〔論 文〕

Onomatopoeia in a Japanese-to-English Translation of All Out!! – a Case Study

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Abstract

There have been various approaches to the connection between signs and their meanings. While some scholars have argued that sounds are entirely arbitrary, there have been arguments that certain sounds are likely connected to certain meanings. This paper considers these two approaches while examining onomatopoeic expressions in a Japanese-to-English translation of the manga All Out!!. It looks at the original solutions the translator found to deal with onomatopoeia with no English counterparts and evaluates to what extent they relied on either already fixed combinations of sounds or used the phonological properties of English sounds to convey a meaning similar to the original. The examined expressions were found to be on a cline with varying degrees of traceable motivation, i.e., obvious phonological features with a certain communicative function. It appears, however, that none of the novel onomatopoeia were selected entirely arbitrarily unless their meaning was fixed, such as in the use of verbs to translate onomatopoeia.

キーワード:オノマトペ, 恣意性, 記号, 漫画

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1 Introduction

Signs are essential for interaction, encoding information into elements and giving them a communicative function. To fulfil this function, conventions for their use and meaning are necessary. Signs have been considered either arbitrary or motivated. The latter approach (laid out by social semiotics) suggests that some of their properties make them more suitable for certain uses or to express certain meanings, while the former (proposed by Saussure, 2011) does not see signs this way.

To illustrate the points made in this paper's discus-

sion, onomatopoeia in the translation of a Japanese *manga* will be used. According to Littlemore (2009), Japanese uses a wider range of onomatopoeic expressions than English. When translating *manga* from Japanese into English, the translator needs to deal with the variety in the source text by finding original solutions, as Petersen (2009) points out. To what extent can these expressions qualify as 'fixed' onomatopoeia that the English language reader will be familiar with? To what extent are they idiosyncrasies of the sign producer (or, in the case of this paper, the translator)? Conversely, if they are fixed, to what extent are they decontextualised? If they are idiosyncrasies, what makes an onomatopoeia (or 'SFX' – short for 'sound effects' – in *manga* jargon) suitable to represent the given real-

world sounds or meanings? This paper will use several *manga* SFX to discuss possible answers to these questions in relation to the applicability of Saussure's framework or social semiotics in order to examine to what extent onomatopoeic expressions are fixed. Furthermore, a psycholinguistic perspective will be added.

Section 2 will introduce the general terms used in Saussure's framework and social semiotics to lay out a clear base for discussion. It will also describe these frameworks' approaches to arbitrariness and motivation. Due to its relevance to onomatopoeic expressions, a psycholinguistic view on sound symbolism will also be introduced. Section 3 will introduce and justify the choice of SFX as multimodal signs. The arguments made in this paper will be discussed and illustrated with specific examples in section 4. Section 5 will discuss the overall implications for motivation and arbitrariness in signs. First, I will lay out the terms used in this discussion.

2 Signs, motivation and sound symbolism

There are various perspectives on the use and perception of signs. This section will introduce the frameworks relevant to the paper's discussion.

2.1 Sign and semiotic resource

Saussure is considered the founder of the discipline he named semiology or a "science that studies the life of signs within society" (Saussure, 2011, p. 66). His starting point for the examination of signs is language. A linguistic sign, he says, "unites...a concept and a sound image" (2011, p. 66). For example, the sign expressed as 'tree' consists of the concept of a tree (the plant) and the sound image of the word. However, Saussure realises that this definition could restrict semiology and proposes "to retain the word sign to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified [signifié] and signifier [signifiant]" (2011, p. 66). In the 'tree' example, the sounds made when uttering the word (or its written letters) are the signifier, and the concept of a plant with a stem of wood is the signified. In the case of onomatopoeia in comic books, the signifier is the written expression, and

the signified is the sound or concept it is meant to represent, making 'signifier' and 'signified' more suitable than 'sound image' and 'concept'.

The social semiotics framework builds on this idea. However, with reference to Systemic Functional Grammar, it sees language as a "resource for making meanings" (Halliday, 1978, p. 192). As such, signs are not considered fixed but determined and formed by their use, i.e. they are context-specific. In social semiotics, therefore, the term *resource* is preferred, as Van Leeuwen points out (2005, p. 3), used similarly to *signifier* in Saussure's terms. Resources, in turn, have "semiotic *potential*" or "potential for making meaning" (2005, p. 4).

