers the following definitions (our translations, here and throughout):

- *Giseigo*: Words that imitate human and animal voices. *Kyaakyaa* [female high voice, laughing or shouting], *Wanwan* [dog barking] and so on.
- *Giongo*: Words that imitate real sounds. *Sarasara* [sound of stream], *Zaazaa* [sound of showering rain], *Wanwan* [dog barking] and so on.
- *Gitaigo*: Words that describe visual, tactile, and other non-auditory sensitive impressions. *Niyaniaya* [smiling ironically], *Furafura* [state of not being able to walk steadily], *Yuttari* [state of being relaxed] and so on.

According to the above definition, *Giseigo*, which imitates sounds of human or animal voices, is one type of *Giongo*, which includes the imitations of all types of sounds, or onomatopoeia. *Gitaigo*, which is the phonetic expression of the phenomena or the states that do not produce any sounds, refers to mimetic words. In the present paper we define onomatopoeia and mimetic words as follows:

1. Onomatopoeia: *Giseigo* and *giongo* of the above definition. That is to say, any words that imitate real sounds, be they human or animal voice or otherwise.
2. Mimetic words: *Gitaigo* of the above definition. Words that phonetically express states that do not produce sounds, such as an emotion, a movement or state of things.

Of these two, the mimetic word is a much more distinctive feature of the Japanese language, as it is not uncommon for other languages (e.g. English or Spanish) to have onomatopoeia. However, the usage of mimetic words is much more uncommon, and apart from Japanese, very few other languages such as Korean and some African languages (Kamei et al., 1996; etc.) are known to have this type of expression.

*Grammatical Functions*

In Japanese, onomatopoeia and mimetic words function essentially as adverbs, although it is possible for the latter to have other grammatical functions.

- (1) *Zaazaa* (to) *furu*

- “Rains *heavily*”  
 (2) *Nikoniko (to) warau*  
 “Smile *broadly*”

Example (1) is onomatopoeia, as it imitates the sound of pouring rain, whereas (2) is a mimetic word, as it describes “in what manner” the person is smiling, the state which does not produce any sound. The particle *to* means “in a form which is...”, so the literal translation of (1) will be “Rains in a form that produces the sound *zaazaa*”, although this particle could be omitted, and often is.

The grammatical function of onomatopoeia is essentially limited to that of adverb, but a mimetic word could function as an adjective, verb etc., as we will see later. It is worth mentioning here that some words could function both as onomatopoeia and mimetic words, though the meaning changes, normally leaving only a slight association between the two meanings. For example:

- (3) *Doa o gangan tatau*  
 “Knock on the door *hard*”  
 (4) *Atama ga gangan itamu*  
 “(My) head hurts *terribly* (I have a terrible headache)”

The word *gangan* is used in both examples (3) and (4) above, but the first is onomatopoeia and the second is a mimetic word. There is an association between the two, although a very slight one—that a headache can sometimes feel as if someone is banging something in one’s head. However, *gangan* could function as a verb only when used as a mimetic word.

It is possible to use some mimetic words as verbs by attaching the generic verb *suru* (to do). Taking the above example, a verb could be created from the expression *gangan*.

- (5) *Atama ga gangan suru*  
 “(My) head *hurts terribly* (/ I have a terrible headache)”

In the above example, the verb *gangan suru* (“to hurt”, although this is used only in the case of headache) has substituted the verb *itamu* (to hurt) in example (4). However this creation of verb does not occur with onomatopoeia.

Another possible usage of a mimetic word is as an adjective. This is possible by adding particles such as *na*, *ni*, *no* or *da*, depending on the position of the expression in the phrase.

- (6) *Sarasara na kami*  
 “*Silky* hair”

(7) *Kami ga sarasara da*“The hair is *silky*”

Again, this does not occur with onomatopoeia.

*Forms of onomatopoeic and mimetic words*

Japanese onomatopoeia and mimetic words have particular forms, by which they can normally be distinguished. In general, there is a “core sound” which consists of two syllables and indicates the basic meaning of the expression. From this “core sound”, various forms of onomatopoeia and mimetic words can be developed to express subtle differences between similar sounds, states, etc. The categorization of these forms differs greatly in numbers among various authors, and some suggest that there are as many as 55 possible forms (Tanno 2005). However, only a limited number of very typical forms of these expressions are considered here, as shown in Table 1.

