

Lost in Interpretation: An Analysis of Subjectivity in Translation

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Introduction

At the 2020 Golden Globe Awards, South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-Ho was accepting the Best Foreign Film award for his film *Parasite* when he said, “Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films,” (qtd. in @Variety). Many Americans likely see the existence of subtitles as a “barrier” to their enjoyment of a piece of media. However, describing subtitles as a barrier may not be the most accurate way to look at them. In a viewer’s consumption of foreign media, subtitles don’t act as a barrier; subtitles serve as a tool for the viewer to overcome the barrier of language. The translation industry seeks to provide viewers with the tools necessary to overcome that barrier across forms of media from film to gaming.

When viewing a piece of media that has been through the translation process, it is easy to forget that the process acts as a sort of middleman in the delivery of that content. In most cases, the middleman does a good job of delivering the viewer a faithful translation of an initially foreign text – in *most* cases. In some cases, the translation process delivers a version of a text that some viewers may find inaccurate or missing something from the original text. Discussions of the quality of a translation are often raised in communities surrounding anime. Due to anime series being made in Japan, a translation is necessary in order for American audiences to experience works in the anime form at all, and a number of those series have complicated histories with translation.

In 2019, Netflix acquired the rights to stream the 1995 anime classic *Neon Genesis Evangelion* on its platform. Shortly after news broke of this acquisition, viewers found out that Netflix would be producing a new English translation to be released alongside the series on their platform. Long-time fans of the series looked forward to the potential dawn of a new generation of *Evangelion* fans. However, once Netflix’s new translation came out, it was immediately met with criticism, particularly with respect to how it handled a queer relationship central to the series. The new translation of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* raised questions among anime fans about how translations can impact their favorite series. As streaming services continue to make international content more accessible to viewers, issues of translation in anime could be indicative of issues that may become more widespread in the future.

In this paper, I investigate how the translation process can fall short of expectations particularly in the area of queer representation in anime. I provide an inquiry into how the translation and localization processes are involved in the production and release of anime in the Western world, to learn how interpretation and subjectivity could play into the process. A case

study will be performed on *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, an anime series that involves queer characters, to observe how the translation process can fail to preserve original meaning of a work.

Translation & Localization

Most pieces of anime content consumed by English-speaking anime fans has been through the translation process. The translation process is one that gets taken for granted by these fans, and often is greatly misunderstood. These misunderstandings are explored in a video essay by YouTuber Red Bard, who specializes in creating anime-centric content. They spoke with professional translator John Hooper, who told them that the most common misconception is, “[t]hat the whole process is just a simple conversion of Language A to Language B. There’s far more involved than just that,” (qtd. in Red Bard). This misunderstanding comes from the subset of fans who demand that their anime be “directly translated.” In their eyes, a translation should provide an exact 1:1 replication of a script in English, which is simply not possible. Sometimes the words necessary for a 1:1 translation do not exist in the English language, causing the flow of a sentence to be lost, or subtext to become obscured.

Think about what happens when you run an English sentence through several different languages in Google Translate, and then attempt to translate it back into English. Often, the result is not the same as the initial English text. That disparity occurs because, unlike Google Translate may lead you to believe, good translations cannot come from such a mechanical process. So, you need a person to do the work – a human translator is necessary. But even then, by nature of taking something from one language and translating it into another, you are going to lose some form of meaning. Maybe a word in one language has a cultural significance or special connotation that can’t be effectively conveyed to a speaker in another language. To consume a translated piece of media is to make a concession – you are putting your trust in a translator to convey what they believe to be an accurate interpretation of a text. That’s exactly what a translation is – an interpretation, made by a person. Because of that, it might be more suitable to describe translation as an act of interpretation.

Here’s the thing: we sort of do that already. You read that quote from Bong Joon-Ho at the start of this paper. When Bong Joon-Ho spoke at the Golden Globes, he spoke to the audience in Korean. It isn’t exactly fair to say that I quoted Bong Joon-Ho, because the words he spoke were in Korean, interpreted to me and the English-speaking world by his interpreter Sharon Choi. Think about watching something like an anime series as having a conversation with someone who is speaking in another language. If you’re going to get anything out of it, you need an interpreter. Obviously, there isn’t someone actually standing with you while you watch it. Your interpreter is the translator who wrote the English subtitle or dialogue track. That track was written by a human. In the case of Bong’s *Parasite* speech, she was clearly visible on stage, standing next to him. In the case of anime, that person isn’t quite as explicitly visible, but I promise – they’re still there. You wouldn’t be able to really watch anime without them.