Another relevant term, affordance, is introduced by Gibson (1979). Defined as the potential uses of a given object, it may appear identical to potential. There is, however, a difference in perspective. Van Leeuwen explains that "different observers might notice different affordances, depending on their needs and interests and on the specifics of the situation at hand" (2005, p. 4). Thus, the focus is on the perception of the sign's receiver. He also points out the similarity with "the Hallidayan concept of 'meaning potential', in which linguistic signifiers – words and sentences – have a signifying potential rather than specific meanings" (2005, p. 4). For example, an Italian friend of mine was perplexed to see the word 'due' on the signboard at a London bus stop. Its written form is identical to 'two' in his native language. In this case, the English affordance meaning 'coming soon' is relevant, whilst an Italian speaker may observe the affordance meaning a confusingly random Italian number in an otherwise English context.

The difference between the two terms can also be described in the way that potentials are "meanings that have already been introduced into society" while "affordance also brings meanings that have not yet been recognized" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 4). In other words, when an affordance becomes suitable for expressing a certain signified (in Saussure's terms), it becomes potential. Kress describes this process as follows: "[T]he production of signs takes place in a situation of ever-

increasing tension between the meaning of existing signs, which provide the signifiers[...] and the producer's need or wish to produce new signs" (1993, p. 173). This is highly relevant to a situation where a sign maker creates new onomatopoeic expressions in comic books, making use of the affordances of certain sounds and, in some cases, helping to create meaning potential if the expression becomes gradually conventionalised.

Kress also points out that "signs are always *motivated* by the producer's interest and by the characteristics of the object" (1993, p. 173, italics added). It is this type of motivation to which the next subsection turns.

2.2 Arbitrariness and motivation

How do sign makers choose signifiers or semiotic resources? Saussure says that this choice is entirely arbitrary. He maintains that arbitrariness does not mean randomness, stating that "[t]he term [arbitrary] should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker...[but] that it is unmotivated, i. e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified." (2011, pp. 68–69). This suggests that he sees the choice of signifiers as based purely on convention. 'Tree' means what it means to an English speaker, not because of any inherent properties of the word's sounds but because English speakers have agreed that those sounds (and letters in written language) will be used to express the concept.

However, Saussure does not deny the existence of motivation in language. He believes that, despite the "fundamental principle of the arbitrariness of the sign", it is possible to distinguish "what is radically arbitrary, i.e. unmotivated, and what is only relatively arbitrary" (2011, p. 131). Japanese cardinal numbers above 10 could serve as an example. For instance, $j\bar{u}$ -ichi (eleven) consists of the words for ten ($j\bar{u}$) and one (ichi). This suggests that Saussure sees motivation as a way for the human brain to organize signs.

This concept of motivation differs somewhat from the one used in social semiotics. Kress says that all humans (and not only humans) share "highly general *semi-*

otic principles", most significantly that there is a 'motivated relation' between the form and meaning of the signs that they make (2010, p. 9). It is worth noting that social semiotics sees language merely as one of several modes of communication. Kress (2010) refers to Chomsky (1965) and his concept of 'innate' linguistic competence that humans naturally possess. While he agrees with the noble implications of such a concept, he suggests replacing the term linguistic competence with "social, semiotic communicational principles and dispositions - which include linguistic as one instance" (Kress, 2010, p. 9). This approach would allow the examination of human communication beyond spoken or written language. It also enables the examination of onomatopoeia as multimodal signs rather than as a purely linguistic feature.

Kress goes on to give the three most important examples of "principles shared by all cultures: (1) that signs are motivated conjunctions of form and meaning; that conjunction is based on (2) the interest of the sign-maker; using (3) culturally available resources" (2010, p. 10). These principles imply that sign makers decide what signs to make and how to make them based on their interests and that they use means of expression recognised by the culture they are making these signs in. These principles can also be tied to the relation between affordance and potential, as introduced in subsection 2. 1.

To summarise the differences between the two approaches, Saussure's framework sees the relation between signified and signifier as always arbitrary and never fully motivated. In social semiotics, conversely, all signs are considered motivated by the sign maker's interests and available resources. At this stage, it appears that the concept of motivation used in the social semiotics framework offers a better explanation for the creation of onomatopoeic neologisms in *manga* because it justifies the use of expressions previously unknown to their reader. If these were entirely arbitrary, they would not be likely to fulfil a communicative function. Furthermore, if they truly are the translator's idiosyncrasies, perhaps their components (and the meaning potentials or affordances of those) help the reader identify

the signs' communicative purpose. The next subsection will examine how that may be possible.