Form	Onomatopoeia	Mimetic word
CVCVCVCV	<i>pachipachi</i>	<i>Nikoniko</i>
CVCVQ	<i>pachit(to)</i>	<i>nikot(to)</i>
CVCVri	<i>pachiri</i>	<i>Nikori</i>
CVCVN	<i>pachin</i>	-
CVCVRN	<i>pachiin</i>	-
CVQCvri	<i>(pacchiri)</i>	<i>Nikkori</i>

Table 1. Some possible forms of onomatopoeia and mimetic word (based on Flyxe 2002)

Before describing this table, it is necessary to have a basic familiarity with the Japanese sound system. In Japanese, all syllables (or *moras*) but three, are open syllables, meaning they all end with a vowel. This means that, unlike English for example, each syllable has more or less the same duration. In Table 1, “C” shows a consonant and “V” a vowel, and the combination of “CV” is a syllable, or a *mora*.

The three syllables that do not end with a vowel are phonemes /N/, /Q/ and /R/, which are often used in onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. /N/ is a nasal sound, /R/ is a prolongation of a preceding vowel—in Japanese, the prolonged vowel is considered to have two syllables, or *moras*, as the duration of the sound is double of one *mora*. /Q/ is not really a sound but the absence of it, which appears after a vowel and before consonants /p/, /t/, /s/ and /k/, for example the pause between [o] and [ki] in a word *pokkiri*. Although without a sound, it is considered as a *mora*, or a syllable, because it has the duration. In Table 1, they are represented with letters “N”, “R” and “Q” respectively.

Table 1 shows some of the very typical (and distinguishable) forms of onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. It is also worth mentioning that these expressions are normally written only using phonograms (*hiragana* or *katakana*) and not Chinese characters (*kanji*) which have meanings as well as sounds.

In the above example of onomatopoeia, the core sound is CV “pachi”, which indicates sound of hitting or slapping something lightly. The first form, CVCVCVCV is a repetition of the core sounds, indicating that the sound repeating itself, and *pachipachi* is normally used to describe the sound of clapping. The form CVCVQ shows that the sound occurs only once, and *pachit (to)* is the sound of slapping someone lightly. CVCVri is also a sound that only occurs once, but which is slightly longer than CVCVQ. For example, *pachiri* is a sound of taking photograph (“click” in English). The forms CVCVN, CVCVRN or *pachin, pachiin* respectively, are again sounds of hitting or slapping something lightly, but the second is a longer sound than the first. The form CVQCVri indicates something longer, with a hint of comical atmosphere, but in the case of the core sound *pachi* it changes meaning and becomes a mimetic word. *Pacchiri* is a description of big and vivid eyes, or a state of being wide awake. The example of a mimetic word is with the core sound “niko”, which indicates a smile as in example (2) above. Here again, the various forms derived from the core sound describe the subtle differences between various types of smiles.

#### *The uses and effects*

As mentioned above, the use of onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions (mostly as adverbs) is extremely common in Japanese, although the figures vary among studies. For example Yamaguchi (2003) argues that there are more than 1,200 onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in Japanese, which is about three times more than in English. Some studies try to explain this phenomenon by pointing out that Japanese does not have a wide variety of verbs, as English for example, to express subtle nuances of action, and therefore it is necessary to express various nuances by onomatopoeia and mimetic words (e.g. Jorden 1982). For example, to express various nuances with the basic action of walking, in English there exist verbs such as to dawdle, to waddle, to trudge, to toddle, etc., whereas in Japanese one has to express these nuances by adding mimetic words *noronoro, yotayota, tobotobo* and *yochiyochi* to the verb *aruku* (to walk) respectively. However Minashima (2004) argues that the use of adverbs to express the nuance is common in English as well (e.g. “grinning broadly”) and therefore it cannot be said that all that is expressed by onomatopoeic and mimetic words in Japanese could be expressed just with the verbs in English. Another argument about the necessity of using these expressions is that, compared to the “normal” expressions, they give much more vividness in describing

states, emotions, movements and so on. Baba (2001) carried out a study on the use of these expressions by Japanese subjects and argues these expressions are used more frequently in emotive and informal situations.

