

**JUDGING BOOKS BY THEIR TITLES:
TRANSLATING YASUNARI KAWABATA'S TITLES
FROM JAPANESE INTO ENGLISH**

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Abstract: *This study examines the translation of book titles from Japanese into English, focusing on a selection of works by Yasunari Kawabata. Drawing on Levinson's (1985) classification of titles and Grice's (1975) cooperative communication maxims, it explores the strategies used by translators and the impact of their choices on the form, meaning, cultural specificity, and potential target reader interpretation. The findings reveal that, despite having similar functions, the Japanese and English titles differ in terms of the quantity, quality, and relevance of the information they convey to their readers.*

Keywords: *Grice's cooperative principle, Japanese into English translation, Levinson's titles functions, title translation, Yasunari Kawabata*

1. Introduction

When thinking about translation challenges, what one usually has in mind is larger chunks of text rather than isolated words. However, though longer texts may appear more daunting to translate, as Pungă and Badea (2018) argued, often times, shorter texts or even stand-alone words are more demanding to render from one language into another. This is frequently true in the case of book titles.

The title of a book encapsulates, in a more evident or subtler way, the essence of the work, while enticing potential readers to engage with its content (a book title, according to Genette and Crampé (1988), may initially address a very large audience, but not everybody will actually get to read the book itself, the decision to do so or not depending quite a lot on how attractive the title is). Titles function as a bridge between the author's intentions and the audience's expectations, guiding the reading from the very cover of the book and offering a lens through which the text may be interpreted. As Genette (1997) explains, titles act as thresholds, they are paratextual elements that not only frame the reader's approach to literary works, but also influence their reception. For translated works, the titles' role becomes even more critical, as they are often imbued with cultural references, wordplay, or emotional resonance that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. Venuti (1995) argues that it is the translator's task to mediate these elements, balancing fidelity to the source text with appropriateness for the target readership. Thus, the translation of book titles often becomes a complex interplay of linguistic skill and cultural sensitivity that bears consequences on how the works are received in linguistic and cultural contexts other than those in which they were initially produced.

With this complexity in mind, we set out to explore the translations into English of a selection of titles of novels by Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1968), praised for the exceptional sensitivity and poetic force of his culturally rich narratives. His recognition by the Swedish Academy brought (back) global attention to Japanese literature in some parts of the world and boosted it in others, including in the English-speaking countries. Yasunari Kawabata's novels began to be translated into English in the 1950s, by American translator Edward G. Seidensticker, the United States thus being the first country to have made his works available to an English-speaking audience. Seidensticker's early translations from Kawabata into English, though not extremely numerous, were instrumental not only in introducing the Japanese writer to the West, but also in boosting his international reputation, which, in turn, was pivotal in his being awarded the Nobel prize.

Kawabata's works have not been extensively examined from a translation-oriented perspective. When they have, the approach has mainly focused on how the Japanese writer's distinctive literary style, narrative perspective, cultural and philosophical references, and thematic concerns were conveyed across linguistic and cultural boundaries (e.g. Jabłoński 2014; Foolen, Yamaguchi 2016; Kataoka 2016; Chan, Ni, 2023, etc), the paratextual elements being the research focus on even fewer occasions (e.g. Serra Vilella 2018, 2021). Our small-scale analysis in this article therefore adds to the existing body of translation research on Kawabata's works, contributing insights in an under-investigated thematic area. In particular, we contemplate the translation techniques used and examine the resulting similarities and divergences in category, form, meaning and pragmatic function between five source and target titles, while we speculate on the possible consequences of the translation choices.

The translation difficulties that we anticipate are connected to some general aspects that we briefly mention in the next section.

2. Japanese into English translation challenges

When considering the challenges of translating from Japanese into English, the key difficulties that arise are rooted, on the one hand, in fundamental grammatical differences between the two languages.

On the other hand, while English tends to be more direct and explicit, Japanese heavily relies on context and implication to convey meaning, so that one may often "read" unexpressed language between the lines of Japanese texts. As Ryan (1980: 49) observes, unexpressed language

is so exquisitely refined in Japanese that its identification and ultimate transmission are matters of great significance. Without it, a translation is empty, vapid, drained of the emotion upon which the original Japanese is predicated. It lies on the page, a collection of English words which may or may not 'mean' what the Japanese words 'mean', but devoid of the feeling permeating the original text.

