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Translating Korean manhwa

Alexandra BÎJA[1]

When translating Korean literature, we often come across words and phrases that might not have a direct equivalent in the target language. One of the most difficult genres to translate is, in our opinion, the comic, or the manhwa. We try to offer illustrative examples of translation from the source language, which is Korean, into the target language, which is English, with emphasis on translating words and phrases that might pose problems, such as culture bound words, names of places and characters. We will also discuss other linguistic phenomena that are common to graphic novels, such as mots expresifs, onomatopoeia, charactonyms, also tackling issues regarding historical references, cultural references, behaviour and customs pertaining to the source, but also target, social groups. The reason why we are focusing on translating manhwa[2] is the fact that it has started to become more and more popular in other cultures/countries. We chose the manhwa called 신과 함께 (Along with the Gods), as it is one of the most popular of its kind, and it is one that intertwines Korean folklore, tradition, history and mythical creatures with contemporaneity.

Key-words: *translation studies, manhwa, untranslatability.*

1. Introduction

Words encoding cultural information are hard or even impossible at times to translate. Starting from antiquity to modern days, linguists have tried to find a way to explain the idea of transposing a text from one semiotic system into another, concerning themselves with issues like accuracy, equivalency, interpretation, and so on.

We base our research on the idea that translating *manhwa* is not only a linguistic process, in which you just find a word for a signified, but rather a process that combines linguistics with other disciplines as well, such as cultural studies, history, ethnology, and so on. It is our conviction that an accurate translation from Korean into English cannot be done without a vast knowledge of other aspects of

[1] Babeş-Bolyai University, alexandra.bija@ubbcluj.ro
[2] A style of comic books and graphic novels particular to South Korea.

the source culture as well, and that translation is both a linguistic and a cultural process. By looking at it in this way, we are bound to capture the "sense" of the source text and to transpose it into the target language.

We will begin this paper by listing a few ideas regarding different approaches to translation, and then we will discuss a number of issues that might pose problems when translation from Korean into English is attempted. Lastly, we will offer a few illustrative examples of such translation issues encountered in the manhwa that we have selected.

2. Approaches to translation

In order to introduce the topic of translation, we would first like to mention Pardo (2013), who in her study presents a list of translation procedures that have been approached throughout time, and which give us an idea of how much the process of translation can vary. The classification of these translation procedures follows Newmark's (1988) diagram:

> **Literal**: the syntax is translated as close as possible in the TL[3].
> **Word-for-word**: the SL[4] word-order is maintained – the translation of cultural words is literally.
> **Faithful**: it implies reproducing the exact meaning of the SL into the TL.
> **Semantic**: it differs from faithful translation in the aesthetic, the beautiful, aspect only of the SL.
> **Free:** this process consists in paraphrasing the original with longer sentences which is also called "intralingual translation".
> **Adaptation**: it is used for poetry, plays. The main sense is maintained but the cultural words/sense is adapted (re-written) in the TL.
> **Idiomatic**: or natural translation reproduces the original sense but introduces colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions in the TL.
> **Communicative**: this type of translation is the one that tends to reproduce the exact meaning of the SL taking into account not only the language but the content, so that they are closer to the original. (Pardo 2013, 5-6)

"Word for word", or literal translation, even though applied in some cases, such as technical and scientific translations, cannot be used when attempting to translate

[3] TL = target language.
[4] SL = source language.

any form of literature, because, through its simple principle of finding an exact word equivalent from the source language into the target language, it fails to capture any kind of deeper meaning that the text might have. And indeed it can be difficult to render an exact meaning of certain structures (for example idioms), this leading to a misinterpretation of the source text. Thus, this *verbum pro verbo* approach has been dismissed by many translators throughout centuries, a *sensum pro sensu,* or "sense for sense" one gaining ground, the approach that we are also adopting in this paper.

Jakobson proposes three ways in which translation can be done: Intralingual, Interlingual, and Intersemiotic (1959). The first is a " «rewording»: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language" (Jakobson 1959 as found in Pardo 2013, 9), the second one is a "«translation proper»…the most traditional way of translating: an interpretation of linguistic signs by means of some other language." (Jakobson 1959, quoted in Pardo 2013, 9), and the third is a "«transmutation»: an interpretation of verbal signs by means of non-verbal sign systems".