2.3 Sound symbolism

Onomatopoeia appear to have a peculiar place in various languages. For example, Aitchison, who agrees with the notion of arbitrary signs, recognises that a few onomatopoeic expressions are not arbitrary (2012, p. 262). She adds that there is variation between languages and that "individual languages may build up idiosyncratic associations between certain sound sequences and particular meanings" (2012, p. 262). I will elaborate on this concept when introducing phonaesthemes later in this subsection.

Aitchison (2012, p. 262) cites Köhler's (1947) experiment in which German subjects were given "two line drawings, one composed of curves, the other of spikes and angles". Their task was to label each of them either 'maluma' or 'takete'. Overwhelmingly, 'maluma' was chosen for the rounded drawing and 'takete' for the spiky one. She adds that the experiment was replicable in other countries (2012, p. 262), suggesting that we may associate sounds with concepts at a deeper level. This idea may be crucial when examining onomatopoeia. However, she warns of drawing hasty conclusions, saying that "this slender thread of sound symbolism [...] appears to exist with respect to forced choices between nonsense words, but largely fades away in actual language use" (2012, p. 262). In other words, this basic connection between sound and concept, or - in semiotic terms - signifier and signified, gets gradually lost once the expression stops being just 'sounds' but becomes a part of a language's vocabulary. For example, it may be hard to trace a connection between the concept and sound image of lexicalised words, such as 'water'. Nevertheless, it appears that, from a psycholinguistic perspective, not all relations are considered arbitrary and onomatopoeic expressions can have a clearer, or motivated, connection between signified and signifier.

Saussure says that onomatopoeia "might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier and signified is not always arbitrary" (2011, p. 68). However, he challenges this claim by saying that they "are only approximate and more or less conventional imitations of certain sounds" (2011, p. 68). Conversely, using the social semiotic framework, it could be argued that sign makers who use onomatopoeia take the given language's available resources (its phonological repertoire) and create a sign that suits their interest of mimicking a sound or (frequently in the case of Japanese) a concept. How these differ from language to language can partly depend on the extent to which they are 'fixed' in each of them.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, Littlemore sees onomatopoeia as a type of "sound symbolism' in which form and meaning are related" (2009, p. 150). As such, they would move away from arbitrariness as described by Saussure. Littlemore points out the wide range of onomatopoeia in Japanese but adds that "sound symbolism is also present, albeit to a lesser degree, in English" (2009, p. 151). She sees a connection between a word's meaning and "the residual meaning of sounds, or phonological clusters" (2009, p. 151). These have been termed by Bergen as phonaesthemes (2004, p. 290). For instance, English words starting with 'gl' are often connected with brightness (e.g.: 'glitter' or 'glint'), and words starting with 'sn' often have a connection with the nose (e.g. 'sniff' or 'snore') (2004, p. 290). Littlemore explains that this connection can be etymological, e.g.: the Old/Middle English word for 'brightness' being 'glit' (2009, p. 151). There are, however, phonological clusters that do not appear to have such a connection, such as words ending with '-udge', which, according to Shore, imply 'heavy stickiness' (1996). Whatever the origin, it appears that the concept of phonaesthemes may shed light on why some sounds are intuitively perceived as more suitable to express certain meanings. This feature may be important when dealing with novel and unusual onomatopoeic expressions.

3 Onomatopoeia in Japanese *manga* as multimodal signs

Having laid out the basic theoretical framework for

the discussion, I will describe what makes onomatopoeia, specifically when used in manga, a type of multimodal sign. Kress says that "all signs are multimodal" (1993, p. 187). In the case of written language, it could be argued that there are already at least two 'modes', that of writing and that of the word's sound image. In the case of comic books, this multimodality is even more pronounced due to the inclusion of visual images. Moreover, SFX are typically placed in the same frame as the image, without the use of word balloons common for dialogue (e.g.: 'gwong' and 'whomp' in Figure 1). Van Leeuwen says that frames are an important device used in all kinds of communications, because "connected elements will be read as belonging together" (2005, p. 7). This means that the SFX are meant to evoke a sound being produced simultaneously with the represented event. Also, framing has various degrees (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 14). In manga, for instance, a panel is a frame, whereas word balloons are frames within that frame. This enables various degrees of detachment or connection.