Ryan (1980: 52) further highlights that, until the 1960s, Japanese literary language often embraced imprecision, with sentences intentionally designed to be vague and suggestive rather than direct. This stylistic preference is particularly relevant for Kawabata's works discussed in this paper, as they were written between the late 1920s and early 1970s. Another significant translation challenge arises from the Japanese writing system, which employs three scripts – kanji, katakana, and hiragana – none of which has direct equivalents in English. The use of these scripts often conveys nuanced meanings and stylistic choices that are difficult to replicate in translation.

Finally, cultural differences present another layer of complexity in literary translation. Many Japanese traditions, concepts, and realia lack direct counterparts both in the English-speaking cultures and in the English language, compelling translators to make deliberate choices between what Venuti (1995) calls *domestication* (adapting the text to align with the target culture) and *foreignization* (preserving the cultural specificity of the source text).

3. Japanese into English book titles translation. Theoretical considerations

Against the background represented by these overall challenges that may arise when translating from Japanese into English, the analysis of the translation choices made in rendering Kawabata's book titles into English builds on a two-fold theoretical scaffolding: Levison's (1985) title categories and Grice's (1975) maxims that govern what he considers to be cooperative communication. Both will be detailed in what follows.

The six title categories that Levinson (1985: 34-35) identified are:

- *neutral titles* expressing “the names of characters, objects, or places which figure prominently in the body of the work and are insusceptible to any additional spotlighting”;
- *underlining or reinforcing titles* which “add additional weight or stress to some theme or subject that is clearly part of core content, but not so overwhelmingly or unquestionably that titular spotlighting is otiose”;
- *focusing titles*, where “rather than merely underlining, there has to be a certain richness of core content so that two or more elements within could plausibly be regarded as of major importance”;
- *undermining or opposing titles*, which are ironic and counter to the works they represent;
- *mystifying or disorienting titles*, with structures that seem tangential to the work, rather than opposing or descriptive, and
- *disambiguating or specifying titles*, where the work may be seen in a different light than it would have, had the title been omitted.

In our analysis, we will indicate whether the source and the target titles belong to the same category of these six and will speculate on what consequences their being of the same type or of different types may have on the target audience.

If titles were to be fully functional both in the source and in the target language, they should ensure cooperative communication between the author/ translator and

the book readers. To do so, they should ideally obey the four, well-known maxims suggested by Grice (1975: 45-46):

- the maxim of quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- the maxim of quantity:
 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- the maxim of relation (relevance): Be relevant.
- the maxim of manner: Be perspicuous.
 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 4. Be orderly.

However, what has often been clarified is that Grice (1975) did not present his Cooperative Principle as a prescriptive code of communicative conduct. Rather, communication can occur effectively whether the sender of a message adheres to or deliberately violates the maxims, provided the receiver of that message can discern the strategy being employed. The Cooperative Principle functions as a foundational assumption for successful communication. Strict adherence to the principle is not mandatory, but a shared understanding between the message sender and receiver of its existence and relevance is. In the context of our analysis, this means that an appropriately translated title is one that is up front relevant, informative enough, unambiguous and brief for the (potential) target readers of the novels. If it is not, the translation may still be considered appropriate, only provided that the readers can make sense of the meaning intended by the violation of the cooperative communication maxims. Still, readers may only discern the communicative intentions underlying a title that violates conversational maxims after engaging with the content of the work. In our analysis of the titles, we assume this familiarity with the content of the books does not exist at the time readers get in touch with their titles.

The sections that follow are dedicated to comparatively discussing the five titles of Kawabata's books that we have selected, both in their original form and in English translation, from the point of view of Levinson's title categories and Grice's cooperative communication maxims.

4. Translating Kawabata's titles from Japanese into English: case studies

4.1. *Izu no odoriko* (1926)

Kawabata's *Izu no odoriko* is his first widely acclaimed literary work. The narrative follows a twenty-year-old student traveling to the Izu Peninsula, where he encounters a family of itinerant entertainers and develops affectionate feelings for a teenage dancer, hence the title of the work. Through its portrayal of the protagonist's

inner struggles, the short story explores themes such as love, loss, and transience, emphasizing the ephemeral beauty of the moment – a hallmark of Kawabata's later writings too. The work is often interpreted as having an autobiographical dimension: Kawabata, orphaned at a young age, frequently travelled in search of emotional equilibrium. He visited the Izu peninsula several times, staying for longer stretches between 1924 and 1927 and fell in love with a woman who might have inspired the novella's central relationship.