A human translator needs to exist in the translation process in order to interpret foreign media to you. This perspective is supported by translation scholar Carme Mangiron. In a peer-

reviewed study, she looked at the evolving localization practices of long-running Japanese video game franchises. Mangiron concluded that localization is a “collaborative, creative, and adaptive process,” and there’s no one-size-fits-all solution to the task. Some works she looked at, like the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* games, take place in a fictional world without a lot of ties to Japanese culture, allowing for a higher degree of cultural adaptation in the translation process. On the other hand, she looked at the *Yakuza* franchise, which takes place in a world extremely similar to real-life Japan. Translations of *Yakuza* don’t employ a lot of cultural adaptation because, for many players, it’s that Japanese cultural element that draws them in. There’s a lot of nuance in these different approaches to localization. If you took a Google Translate-esque mechanical approach to translating things, you would lose the space for that nuance. If we took that mechanical approach to something like the video game series *Animal Crossing*, a series filled with puns and idiomatic expressions, we would end with a script populated with pages and pages of idioms that don’t make any sense and puns that don’t work. There’s a layer of interpretation and subjectivity that translators need to bring to a work in order to make it have any meaningful impact for a target audience.

Another scholar has used anime as a way to look into how translation can affect a work. In a dissertation for Georgetown University, Brian Shea investigated how cultural themes in anime were handled when they were brought to America. He found that there is no feasible way for two viewers of different cultures to view their respective versions of a series and take away the exact same impression. I agree – there is no truly perfect way to translate something like an anime series. When we see something that has been translated, we’re seeing it through the interpretation of whoever translated it. That isn’t necessarily bad, and it’s far better than being confronted with a text in an entirely different language. But Shea’s findings do raise an issue. Because translations depend on an interpretation, it’s possible that one translator’s interpretation of a text is not the same as another’s. And these disagreements in interpretations can cause problems to crop up in translated versions of texts. All too often, queer characters find themselves as casualties in the translation process, with their queer identities being obscured or stripped away from them in their translated works. Obviously, the loss of queer identity isn’t the only thing that can be lost in translation – I just spent a whole paragraph talking about how jokes can lose their impact or cultural references can go missing. The loss of queer identities is of interest to me because it’s frequently done in a way that feels, at worst, deliberate, and can be seen as indicative of more potential issues in translation.

Case Study: *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

Before getting into the loss of queer identities in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a brief history should be given. *Evangelion* is an entry into the Mecha genre of anime, featuring teenagers who pilot giant robots to defend a futuristic version of Tokyo from aliens known as Angels. Anime series with giant robots are a dime a dozen—the thing that keeps people interested in *Evangelion* all these years later are the big themes that the show handles. Creator Hideaki Anno placed psychological, existential, and philosophical themes against the framework of the Mecha anime genre, fueling discussions from viewers for years to come. A piece published by *Vox* shortly before *Evangelion*’s release on Netflix mentions how the series has sparked conversations about its

themes and points to fan sites like EvaMonkey.com that have been continuously run by fans since the early 2000s (Frank and Romano). These communities have resulted in the series attaining a cult-like status.

In addition to these communities, *Evangelion* attained a cult-like status because for the longest time, it was notoriously difficult to watch. In a piece about the series' then-upcoming Netflix release entertainment reporter Austen Goslin points out that a lot of hype surrounding the 2019 release was because *Evangelion* has been notoriously difficult to find, with DVD and VHS releases being extremely limited for a show with such a large following (Goslin). In my experience, *Evangelion* was a show that I had always heard about in online spaces but was never able to watch legally. There was an air of mystique surrounding the show that I always found fascinating.