Petersen says that SFX are prominent in *manga* because of a long tradition of storytelling in Japan and characteristic features of the Japanese language (2009, pp. 163–167). He also compares American comics and Japanese *manga*, noting that onomatopoeic expressions are more frequent in the latter. This, he points out, requires translators to find original solutions (2009, pp. 165, 169). He says that *manga* exploits a phenomenon referred to as 'subvocalization', which is "a natural habit of readers to imagine the sound through inaudible speech movements of the lips and throat" (2009, p. 164). They can be, therefore, seen not only as a visual means of communication but also as auditory (albeit imaginative).

It appears that SFX have a quasi-auditory nature and are integrated as visual elements in *manga*. This makes them multimodal signs. In the next section, I will examine several specific examples.

4 English SFX in All Out!!

To illustrate the points made and examine the fea-

tures discussed so far, I will use several pages from the first volume of *All Out!!* by Shiori Amase (2017). The translator's name is not published online. It is a sports *manga* about high school students who take up playing rugby. In my experience working for a *manga* publisher, sports *manga* is a dynamic genre with a relatively high frequency of SFX supporting the narrative. Therefore, it offers a wide range of SFX for examination.



Figure 1 "All Out!!" p. 10 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

Figure 1 shows two SFX on page 10 that read 'gwong' and 'whomp'. An English speaker might find the latter's inclusion natural. It is an example of giongo, which Petersen describes as "words that mimic real sounds" (2009, p. 167). However, the picture including 'gwong' does not suggest any sound production. 'Gwong' expresses the characters' surprise. Petersen refers to this type of onomatopoeia as gitaigo and defines them as "words that mimic psychological states and non-auditory sounds" (2009, p. 167). 'Whomp' is, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an existing expression in American English. However, 'gwong' is uncommon in everyday English. Furthermore, gitaigo are, as Littlemore points out, absent in English altogether (2009, p. 150). This can raise questions as to what extent its use is motivated. It could also suggest that it is composed of phonaesthemes and has affordances or potentials that make it suitable for the context.

There are two SFX on page 11, 'irk' and 'snap'. In these cases, the translator used existing verbs to translate the *gitaigo*.



Figure 2 "All Out!!" p.11 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

The SFX on page 12 read 'grab', 'vwump' and 'looooom'. The logic behind the use of 'grab' and 'looooom' is the same as that for 'irk' and 'snap' on the previous page. 'Vwump', conversely, is not a part of English vocabulary (according to the Macmillan, Merriam-Webster and Collins online dictionaries), but it displays phonetic similarities with 'whomp' from page 10. The contexts could imply that '-omp' or '-ump' evoke a quick, possibly violent, movement, similar to '-ack' (as in 'smack' or 'whack').

The first panel on page 13 shows the SFX 'rmb' four times. The original go resembles gu from the previous page, but there is no correlation in the English translation. Also, the repetition of the SFX in tandem with the context suggests that it does not express movement but either lack thereof or a psychological state, making it another example of gitaigo. The SFX in the second panel, 'grrk' is not an English word either. It appears to illustrate strenuous effort, but more similar examples would be needed to determine to what extent this choice is motivated. The last SFX on this page is a repetition of 'stomp', another verb.



Figure 3 "All Out!!" p. 12 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)



Figure 4 "All Out!!" p.13 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

Moving on to SFX on pages 22 and 23, the first SFX on this double page, 'wham', is a more conventional way of representing an impact. In the second panel, a somewhat similar movement is expressed using 'whump'. While this one may not be as common, it ap-

WHAT'RE YOU DOING, LEAVING ALREADY?

Figure 5 "All Out!!" p.22 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)



Figure 6 "All Out!!" p.23 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

pears to follow that pattern of the sound combinations 'o-m' and 'u-m', possibly followed by a 'p' (e.g.: 'thump') representing abrupt movement or impact. It could be argued that these seemingly arbitrary letter combinations contain phonaesthemes and their use is, therefore, motivated. The remaining SFX on this double page are verbs illustrating represented actions.

An SFX on page 27 relatively resembles the original. 'Kssh' is a translation of the original *gasha* and illustrates the rattling of a chain-link fence.



Figure 7 "All Out!!" p. 26 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)



Figure 8 "All Out!!" p. 27 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

This choice looks straightforward due to the proximity of the real-world sound to the phoneme 'sh' in both languages. Less obvious is the choice of 'fwup' in the second panel. The SFX accompanies an image showing a quick movement of the character turning around. It is not as abrupt and has a smaller range, but it represents speed, similarly to 'vwump' on page 12. This could indicate that the combinations 'fw' or 'vw' evoke a kind of 'airiness' or speed of movement without necessarily being large or violent. This translation could be motivated by how English language readers perceive these sounds, as the originals gu and basa bear no resemblance. The only SFX on page 27, 'tff', could be similarly motivated to express a rustle or a quick movement of the character's foot. The former could be motivated by the similarity of a rustling sound with the phoneme 'f'.