### Translation of Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic words

#### *Onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in Japanese literature*

This section will discuss very briefly the difficulty of translating these expressions, by using a poem by Shuntaro Tanigawa (1931-), a well known contemporary Japanese poet, as an example.

1. *Anata wa oogesa ne to onna wa iu*  
“But you exaggerate so much, the woman says,”
2. *Ano hito wa **bosoboso** hanshita dake yo*  
“He used to *mumble*, only,”
3. ***Perapera** shabettari wa shinakattawa*  
“Never *chattered* like you,”
4. *Iya mushiro **gamigami** wameite itayo*  
“No, rather, he used to shout *scornfully*,”
5. ***Butsubutsu** to otoko wa iu*  
“The man *grumbles*,”
6. *Anata mitai ni **ujiuji** iunoyori iiwa*  
“Better than being *wishy-washy* like you,”
7. ***Sabasaba** to onna wa kotaeru*  
“The woman answers *frankly*,”
8. ***Rokuichippukyuririri** to*  
“*Rokuichippukyuririri*”
9. *Kago no naka no kotori ga saezuru*  
“Chirps the bird in its cage,”
10. *Onna no miteru manga no nakade*  
“In the cartoon that the woman is watching,”
11. ***Zutetto** shujinkou ga zukkokeru*  
“The main character fall *loudly*,”
12. *Mado no soto ni **potsun** to kakashi ga tatte iru*  
“Outside the window, a bogle is standing *all alone*”
13. ***Kirakira** kagayaku manatsu no hi no moto de*  
“Under the *brilliant* summer sunshine,”
14. *Sekai wa hotondo ongaku de atta*  
“The world was, almost, music”

In the 14 verses, the poet uses 10 onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. The onomatopoeic words are *bosoboso* (2), *perapera* (3), *gamigami* (4),

*butsubutsu* (5), *rokuikuchippukyuririri* (8), and *zutete* (11). The mimetic words are *ujijuji* (6), *sabasaba* (7), *potsun* (12) and *kirakira* (13).

Of the above, *bosoboso*, *perapera*, *gamigami*, and *butsubutsu* all express the different manners (and therefore tones of voices) of talking. *Rokuikuchippukyuririri*, which is the sound of a bird chirping in this poem, is a creation by the poet, although using sounds such as “chi”, “kyu”, and “ri” that would appear in more traditional onomatopoeic expressions for bird sounds.

The difficulty of translating these expressions is quite obvious, as their particular forms contribute greatly to the rhythm of the poem as well. The impression of having so many “sounds” leads to the final verse of “the world was, almost, music”—the music that inevitably disappears in the process of translation.

#### *Translating onomatopoeic and mimetic words in literature—previous studies*

As onomatopoeic and mimetic words are known to be one of the features of Japanese, there are a number of related studies, mostly from the perspectives of foreign-language education (e.g. Ivanova 2002) and linguistics (e.g. Tsujimura 2001).

The studies on translation of these expressions normally focus on literary translation. For example, Flyxe (2002) examines the translation of Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions into Swedish by analyzing the difficulty of the translation and the reasons for their often remaining without translation. The author gives various examples of earlier studies, such as Eström (1989) and Hayase (1978), as well as two studies on the translation of the novel *Yukiguni* (Snow Country) by Yasunari Kawabata into English. Eström concludes that 60 of the total 200 onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in the original remain without translation, and according to Hayase, 59 of the total 186 are not translated. Flyxe also cites the study by Kubo (1997), where according to him 78% of the onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions that appear in the novels of Kenji Miyazawa have been translated without using these types of expressions.

Flyxe proposes some reasons why these expressions are not translated. For example, it is possible that in the target language (in this case, Swedish), onomatopoeic expressions are considered to be childish and vulgar, and thus it is impossible to maintain the register of the original text if the translator uses such expressions. Also he points out the absence of the complex phonetic symbolism in the target language, and therefore the impossibility of expressing the subtle nuances expressed by Japanese onomatopoeia and mimetic words. Flyxe gives a case in which the translator uses the same Swedish onomatopoeia *plaskar* to translate two different onomatopoeias, *bachabacha* and *bochabocha*, which are both water-splashing sounds but the second indicates that the water is deeper than the first. Finally, the author

mentions the difficulty of maintaining the style of the translation using these expressions, either due to the excessive “informality” of onomatopoeic or mimetic expressions in the target language, or changes of the structure of the sentences in the process of translation.