On the other hand, Snell-Hornby (1988) is against the idea that equivalence should be used in a translation, considering that:

> equivalence is unsuitable as a basic concept in translation theory: the term equivalence, apart from being imprecise and ill-defined (even after a debate of over twenty years) presents an illusion of symmetry between languages which hardly exists beyond the level of vague approximations and which distorts the basic problems of translation. (Snell-Hornby 1988, 22)

In her book *Translation Studies: An Integrated Approach* (1988), Snell-Hornby argues that translation should be tackled from a holistic point of view, implying that the translation as a whole, in order to be relevant and accurate, should take into account other factors as well, which, if interconnected, compose a unity:

> Whereas linguistics has gradually widened its field of interest from the micro- to the macro-level, translation studies, which is concerned essentially with texts against their situational and cultural background, should adopt the reverse perspective: as maintained by the gestalt psychologists, an analysis of parts cannot provide an understanding of the whole, which must be analysed from the top down. (Snell-Hornby 1988, 35)

It is our opinion as well that we should have a holistically oriented approach to translation (literary translation *de facto*). As stated before in this paper, we consider that it is of utmost importance that a translator should take into consideration all other factors that compose a social entity/group, not only the linguistic factor which is not enough to render the same meaning of a text.

3. Issues

In one of his studies, Peter Borbely (2014) lists a number of translation issues that can appear due to linguistic relativity. He believes that "[c]ulture and language are intertwined entities, thus readers need to acquire a certain level of intercultural competence to gain a proper understanding" (2014, 113) and that "cultural terms and references also have little resonance for Western readers, which also may disturb the reading process" (Borbely 2014, 113).

Some other issues that we were able to identify were: word order, various syntactic differences, such as the position of adverbs, verb inflection and the position of relative clauses, disposition of the vocabulary to nuance meaning, and word formation, among many others, issues that we will try to illustrate. We offered a more detailed approach to these issues in one of our other papers (Bîja 2021).

Korean can form new words by fusing different stems together, and adding morphemes to change meaning. It is hard to say which language benefits from the use of more words in order to express thought, but it is true that Korean language has many ways of enriching the vocabulary and of forming new words, enabled by its very own writing system, and which are unknown to the English language. While English uses the Latin alphabet, Korean uses both Hangeul and Hanja[5]. It does have phonologic orthography, but it is a featural writing system. In Hangeul, the featural symbols are combined into alphabetic letters, and then the letters are joined into syllabic blocks, so that the system combines three levels of phonological representation (Sampson 1990). One syllabic block is also a stem, and combining several syllabic blocks can generate new words. Thus, in Korean we can say that a new category of word formation appears, which is the abbreviation of a word to its first cluster of letters/ syllable. This happens in the case of longer phrases that need to be shortened. Below are some examples:

a) 깜놀 <'깜짝 놀랐다 kkamnol < 'kkamjjak nollata[6] (tr. I was surprised, was scared for a second)
b) 밀당 : '밀고 당기기 mildang: 'milgo dang-gigi. (tr. push and pull – play hard to get)
c) 불금 < 불타는 금요일 bulgeum < bultaneun geum-yoil (lit. tr. Burning Friday); it refers to an exciting day.

[5] Chinese characters incorporated into the Korean language, with Korean pronunciation.
[6] The type of transliteration that we employ throughout this paper is Revised Romanization.

Then there are the social and cultural nuances that might pose difficulties in translation, that we have mentioned in a previous study as well (Bîja 2021), and these are: humour, gender differentiated speech, social class differentiated speech, honorifics, wordplay and cultural references. When talking about these nuances, Borbely (2014, 115) says that "[c]ultural references and their original substance are usually explained in footnotes, mostly, when it seems to be impossible to translate them into English without losing some meaning". We believe that we should first try and find a way in which to accurately translate the structures without losing their substance, and only when it is clearly impossible, to resort to explanations in footnotes.