The reason for this movement becomes clear on the following page, where the character turns to another character.



Figure 9 "All Out!!" p.28 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

Page 29 shows two relatively similar SFX, 'whump' (cf. page 22) and 'fa-whomp'. Both expressions appear to support the assumption about the '-om (p) /um (p)' phonaestheme and its function of representing abrupt movement or impact, with indications of motivation. Furthermore, 'wh' at the beginning of an SFX or syllable seems to be an orthographic means for expressing this type of movement, e.g.: the more common 'wham' or 'whack'.

Finally, I would like to move on to pages 32 and 33. The first SFX, 'rahhh', could be classified as a caption, expressing vocal sounds made by the characters.

On page 33, there is the SFX "vwoosh", which would support the idea about the 'vw' combination used to represent quick movements through air.



Figure 10 "All Out!!" p. 29 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)



Figure11 "All Out!!" p.32 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)



Figure12 "All Out!!" p. 33 (Amase, Shiori. 2017. Kodansha)

These examples indicate that English language readers may recognise affordances in certain sound combinations which, in some cases, have gained meaning potential at word level. For example, 'fw' has the affordance to indicate quick, 'airy' movement while a conventionalized SFX such as 'wham' has the meaning potential to illustrate or represent an impact. In the next section, I will discuss the implication this has for a discussion of motivation and arbitrariness.

5 Arbitrariness and motivation in manga SFX

Here I revisit the questions raised in the introduction: To what extent do SFX qualify as 'fixed' onomatopoeia that the English language reader is familiar with? The examples discussed in this paper indicate that because English lacks a repertoire of fixed onomatopoeia to match that of Japanese, the translator may compensate for this deficiency by inventing new expressions or using expressions that are not conventionally a part of the English lexicon. They may be fixed to a certain extent, but there is still room for the creative use of the affordances of phonological components and the meaning potentials of existing expressions.

It was difficult to judge to what extent the examined SFX are the translator's idiosyncrasies. For this purpose, it would be useful to create a multimodal and/or bilingual corpus of *manga* similar to that suggested by Andersen for sociolinguistic research (2010). Its use may also shed light on whether there are expressions that, although not found in an English dictionary, have become common and, to some extent, conventionalised in the *manga* genre.

The visual aspect of the *manga* examined in this paper indicated that SFX are not fully decontextualised. Whilst the translator did use several conventional English onomatopoeic expressions and regular English lexical items, such as 'grab' and 'stomp', they had to find original solutions that followed observable patterns. There are indications that if some of the expressions used in this translation are not fixed, it is their components, such as '-omp' or 'vw', that show signs of fixedness and decontextualisation. Decisions on their suit-

ability to represent the given meaning in the source text seem to be arbitrary to some degree but are occasionally motivated by phonological similarity (*gasha* and 'kssh').

Overall, it appears that this *manga* translation illustrates some motivation in signs. Some sound combinations appear to be arbitrary, possibly due to their lexicalisation. The social semiotics model seems to be more applicable in this case than Saussure's framework. The 'interest of the sign-maker' can be identified as an interest to add sound effects and the 'culturally available resources' can be conventionalised onomatopoeic expressions, lexicalised verbs or combinations of sounds with meaning potential.

6 Conclusion

This paper has discussed to what extent signs are motivated or arbitrary using examples from an English version of a Japanese manga to illustrate the points made and examine the features discussed. It appears that the social semiotics approach is more relevant to the discussion, as in a situation when onomatopoeic expressions need to be invented, motivation is key for comprehensibility. This motivation is realised within the boundaries of English phonology and the extent to which these new expressions resemble existing onomatopoeic expressions. The latter boundary, however, suggests that there is some 'fixedness' involved in the process. Psycholinguistic research has revealed that humans associate certain sound combinations with certain situations and feelings, suggesting that onomatopoeic expressions, as well as lexicalised expressions, exist on a cline. On one end, their motivation is easily traceable (e.g.: resemblance to real-world sounds). On the other end are lexical items whose motivated origins are harder to trace and can, therefore, be considered more fixed and arbitrary. Whether this fixedness is the result of motivated choices made by past users would be a topic for further research using, for example, multimodal corpora.

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