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

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

## Methodology

### *Data source*

In the present study, the data is extracted from a novel by Haruki Murakami, *Sputnik no koibito* (1999) and its translations into English (*Sputnik Sweetheart*) and Spanish (*Sputnik, mi amor*). The novel consists of 16 chapters, from which onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in the original and translations of corresponding parts have been extracted.<sup>1</sup>

Haruki Murakami (1949-) is probably the best-known author of contemporary Japanese literature, both within and outside of Japan. Although his work spans various genres such as novels, essays, non-fiction etc, most of his works translated into foreign languages are novels. Since the publication of his first novel *Kaze no uta wo kike* [Listen to the Songs of the Wind] in 1979, he has published more than 10 novels, among which are titles such as *Hitsuji wo meguru boken* (Wild Sheep Chase) (1982) and *Norway no mori* (Norwegian Wood) (1987).

The themes of the works of Murakami are consistent, although they gain more complexity with time. These themes include the nostalgia for

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<sup>1</sup> The original used here is the paperback edition (16<sup>th</sup> edition, 2004) of Kodansha, Tokyo (318 pages). The English version is the first edition, translated by Philip Gabriel (2002) and published by Vintage, London (229 pages), and the Spanish version is translated by Lourdes Porta and Junichi Matsuura (2001) published by Tusquets Editores, Barcelona, Spain (246 pages).

youth, which passes and does not return, and the fragility of daily life that hides violence or a “dark side” of the human mentality, which expresses itself as “another side” of the world. Characters often pass onto that “other side” where we find what is oppressed in our daily world, such as more primitive, energetic, violent and absurd parts of humanity. In other words, it is what each of us, living in a highly mechanical and industrial civilization, hides within ourselves. Characters cross the border and often come back to “this side”, but with their identity ruptured—they often lose the most primitive part of their mentality, such as their will to live or their sexual desire. The theme is repeated in *Sputnik no koibito*.

### *Method*

In the present study, onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions are extracted from the original Japanese version, and their corresponding translations in English and Spanish.

Extracting onomatopoeic expressions is quite simple, as those are the expressions that imitate real sounds, be they human or animal voices, or inanimate sounds. Extracting mimetic expressions is somewhat more complicated, as they “imitate” or express with sounds the states, movements, emotions, etc., which do not produce real sounds. Some of the mimetic words are very commonly used and it is hard to judge whether they still maintain mimetic character. In those cases, *Gendai Giongo Gitaigo Yoho Jiten* [“Modern Dictionary of Onomatopoeic and Mimetic Words”] by Hida and Asada (2002) was used as the reference of consultation.

The expressions extracted from the original version are numbered according to: (1) chapter and (2) order of appearance. Then, they are categorized according to: (1) type of expression (onomatopoeic or mimetic), (2) grammatical functions (adverb, adjective, verb, noun and so on). The parts that correspond to those expressions in the original are extracted from the translated versions, and categorized by the methods used for the translation. In the present study, the following nine methods are identified:

- (1) Translation using adverbs
- (2) Translation using adjectives
- (3) Translation using verbs
- (4) Translation using nouns
- (5) Translation using explicative paraphrases
- (6) Translation using idioms
- (7) Translation using onomatopoeic expressions
- (8) Translation using two adjectives, or combination of adverbs, adjectives or verbs
- (9) No translation (omission or complete change of the phrase).

Methods (1) to (4) of the above are adverbs, adjectives, verbs and nouns in the target language. Participles of the verbs are considered as adjectives in the present study. Method (5) is considered as paraphrase when the translation of the onomatopoeic or mimetic expression consists of a part of a phrase (subject and verb, for example) that is not an idiom. Method (7) is the use of the onomatopoeic expression of the target language.