The title draws attention to the dancer and can be thus classified as a focusing title within Levinson's taxonomy. Although the dancer is not the central figure in the narrative, she plays a pivotal role in shaping the protagonist's emotions and actions. Levinson (1985: 35) defines a focusing title as one that "suggests which of the contending themes should be given center place in interpreting the work and organizing one's appreciation of it." Indeed, the dancer girl (though a character, not a theme) serves as a crucial point of focus, offering a lens through which the reader can better and more deeply understand the young student's inner turmoil.

The original title consists of three elements: "Izu", the name of the location where the story takes place; the particle "no", meaning 'of', 'from', 'at'; and "odoriko", which denotes a dancer.

Izu no odoriko was the first of Kawabata's works to be translated into English. The translation was undertaken by Edward Seidensticker, renowned for his extensive work in translating Kawabata's writings. It was initially published in an abridged form in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1955, the full version appearing only later. The English title – *The Izu Dancer* – remained unchanged for both the abridged and the complete variant.

In this English version of the Japanese title, "Izu" is a direct translation. Without any additional information and if readers are unfamiliar with the fact that the proper noun "Izu" stands for a place in Japan, they may find it ambiguous.

The particle "no" is disregarded, which, together with the word order opted for, adds to the ambiguity of the title.

"Odoriko" is a pretty challenging word to translate, if all the subtleties implied by its structure were to be taken into account. It is a compound word made up of "odori", meaning 'dance' and "ko", meaning 'child'. This latter element may have been rendered by various kanji, but the one chosen - 子 – signifies 'child' and implies the female gender, just like it does when it is used in women's proper names like Yukiko, Hiroko, etc. Therefore, quite significantly, the term "odoriko" does not evoke a neutral image, but rather specifically suggests that of a young female dancer.

The English translator's choice for "odoriko" is "the dancer". The use of the definite article "the" as a determiner of the noun "dancer" serves to signal a particular individual who holds a central place in the short story, though, as Japanese lacks articles, the employment of the indefinite article "a" could also have been a viable translation option. While this choice directs readers' attention to a specific figure, the translation of "odoriko" does not go beyond this level of specificity. The original title conveys to the source audience that a young female dancer in/ at/ of Izu is central to the narrative, thereby ensuring cooperative communication, but the nuanced information regarding the dancer's gender and age is absent in the English version.

The target audience is presented with a title that, while still functioning as a focusing one, is considerably less transparent than the original. The overly general “the dancer”, in terms of age and gender of the referent, and the potential opacity of the proper noun “Izu” for readers unfamiliar with Japan’s geography suggest a violation of both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner. Consequently, the English title risks being perceived as ambiguous and insufficiently informative.

A pretty similar translation of Kawabata’s title occurred in a research article on the writer’s works (Tsukimura, Kawabata, 1968) – *Izu Dancer*. The only difference resides in the omission of the definite article, the implication being that the referent is rather generic than specific. Our comments above, concerning the ambiguity and reduced informativity of Seidensticker’s title, hold in this case, too.

In 1997, another translation appeared alongside Seidensticker’s, in a collection of short stories, this time by Martin J. Holman, titled *The Dancing Girl of Izu*. Unlike the initial English version, this focusing title overtly carries across into the target language what is implicit in the Japanese original: the person referred to is a young female. By using the analytical genitive “of Izu”, it also clarifies it for the readers that Izu must be a place. As such, this English translation of *Izu no odoriko* may be credited with relevance for the target audience and thus, with alignment with Grice’s cooperative communication principle.

4.2. *Asakusa kurenaidan* (1929-1930)

Kawabata’s *Asakusa kurenaidan* offers a penetrating exploration of the “destitution and marginalization produced by [...] consumer culture” (Lippit 2002: 122). Rooted in modernist tradition, this work diverges significantly from the author’s writings anchored in traditional Japanese culture. Unlike *Izu no odoriko* and *Yukiguni* (to be discussed later), *Asakusa kurenaidan* presents a vivid and dynamic portrait of urban Japanese life, marking a bold departure in theme and style from the author’s more traditional works.

The novel was initially serialized in several Tokyo-based publications, including the *Tokyo Asahi* daily newspaper, *Kaizō* literary journal, where it carried the title *Asakusa kurenaidan*, and *Shinchō* literary journal, where it appeared under the title *Asakusa akaobikai* (*The Red Sash Society*). Its complete text was eventually published in 1930 under the title analyzed here (Wada, White 2018).