3. Case study

In this part of the paper we will try to offer illustrative examples of translation from the source language, which is Korean, into English as the target language, with emphasis on translating words and phrases that might pose problems, such as culture-bound words, names of places and of the characters, whether they convey any sort of special meaning in the source language. We shall also tackle various other linguistic phenomena that are common to graphic novels, such as mots expresifs, onomatopoeia, charactonyms, and also issues regarding historical and cultural references, behaviour and customs pertaining to the source, but also target social groups. Our aim is to find a way in which to translate culture-bound words, and to ponder further on the issue of untranslatability.

The manhwa that we chose as a case study is called 신과 함께, title that could be translated as "Together with the Gods" or "Along with the Gods", written and illustrated by Joo Ho-min (2012). The manhwa started off as a web toon in 2010, and was eventually printed in 2012 in a series of 3 collective volumes. The comic intertwines Korean folklore, tradition, history, and mythical creatures with contemporaneity, which is precisely why we chose it. Rumy Doo, a journalist of the online publication in English, *The Korea Herald*, described this manhwa as "a whimsical twist on the Korean folklore of the seven gates in the afterlife." (http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171213000861). The story begins with the main character, Kim Ja-hong, who has died and is escorted to the "other side" by train, by two Grim Reapers. There, every deceased is represented by a "lawyer" in front of seven judges, who decide if they go to heaven or hell. The same journalist said that: "The story offers an amusing take on life and death, while its development invites readers to contemplate the nature of judgment, human virtues and what it means to lead a 'good' life"

(http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171213000861). The main idea of the comic is not foreign to the West, where people also believe in the afterlife and in a final Judgement. The difference, however, is that these ideas appear in the Western consciousness through Christianity, while the manhwa we are talking about is influenced by Buddhist teachings.

Starting with the title page of the first episode of the comic, entitled "Train to the Afterlife" (see Appendix 1), we encounter words with cultural nuances that can pose problems in translation in the absence of a vast knowledge of the Korean culture. The text on that page can be translated as follows: "The train arrives shortly. Current train: Chogunmun (Chogun Gate). Next train: Ogeun". If the name of the train stop 초군문 Chogunmun would be just a name, as many others are, like Namdemun or Sukjeongmun, two of the six Gates of Seoul located in the Fortress that still exist today, it would be translated just as a name. But Chogunmun has a deeper meaning. Not only is it not one of the remaining gates of the fortress, but in the Korean tradition it is believed that it is the first (out of seven in some legends, and twelve in others) gate of the underworld. In Western (Christian) tradition, there is just one gate, the gate of Heaven, where the deceased's soul is judged. Saint Peter, the gatekeeper, decides who can pass on to the Heavens, or go to Hell. In Christian tradition, the Gates of Heaven are also known as "The Pearly Gates" (Ferguson, 1996). Thus, a close translation of Chogun Gate, one that would not stray much from the original nuances of the name, would be "The Pearly Gate".

On the next page (see Appendix 2), we encounter an onomatopoeic word, in the sentence: "With my time of death approaching, I should have written in a book the most important moments in my life, which passed by 휘리릭". In this case, the Korean onomatopoeia implies a sudden, quick movement, followed ultimately by a disappearance. Thus, in my opinion, the best English equivalent for it would be *"poof"* or *"spoof"*, an interjection used to indicate a sudden vanishing (Onomatopoeia Dictionary). According to De la Rosa Regot "different languages represent natural sounds differently and according to their particular sound system" and "the complexity of natural sounds and our individual hearing abilities also influence how people verbalize sounds" (2015, 5). Thus, in our situation, we had to find a form which is used in similar situations, and which might carry the same nuances. Throughout the comic we encounter various other onomatopoeic sounds as well, such as: the laughing sound 풉 *phub* found in Appendix 5. Usually, the sound appears as 풉.. 푸하하하 *phub.. phuhahaha*, showing a violent laughter, therefore in our case, it indicates a muffled, suppressed laughter; thus, the English equivalent could be "snort", an onomatopoeia used to denote a suppressed laughter, a burst of laughter through the nose, generally at something surprisingly

hilarious. In Appendix 4 we encounter the onomatopoeic sound 벙 *peong*. In this case, the sound is used to show disbelief and surprise, and it comes from the expression 벙찌다 *peonggida*, which means to joke or to ridicule. Since it implies that the speaker/character is in complete disbelief, and also that the sound comes from a Korean expression, the most appropriate translation of it, in my opinion, is "no way!".