## **Results**

In the original Japanese version, 267 mimetic and 28 onomatopoeic expressions (total 295) are found. Of the total 295 expressions, 228 are adverbs (77.3%), 13 are adjectives (4.4%), 48 are verbs (16.3%), 1 is a noun (0.3%) and the rest 5 are others (1.7%). However in the Spanish translation, of the parts which correspond to the 295 onomatopoeic or mimetic expressions in the original, 62 (21.0%) are adverbs, 5 (18.0%) are adjectives, 32 (10.8%) are verbs, 9 (3.1%) are nouns and the rest 139 (47.1%) are others. Here, the “others” includes translation using explicative paraphrase, idiom, combination of adjectives, etc., as well as omission. In the case of the English translation, 48 (16.3%) are adverbs, 45 (15.3%) are adjectives, 49 (16.6%) are verbs, 13 (4.4%) are nouns, and the rest 140 (47.5%) are others. The more detailed figure for each translation method included in the “others” will be shown in the analysis section.

As can be seen from these figures, there are many more mimetic expressions than onomatopoeic ones used in the original. Also, although most of the Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions function as adverbs (77.3%), this trend is not maintained in either of the translations. Especially in the English translation, the use of adverbs is only 16.3% of the total, and is less than that of verb (16.6%).

This tendency to use fewer adverbs in the translations than in the original is compensated for by using “other” methods (47.1% in Spanish and 47.5% in English). Although the use of verb and adjective is more frequent in the translations compared to the original, the most outstanding feature of the translations is the high frequency of the use of “more original” translation methods rather than assigning an equivalent word in the target language. It is probable that these are the cases in which translators could not find an equivalent term, be it adverb, adjective, verb or noun, in the target language and had to choose one of the “other” methods of translation or omit it completely. In other words, the analysis of those methods opted for by translators will help in understanding how translators dealt with the challenges of translating these expressions.

## Analysis

In this section, each of the nine methods adopted in translating Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic words will be analyzed using some examples. However as mentioned in the previous section, some methods, such as use of explicative paraphrases, idioms, combining two adjectives or omission seem to emphasize the challenges that translators face, as they are the methods adopted when translation by one equivalent word (be it adverb, adjective or verb) in the target language, and thus needs more attention than some other methods.

### *Translation using adverbs*

As we have seen, a major part (77.3%) of the onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in the original are adverbs. Although in the translations the rates are much lower (21.0% in Spanish and 16.3% in English), this is one of the simplest methods of the translation. Observe this example.

(1) Chapter 5 no.11

Original: *Sumire wa nani mo iwazu ni boku no te wo totte sotto nigitta.*

“Without saying a word, Sumire took my hand and held it *gently*.”

English: Without a word, Sumire took my hand and *gently* squeezed it.

Spanish: Sin decir palabra, Sumire me tomó la mano y me la apretó *suavemente*.

The mimetic word *sot(to)* expresses the way of doing something carefully and gently. In both the Spanish and English translations the translators chose adverbs, as in the original, which have equivalent meaning.

Adverbs were used in 62 and 47 cases in Spanish and English translations respectively. However, it should be noted that the use of a noun combined with the particle *with* or *con* in the case of Spanish, also has adverbial function. These cases will be discussed below.

### *Translation using adjectives*

There are 43 (Spanish) and 45 (English) cases where adjectives are used, compared to only 13 cases in Japanese. These are mostly cases that use adverbs in the original (which are all mimetic words), and the change of grammatical category is understandable considering the structural differences of phrases in Japanese and European languages, especially as adverbs and adjectives are both modifiers. Here we will look at one such example.

(2) Chapter 9 no.9

Original: *Yagate **guttari** to natta.*

“Then (she) went *numb*.”

English: ... (she) ended up *limp*.

Spanish: ... hasta quedar *desmadejado*.

The mimetic word *guttari* expresses the state of someone (or some animal) not having energy to move, possibly in a state of unconsciousness. In the original it is used as an adverb of the verb *naru* (“become”), explaining to what state the character has “become”. In both the English and Spanish versions it is translated as an adjective due to the phrase structure, but with the equivalent meaning.

#### *Translation using verbs*

As has been mentioned, in Japanese it is possible to create verbs by adding (i.e. without particle) the generic verb *suru* (“to do”) to mimetic words. In those cases, it seems natural to translate using verbs, although in many cases the translators choose to use explicative paraphrases as well.