Set in the bustling entertainment district of Asakusa during 1920s Tokyo, the novel blends fiction and non-fiction to depict the dark realities of urban life, focusing on the lives of marginalized individuals – beggars, prostitutes, teenagers, dancers – through the perspective of a reflective narrator. Rather than adhering to a linear plot, the novel adopts an episodic structure, emphasizing the atmosphere of Asakusa with its colourful inhabitants. Central to the narrative is the narrator’s engagement with the district’s vibrant stories and characters, facilitated by a gang of female delinquents, which inspires the novel’s title.

In the Japanese title, “Asakusa”, the name of the Tokyo district, acts as a descriptor of “kurenaidan”.

“Kurenaidan” is composed of two elements: the former is “kurenai”, referring to a deep red, crimson, vermilion colour, but which is represented by a kanji that may as well be read as ‘lipstick’. The origin of “kurenai” is said to be a merging of “kure” (‘China’), “no” (possessive particle), and “ai” (‘indigo’, by extension, ‘dye’) – the word can thus be understood literally as ‘China’s colour’. This is explained by the fact that the safflower plant from which the kurenai colour dye was extracted was brought to Japan from China.

The latter part of “kurenaidan” is “dan”, which translates as ‘association’, ‘group’, ‘party’. The implied reference of the compound word in the title is, however, to a group of females, due to the possible “lipstick” reading of the kanji that we mentioned above. The Japanese title of the novel would be categorised as neutral in Levinson’s terms, naming the group of characters that occupy a central place in Kawabata’s writing. The insinuated piece of information that these characters are women is accessible to Japanese readers, familiar with how kanji ideograms may be interpreted. However, what the Japanese title does not communicate is the social status of the characters it refers to, so, we may consider that, in the absence of this detail, the title flouts Grice’s maxim of quantity.

The novel was not published in English until much later after it was released in Japan, in 2005, in Alisa Freedman’s translation, under the title *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*. Like the Japanese original, this too is a neutral title according to Levinson’s classification. However, the similarities between the source and target titles appear to extend no further than this.

What is immediately apparent is that an analytical genitive structure was favoured instead of the synthetic association of words *The Asakusa Scarlet Gang*, which would have been closer in form to the source title. This helps in at least partly disambiguating “Asakusa” for readers who may not be familiar with the fact that what the proper noun refers to is a Tokyo district. The “of” genitive translation choice works at least as far as it makes it clear that “Asakusa” is a place that the gang in question is associated with or resides in.

“The gang” is not a literal translation of “dan”. As explained above, the Japanese word is neutral in referring to a ‘group of people’, while the English word is much more specific in indicating that the group is one of criminals. Information is thus added as compared to the Japanese title and expectations on the readers’ part are created in closer connection with the content of the novel. Considered from this perspective, unlike the Japanese title, its English counterpart may seem to obey the maxim of quantity. However, the latter does not suggest in any way that the criminals in question are women – as English does not have graphic resources equivalent to Japanese to imply it, this could have only been done in plain English words. Thus, what the English title gains on one side, it loses on the other, in the end remaining only partly informative with respect to the novel’s plot.

As with *Izu no odoriko*, the use of English articles was at the translator’s discretion – a choice was allowed between presenting the gang as known and familiar, through the use of the definite article, or as less so, by employing an indefinite article or omitting articles altogether. She chose the former, unambiguously signaling (in alignment with Grice’s maxim of manner) that the title refers to a specific gang. This

deliberate strategy may function as an attention-grabbing device, positioning the gang as a central focus of the narrative.

Other translations of the title are encountered in papers and novels written before its official English version was published. One of them is *The Kurenaidan [Scarlet Club] of Asakusa*, in the 1939 *Introduction to Contemporary Japanese Literature*, where “kurenaidan” is transliterated and explained in brackets, by a phrase containing “club”, a neutral term as compared to “gang”. Another is *The Crimson Gang of Asakusa*, in a paper by Tsukimura and Kawabata (1968), where the only difference from Freedman’s translation is a partial synonym for the colour word.

Both these translations resemble the official *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* in that they convey less information in connection to the novel’s plot than the original title does and thus may be considered not to obey Grice’s maxim of quantity.

4.3. *Yukiguni* (1937-1948)

Kawabata’s *Yukiguni* was written starting with the mid 1930s and added to throughout the years, so that it only reached its final form after World War II. The novel may be considered “the first [...] in which we find all the artistic elements, both modern and traditional, that have since characterized the distinctive style of Kawabata” (Araki 1969: 321). While reminiscent of *Izu no odoriko* in its exploration of the protagonist’s emotional responses to the natural world and human kindness, *Yukiguni* delves into these themes with greater depth and complexity (Tsukimura, Kawabata, 1968).