Next we find the onomatopoeia 쓕 쓕 *shyak shyak* (see Appendix 6), the sound the pen makes on paper when one writes something. This sound happens to lack an English onomatopoeic equivalent. We gather from context that the character hurriedly signs some documents, thus, the Korean onomatopoeia could be replaced with the English verb "scribble", to write something carelessly and hurriedly. Appendix 7 shows us four different onomatopoeic words. The first one, 어으, is the equivalent of a sigh, as is 아오 *ahoh*. The second one, 아이씨 *aishi/ aish*!, means *dang!, damn! shit*!. In our case it shows exasperation, thus its translation would be "Dang it!", although its transliteration, *aish!,* would also have an effect. The fourth onomatopoeic word, 야! *Ya!*, is the Korean equivalent of the English "Hey!, thus it will be translated as such. Next, the sound 웅웅웅 *ung-ung-ung* (see Appendix 8) represents some kind of screech, in our case the sound the escalator makes as it moves. It does not have an onomatopoeic equivalent in English, thus the *mot expresif* "screech" could be used to translate it. Another sound that does not have an equivalent in English is 헐 *heol*, used by Koreans to show surprise, shock, or disbelief at times. It could be replaced by the English expression OMG (oh my God).

As far as charactonyms are concerned, they are bound to appear in Korean literature, because the very principle of Korean given names is that they consist of two sino-korean (hanja) morphemes which hide a deeper meaning. In our comic, we find three names (at first), the one of the deceased, 김자홍 Kim Ja-hong, and the names of the two Grim Reapers, 해원맥 Hae Won-maek and 이덕준 Lee/ Yi Deok-jun. Translating Korean charactonyms is extremely difficult, mainly because each morpheme can be the reading of many hanja, and it is hard to accurately decide which meaning the author intended the name to have. For example, the morpheme 원 in Hae Won-maek's name can stand for the following hanja: 原, 元, 員, 院, 源, 援, 圓, 遠, 園, 媛, 願, 怨, 瑗, 苑, 猿, 愿, 寃, 鴛, 阮, 湲, which all have different meanings, like origin, head, member, institution, source, aid, circle, garden, and so on. It would be a stretch, but we could say that the meaning behind Hae Won-maek is "wish deliverer" and that behind Yi Deok-jun is "worthy virtue", meanings that would fit our context, since they are the name of the Grim Reapers, who can help the souls of the deceased ascend to Heaven or descend into Hell.

Names in western comics, as well, reflect certain assets or defects that the characters might have. As Balteiro notices, "[o]ne of the usual features of proper nouns among comic book heroes in English (and in many other languages) is a high degree of expressivity and creativity, which is achieved through a number of word-formation mechanisms, such as compounding (e.g. "Spiderman") and derivation (e.g. "She-Hulk", "Spidey"), in addition to other stylistic resources, such as alliteration (e.g. "Silver Surfer") and onomatopoeia (e.g. "Zzzax")" (2010, 33).

As far as the issue of translating these charactonyms is concerned, the author goes on to say that:

> [i]n fact, it is the highly descriptive character of charactonyms in comic books that represents the greatest challenge for translators, because through a number of word formation mechanisms the source text has managed to create a constellation of meanings that are part of the perception of the character, which may be difficult to convey in the target language. (Balteiro 2010, 33)

In our case, we could try and find English names that have the same or similar meaning, such as Justin, which means "virtuous, righteous" for Yi Deok-jun. In the Christian tradition, archangel Michael is viewed as the good Angel of Death and Samael the controversial Angel of Death, thus we could use these names as well. It is my opinion, however, that in this case we should just keep the Korean form of the names, without trying to translate them as charactonyms, because if we were to do so, the text would lose some of its essence, given the fact that in Korean tradition/mythology, the two archangels do not represent Death, and, furthermore, the characters are Korean, thus it would be inappropriate to replace their names with Western ones. Preservation of the original name is, in fact, a procedure which many translators are in favour of, Balteiro saying that:

> many scholars have argued that this [the preservation of the original], far from proving the traditional maxim that proper nouns are not translated, is a sort of "translation", as it is a conscious decision and the resulting unit is not the same as in the original. (Balteiro 2010, 37)

In Appendixs 3 and 5 we also encounter some cultural references that need to be acknowledged and explained to the target reader, and these are the personifications of Death. Card and Wilson (2007) argue that the personification of certain concepts is a matter of cultural mapping, saying that:

> we might expect a concept to be created and evolve similarly in two cultures if the cultures in question demonstrate similarities and if the concept is created from a similar psychological perspective (…) Culture plays an important role in the creation, evolution and maintenance of a concept. (Card and Wilson 2007, 83).

The two authors also say that "[c]ultural similarities provide a source of environmental and cognitive commonalities which should logically lead to equivalent concept formation" (Card and Wilson 2007, 84), which is not our case. The cultures of the target and source languages, English and Korean in our case, are very different from one another. On a conceptual level, the notions of "death" or "personification of death" come from two different forms of thought: Christian in the case of Britain and Buddhist in the case of Korea. In Western culture, the personification of Death is known as the Grim Reaper, and it is depicted as an ominous skeletal figure, often wearing a black cloak and carrying a scythe. The personification of death in Korean culture is called JeoSeung Saja 저승사자, as can be noticed in the manhwa, too. The name translates into "The Messenger of the Afterlife", JeoSeung 저승 meaning "the afterlife", which in Korean tradition is neither heaven, nor hell; Saja 사자 means "messenger". The names given to the personifications highlight the differences in the two cultures. Card and Wilson notice that "fear and loathing is communicated by the English adjective grim" (2007, 84), while the Korean "Messenger of the Afterlife" does not have such connotations. This shows how "underlying and covert difference between two cultures affect linguistic representation in those cultures" (Card and Wilson 2007, 84). According to the same authors, the Grim Reaper, in Western tradition, is male, "the skeleton has historically been an inherent physical feature of the English version", skeleton that has "no eyes, but we might still believe it has some type of vision" and "does not decide who dies but functions as the messenger or footman", (2007, 86). This is the case with the Korean personification of death as well. Other than that, the JeoSeung Saja is always in normal human form and is depicted wearing a black *hanbok*[7] and traditional Korean black hat called *gat*[8] 갓. In the case of our manhwa, we are faced with a modern depiction of a Messenger of the Afterlife, also in human form, but dressed in modern clothes.

What we encounter in the fifth page of our manhwa further highlights the differences between the target and source cultures, and how tradition and

[7] *Hanbok* refers to the traditional Korean clothing.

[8] *Gat* stands for the traditional Korean hat worn by men together with a *hanbok*, especially during the Joseon Dynasty. The hat was made of horsehair arranged on a bamboo frame.

mythology plays a very important role. On that page, the "Messengers of the Afterlife" introduce themselves, saying: "I am Hae Won-maek, the Messenger of the Afterlife on Earth."; "I am Yi Deok-chun, the Messenger of the Afterlife in Heaven." This specification puts the translator in some difficulty, not because the phrases *per se* are difficult to translate, but because the target reader might not understand the references, thus not comprehend the message of the text to the fullest. In Korean mythology there is this distinction between different kinds of Messengers of the afterlife, distinctions that are brought about by the various factors that ultimately ended with that particular entity (formerly living person) becoming a Messenger. In Western cultures, this kind of distinction between Grim Reapers does not exist, thus the reader might not fully understand what the author is trying to say. In my opinion, such differences should be explained to the target reader, separate from the comic's text, for example in footnotes, or in a pre- or post-face. In this way the reader, who might not have sufficient knowledge of the source culture, can get familiarized with it, and the text does not lose much of its original meaning, which some sort of cultural equivalent might bring about.