#### (3) Chapter 8 no.1

Original: *Watashi wa **bikkuri** shite shimatta.*

“I was *surprised*.”

English: I was *surprised*.

Spanish: Me *soprendió*...

*Shite* is the conjugation of the verb *suru*, and thus the original phrase contains the verb *bikkuri suru* (“to be surprised”). In both translations, it is translated as a verb.

Another pattern is to translate onomatopoeic or mimetic adverbs using verbs. This is understandable, as mimetic or onomatopoeic adverbs often explain nuances of the main verb they modify (e.g. *warau* is the main verb which means “to laugh”, and *kusukusu warau* is “to chuckle”, *nikkori warau* is “to smile”), but in the target language there exist verbs that already include these nuances.

#### (4) Chapter 12 no.8

Original: *Marude hitorigoto mitai ni **butsubutsu** to...*

“*Mumbled* as if he was talking to himself.”

English: ... as he *mumbled* this, as if talking to himself...

Spanish: *Masculla* estas palabras con la cabeza gancha, casi para sí mismo.

*Butsubutsu* is an onomatopoeic word that imitates the sound of someone talking not very clearly, possibly complaining about something. In the original the verb is omitted, but the sentence should be finished by adding the verb which shows the action it modifies, in this case *iu* “to say”, at the end. In both the English and Spanish translations, it is translated by one verb, which expresses both the action and the nuance (i.e. “to mumble” is “to say something *not very clearly*”).

In other cases, mimetic or onomatopoeic adverbs do not add any nuance to the action they modify, but simply repeat the meaning of the verb. In those cases, they are incorporated in the verb in the translation.

(5) Chapter 1 no.12

Original: *Soko ni tamashii to unmei wo meguru subete no jisho wo **gisshiri** to tsumekomou to shite ita.*

“(She) was trying to *squeeze* all the phenomena about the human soul and the fate into (her novel). “

English: ...a kind of portmanteau *packed* with every possible phenomenon in order to capture the soul and human destiny.

Spanish: ...donde pudiera *embutir* cualquier fenómeno que apuntara a su alma y a su destino.

*Gisshiri* is a mimetic word which expresses the state of a space packed with many things, for example, a train packed with passengers. However, the verb it modifies *tsumekomu* means “to put many things not leaving any space, possible by force”, and the nuance of mimetic adverb is simply repeating what is already expressed by the verb. In the above example, both the Spanish and English translations incorporate the meaning of the mimetic adverb in the verbs. As no element of the original phrase is lost in the translations, it is not considered an omission.

*Translation using nouns*

In the original there is only one case of a mimetic expression used as a noun (Chapter 5 no.7), but in the translations there are 13 (English) and 9 (Spanish) cases using nouns for translating onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. There are two patterns in the translation—either to use noun on its own, or to use it in combination with the particle *with*, or *con* in the case of Spanish. In the latter case, it has an adverbial function.

(6) Chapter 9 no.7

Original: *Myu wa **hotto** iki wo tsuita.*

“Myu gave a sigh of *relief*”

English: Miu gave a sigh of *relief*.

Spanish: Myu lanzó un suspiro de *alivio*.

The mimetic word *hot(to)* functions as an adverb, explaining the action of sighing as done with relief. In both translations, it is translated as nouns.

(7) Chapter 11 no.24

Original: *Futo ki ga tsukuto...*

“(She) notices *suddenly*...”

English: *With a start* she notices...

*Fu(to)* is a mimetic adverb that expresses the noticing or thinking of something suddenly, with no particular reason. In the English translation, to express the suddenness, the translator uses the noun *start* with the particle *with*, making the noun part of an adverbial. The method could expand the possible choice of adverbs that translators could use.

*Explicative paraphrases*

The use of explicative paraphrases is very common, especially in the English translation. The English translator uses this method to translate 5 onomatopoeic and 54 mimetic expressions (in Spanish, 0 and 37 respectively), which is 20.0% of the total of those expressions (in the case of Spanish, 12.5%). This is an interesting method to analyze as it shows the translator’s interpretation of these expressions and the effort to transmit it to the target language. However there is also the risk of making the phrases too redundant, thus lacking the natural fluency in the target language.