Once *Neon Genesis Evangelion* finally dropped on Netflix, it was immediately mired in controversy. Episode 24 of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* features a scene where one male character confesses his love for another male character. The English translation from that decade has Kaworu tell Shinji that he is, "worthy of love," and when Shinji asks him what he means, Kaworu elaborates, "I mean, I love you," (ADV Films). Since then, Kaworu and Shinji have been held as iconic queer anime characters. That is, until 2019, when Netflix re-subbed/dubbed the series, changing Kaworu's lines to, "You're worthy of my grace," and, "It means I like you," (Kanemitsu). This change sparked controversy and accusations that Netflix was attempting to "cleanse" the series of its queer history. Some longtime fans argued that Netflix's version of the show was tainted and urged people looking to get into *Evangelion* to seek out old versions of the show to experience it in its "true" state. A viral tweet from the day of the Netflix release presented the translation change, arguing that it was, "not ok," with many echoing that sentiment in the replies (@jimmygnome9).

Following fan outrage, Dan Kanemitsu, a translator on Netflix's version of *Evangelion*, shared a series of tweets where he explained that he, "[has] tried [his] best to be faithful to the original source material," prompted the audience to, "recognize intimacy between people based on inferences," and concluded that, "[l]eaving room for interpretation make things exciting [sic]," (@dankanemitsu). I think that Kanemitsu makes a few good points, namely his interest in allowing room for audiences to make interpretations. But I don't think that Kaworu and Shinji's relationship was the place to do that. Allegra Frank and Aja Romano brought up the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* manga, which acts as both an adaptation and expansion of the story told in the original anime series. In that manga, Kaworu's romantic interest in Shinji is made explicitly clear when he kisses him several times and declares his love for Shinji. The precedent clearly exists for Kaworu and Shinji's relationship to be romantic, so I believe that Kanemitsu's affinity for inferences falls flat.

In their article, Frank and Romano consulted a handful of other translators, who verified that Kanemitsu's translation technically makes sense. But because of the Japanese word used in the original script, there's room for interpretation. Kaworu's declaration of love is incredibly important in the show. In *Evangelion*, Shinji is valued by others for his ability as a mech pilot, but Kaworu tells Shinji that he loves him just because of who he is. In the following episodes, Kaworu is revealed to be one of the Angels who seeks to destroy the world, but in the form of a human. Shinji is forced to kill him, causing Shinji to have a mental breakdown. *Evangelion* is a series that explores many questions about relationships, and this intimacy between Kaworu and Shinji is one

of the most important moments for that idea. It was not appropriate for ambiguity to be injected into this relationship because 1) it's already explicitly queer and 2) it undermines a major turning point in Shinji's character arc as well as the plot of the series.

Conclusion

Translation is a process that requires a degree of subjectivity. The presence of a human is critical to the process of composing a translation that can properly convey everything that a foreign text should to a foreign audience. A human can think creatively about how to rewrite a joke in English, decide how heavily something should utilize cultural references, or bring an idiom from one language to another. That subjectivity is necessary, but also presents its own problems, as we've seen in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Neon Genesis Evangelion's translation on Netflix drew criticism for queer erasure. That's the perspective from fans. The intention expressed by the translator was that the goal of the new translation was to allow viewers to infer their own meaning from Kaworu's lines. Depending on your interpretation or relationship with the show, you could have any number of reactions to this translation, ranging from praise, to indifference, to complete outrage.

It's worth pointing out that *Evangelion* isn't even the first example of what could be seen as queer erasure in anime – a 2000 localization of *Sailor Moon* recontextualized a lesbian relationship to be a pair of cousins (Red Bard). That change came as a result of TV networks seemingly being unsure if they should air a television show featuring a lesbian relationship. That uncertainty manifested in the new interpretation of the two's relationship.

I want to make it explicitly clear – Translation requires subjectivity. It just doesn't work without subjectivity. Viewers need to understand that the process of translation is really a balancing act between translation and adaptation, and that a degree of adaptation will always be necessary. But, as we've seen through the ways that anime has treated its queer characters, subjectivity can end up robbing a work of its meaning.

To consume a piece of translated media is to engage in a sort of contract. You, as the viewer, need to understand that you're viewing that media through the lens of whoever translated it. The translator needs to understand that they have a duty to properly walk that line between adaptation and translation. If both parties can work to better understand how each one interacts or interprets the work, perhaps we can move towards better translations in the future.

It is beyond the scope of this paper, but it also may be worth looking how the visibility of queer characters in anime relates to the general acceptance of queer identities in greater society, and an investigation into how representation in media affects those being represented and/or underrepresented. In addition, as platforms like Netflix continue to release international content more frequently, the audience size of people interpreting media through a translation will increase. Issues that presently exist in translation could become exacerbated, and lead to greater problems on a grander scale.

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