Beside the translator, who should make sure he delivers an accurate translation of the source text, the reader, too, has the responsibility to decode not only the text, but the sequence of images as well. LaPlante argues that:

> (…) if sequential art (and by extension, comics) comprises its own medium apart from that of the written word, and is a medium governed by the grammatical laws of visual literacy, what are these laws, and how do they fit together to allow the visually literate reader to make sense of what he sees on the page? The reader must know how to read and decode the information that is presented to him, and how it relates to the world within the comic he is reading: how it governs the passage of time, how it simulates motion, how it informs the reader of subject and object, how it can add adjectival or adverbial qualities to the image, and how each of these elements relate to one another on the space of the page to form a cohesive narrative. (LaPlante 2008, 7)

Translating Manhwa is indeed a difficult endeavour, but in order to preserve the original meaning of the text, both the translator and the target readers should work together in decoding the essence of the text.

5. Conclusion

When we started writing this paper, one of the reasons why we chose the topic was the fact that there was little academic literature on the translation of comic books, genre that, in our opinion, is quite important and quite abundant. The lack of literature on this specific topic might be influenced by the fact that some scholars look down upon this whole genre, as LaPlante notices:

> There are many books, essays, and studies about the translation of prose literature, poetry, and technical and legal documents; each with techniques, philosophies, problems and solutions appropriate to its particular area of concentration. Very little has been written, however, about the translation of comics. This may be because many feel that comics lack the cultured subtlety of prose or poetry, or the practical relevance of technical or legal documents, and hence are not worthy of formal study. Or perhaps this is due to the general perception that comics are only a textual narrative accompanied by pictures, so that when a translation is made, it is satisfactory to treat the work as though it were simply a standard work of prose. (LaPlante 2008, 2)

Manhwa are not just comic books, they are a mirror of the Korean society, having themes that tackle historical and contemporary issues alike. Due to the fact that manhwa approaches themes taken from a community's culture, one might find him/herself facing very many culturally marked words that might or might not have an ontological support in the target language, thus making the job of the translator more difficult. Translation itself is culture bound, so when we translate we transport not only words from one context into another, but rather one culture into another, including the social, political, and other conditions, that the translator should be aware of.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

The train arrives shortly
Current train: Chogun Gate
Next train: Ogeun
First episode
Train to the Afterlife

Appendix 2

With my time of death approaching, I should have written in a book the most important moments in my life, which *spoof* passed by.
Coming to my senses, I'm surrounded by flowers.
Relatives
Former colleagues
Grieving friends
When I look at them, it really seems like I died.
…these people…I don't know them.

Appendix 3

Let's go, mister Jahong!
…?
Uhm, who are you?
I am Hae Won-maek, the Messenger of the Afterlife on Earth.
I am Yi Deok-chun, the Messenger of the Afterlife in Heaven.

Appendix 4

– No way!..
– You must be mister Kim Jahong, right?
– Ah, yes.
– Born on 10.03.1971, deceased on 07.12.2009, right? There, then sign here, please.
– Excuse me?
– Your signature. You have to go to the Afterlife anyway.
– Wait a second. It's the first time I die, so I don't know what to do.
– Can't you explain more to me?

Appendix 5

– We are the Messengers from the Underworld. We came to take you safely to the other side.
– Messenger of the Underworld? You're saying you're a Grim Reaper?
– I thought you looked like this…

Snort….

– Oh, many get scared. The afterlife is different from what is told in stories. You have to sign this entrance agreement in order to get into the Afterlife.

Appendix 6

– What if, by chance…If I refuse to sign, can I still live?
– In that case you will be executed. This is just a formality. Let's not tire each other,
– I was just asking. (*Scribble*) I was a bit afraid, to be honest.

Appendix 7

4:45 AM
AT Daehwa station
Sigh. It's cold.
Dang it… why aren't they coming? It's freezing..
We are here.
Sigh
Hey~ Couldn't you walk faster? At this pace we'll lose the train.
We are sorry, mister bachelor.
This kid is the last one, right? Did he sign?
Yes.
This young man is calling me a kid…but I'll refrain myself, since I need their help

Appendix 8

Screech
– Excuse me, although I don't know where we're going, it's four in the morning right now, so there's no tube running.
– No way! Really?
– What? They don't know this? What kind of Grim Reapers are they?