(6) Chapter 1 no.3

Original: *Mukashi no italia eiga ni detekuru sensai koji mitai ni yasete me dake ga **gyorogyoro** shite ita.*

“Like a war orphan in the old Italian films, she was thin, and had *huge eyes*”

English: ...and she was as thin as one of those war orphans in an old Italian film—*like a stick with eyes*.

Spanish: ...estaba delgada como un huérfano de guerra de esos que salen en alguna película vieja italiana, y *sólo su mirada mostraba cierta inquietud y vivacidad*.

*Gyorogyoro* is a mimetic word that describes huge eyes, possibly bulging and moving. To express this, both translators use explicative paraphrases, but while the English translator stresses the hugeness of her eyes, the Spanish translator uses more elaborated paraphrase. The Spanish phrase

means “...only looks of her eyes showed some curiosity and liveliness”, which tries to explain all the nuances that the original mimetic word carries.

*Translation with idioms*

Idioms could be a good option for translating onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. Even when they do not have onomatopoeic or mimetic elements, sometimes they can give vivid images without further explanations (such as explicative paraphrases). The difficulty here is to find an idiom that coincides in meaning with an onomatopoeic or mimetic word. Possibly for this reason, there are not many cases of translators using this method.

(7) Chapter 4 no.6

Original: *Saizu wa uso mitai ni pittari dattawa.*

“(The clothes) were just my size, seems like a joke”

English: The clothes fit me *like a glove*.

*Pittari* is a mimetic word that describes how two surfaces of things fit to each other perfectly, without leaving any gap between them. The idiom used in English seems to be a perfect translation.

*Translation with onomatopoeia: the cases of onomatopoeic expressions*

There are 28 cases in the original in which onomatopoeic expressions are used. In the English version there are 16 cases, and in the Spanish 8 cases, where they are rendered by onomatopoeic expressions of the target language. Unlike mimetic words, onomatopoeic words exist in English and Spanish, and the translators use them where they could find equivalent “sounds” to those described in the original version. However, it is impossible to find equivalent onomatopoeic words for all cases. Sounds that are very different for Japanese speakers are thus translated using the same onomatopoeia in English and Spanish.

(8a) Chapter 11 no.13

Original: *Pokipokipokipoki.*

Spanish: ¡Crac! ¡Crac! ¡Crac! ¡Crac! ¡Crac!

(8b) Chapter 11 no.28

Original: *Kotsun.*

Spanish: ¡Crac!

In the above two examples, the sounds described by the original onomatopoeic words, which are quite different from each other, are translated by the one Spanish onomatopoeic word. *Pokipoki*...is the sound of cracking fingers

and *kotsun* is the sound of something small and hard hitting a hard surface lightly, like hitting someone's head very lightly with a fist as a sign of endearment. However, not being able to find two onomatopoeic words that differentiate these sounds, the same "sound" is used to translate both. The ease with which new Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic words are created is one of the features of these expressions, but this is not the case in English or in Spanish.

#### *Translating with combination or repetition of words*

There are five and seven cases using this method in the Spanish and English translations respectively. As in the case of using explicative paraphrases, we can see how translators try to transmit their interpretations of mimetic and onomatopoeic expressions, but here without the risk of making the phrase too redundant or deviating too much from the original by adding extra information.

#### (9) Chapter 1 no.1

Original: *Kojinmari to shita shiritsu daigaku.*

"small private college"

English: *Cosy little private college.*

*Kojinmari* is a mimetic word that describes the state of something being small, neat and organized. By combining two adjectives, the English translation tries to transmit the various elements that the meaning of *kojinmari* holds.

This method could be very effective without the translator excessively imposing their personal interpretation. The difficulty here is that the translator has to understand the meaning of onomatopoeic and mimetic words completely to be able to "decompose" their meaning into elements and then translate each of them using adjectives, adverbs, etc.

#### *Omission*

The table 2 shows the number of omissions made by the two translators.

	English		Spanish		Both	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Onomatopoeia	4 (of 28)	14.3	8(of 28)	28.6	3 (of 28)	10.7
Mimetic words	53 (of 267)	19.9	49(of 267)	18.4	18 (of 267)	6.7
Total	57 (of 295)	19.3	57(of 295)	19.3	21(of 295)	7.1

Table 2. Omissions

The English and Spanish translators together omit 57, or 19.3% of the onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. However, of those, only 21 expressions are omitted by both translators, meaning about 30 expressions omitted in one version are translated in the other, possibly showing the difference between two translators in evaluating the importance of those expressions.

*Cases omitted by both translators*

There are 20 onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions that are omitted by both translators. In all 20 cases, those expressions are functioning as modifiers and not as verbs, meaning they do not carry the most essential information in the phrase. As a consequence, in some cases the omission does not result in a loss of information, and sometimes even seems an appropriate method when an equivalent onomatopoeic expression does not exist in the target language.

However the omission by both translators does not always mean that the expressions do not have importance. In the following examples, the mimetic word describes something about the emotional states of the characters of the novel, but the information is lost in both translations.

(10) Chapter 5 no.2

Original: *Benkyo ya shigoto to wa betsu no basho ni **kossori** totte oku.*

“Keep it secretly somewhere, which is not related to my work or study”

English: ...not a part of your work or study.

Spanish: ...debía mantenerla apartada de mis estudios y de mi trabajo.

The mimetic word *kossori* describes doing something in a secretive manner, or stealthily. Here the narrator is talking about his love for literature which he keeps as something very private, not as a part of his work or his study. In both translations this adverb is lost, which somewhat changes the interpretation of narrator's feeling.

(11) Chapter 8 no.15

Original: *Sono te kara kara ni natta gurasu wo **sotto** toriageta.*

“I *softly* took the empty glass from her hand.”

English: ...taking her empty glass.

Spanish: ...tomé de su mano la copa vacía.

The mimetic adverb *sot (to)* describes the way of doing something softly and with care, without making sounds. In this particular scene, the narrator takes an empty glass of brandy from a woman, trying not to disturb her thinking. The hint about his delicate and caring personality is lost in the translations.

*Cases omitted by one of the translators*

There are 70 cases in which one of the translators did not translate the onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. Of those 70, some are cases where those expressions do not add new information to the phrases but elaborate, or merely repeat the information given by other words (e.g. verbs), but they are scarce examples. In the rest of the cases, these expressions carry some information, and therefore have effects that are lost by the decisions of the translators.

Sometimes mimetic words do not add new information to the phrases but have the effect of adding emphasis, which is lost in the translation.

## (11) Chapter 4 no.14

Original: *Sappari omoshiroku nai.*

“It is not interesting at all”

English: ...and it’s boring.

*Sappari* is a mimetic word that emphasizes the degree of negation. It could have been translated as “it’s *absolutely* boring”, for example, but the translator opted to omit the expression.

**Conclusion**

All six methods of translation mentioned by Flyxe (2002) were found in the present study, as well as three more methods (idiom, combination of words and using nouns).

The rates of omission (19.7% in both English and Spanish translations) are similar to the results of previous studies. The present study, by analyzing cases of omissions, has tried to identify the role of onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in the original phrases, and the possible loss of some information by omitting those in the translations.

There are some cases where those expressions do not add new information to the phrase but elaborate, or even repeat the information already given by other words (verb, for example). In these cases the omission could be seen as an appropriate method of translation, especially in cases of onomatopoeic words, which often do not have equivalent “sounds” in the target language.

Regarding translation methods, there are some relatively “straightforward” methods, such as using adverb, adjective, verb or possible idiom, when the translators could find a word (or idiom) in the target language that is equivalent in its meaning to the original onomatopoeic or mimetic word. When this is not so easy, the translators use other, more original methods, such as explicative paraphrase or combination of various adjectives. The former is an especially popular method, although it has the risk of making

the translated phrase too redundant, or imposing the translator's interpretation (which could be very elaborate sometimes) on the readers. The combination of various words seems to be a very effective method of translation. The difficulty here is to understand profoundly the meaning of each onomatopoeic and mimetic expression, to be able to "decompose" it into various elements and translate each of them into the target language.

To conclude, it is proposed that except for very few cases in which onomatopoeic or mimetic words do not add extra information, omission is not a desirable method of translation. When there is no equivalent word in the target language, the translators should consider using other resources, such as explicative paraphrases or combination of various words.

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