Yukiguni is the story of a successful Tokyo businessman, who frequently travels to a secluded hot springs town in Western Japan, where he now takes romantic interest in two women, a geisha and an employee of the inn where he finds accommodation.

“Yukiguni” holds a precise cultural and geographical significance, denoting a region in Japan characterized by heavy snowfall, most commonly associated with the area stretching from Fukui to Akita Prefecture. The Japanese are well-acquainted with this so Kawabata’s title should make perfect sense to them. The novel’s narrative unfolds specifically within the setting mentioned, in the snow-laden mountains of Niigata Prefecture near Echigo-Yuzawa. Given that the title refers to a place that figures predominantly in the novel, it may be classified as neutral in Levinson’s categorization.

The translation of *Yukiguni* into English, in 1956, under the title *Snow Country*, is also Edward G. Seidensticker’s work.

The title *Snow Country* can be considered a literal rendering of *Yukiguni*, as “yuki” translates as ‘snow’ and “kuni,” when sonorized as “guni,” signifies ‘land,’ ‘country,’ or ‘region’. However, the translator’s choice of the term “country” from among these possible alternatives suppresses the cultural and geographical specificity inherent in the original title. Additionally, the absence of a definite article before “country” further weakens the referent’s precision. These translation decisions render the English title less informative than its Japanese counterpart, which results into the

maxim of quantity being violated by the provision of insufficient contextual detail. The maxim of quality is also flouted, as the English title may mislead its readers. An English-speaking audience is likely to interpret “country” in its general sense as ‘territory of a nation’, rather than in its more specific, poetic sense of ‘region’ or ‘area’. This, however, may not be the case for readers who are familiar with this kind of usage in other publications in/ about Japan, where “snow country” usually appears within inverted commas and so its secondary meaning use is graphically marked (see, for example, *Highlighting Japan*, the Japanese Government’s official online magazine, which promotes Japan to people around the world).

With this exception, even if the Japanese and the English titles are both neutral in Levinson’s classification, they do not communicate the same amount and kind of information to their respective audiences.

4.4. *Senbazuru* (1952)

Senbazuru, like several of Kawabata’s earlier works, was serialized in a newspaper, beginning in 1949, before it was published as a novel in 1952 (www.britannica.com).

The novel, which revolves around the culturally very significant Japanese tea ceremony, serves as a meditation on the erosion of traditional values in the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in World War II. While some have interpreted it as a delicate and evocative depiction of the ceremony, in his Nobel lecture (www.nobelprize.org), Kawabata himself rejected such readings, emphasizing that his book was not intended to be celebratory:

I may say in passing, that to see my novel *Thousand Cranes* as an evocation of the formal and spiritual beauty of the tea ceremony is a misreading. It is a negative work, and expression of doubt about and warning against the vulgarity into which the tea ceremony has fallen.

(https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1968/kawabata/lecture/)

This is reflected in the novel’s increasingly sombre tone and in the depiction of the tea ceremony as gradually deteriorating and becoming progressively less formal and structured with each mention in the book. Indeed, from this point forward, themes of nostalgia for a lost past, worry about the future, and the pervasive presence of death become recurrent motifs throughout Kawabata’s works.

The narrative follows Kikuji, a young man struggling with the loss of his father, who gradually becomes entangled in the deceased’s past affairs. His misfortunes begin when he is invited to a tea ceremony by Miss Kurimoto, one of his father’s former mistresses, who seeks to arrange a match between him and her student, Yukiko. However, rather than pursuing this prospective relationship, Kikuji embarks on an affair with Mrs. Ota, his father’s last mistress. This affair ultimately culminates in tragedy, as Mrs. Ota, overwhelmed with guilt, takes her own life. Following this, Kikuji engages in a relationship with her daughter, yet, by the novel’s end, he remains alone.

Although Yukiko plays a relatively passive role in the unfolding events, she serves as a symbolic character in the novel, representing the alternative path Kikuji might have chosen – a life unburdened by his father’s immoral legacy. Her presence is closely associated with a *furoshiki* (a traditional Japanese wrapping cloth) adorned with the thousand cranes motif, which comes to embody both her identity and the cultural ideals she represents. Through this motif, as well as the frequent depictions of her beauty and refined demeanour, Yukiko emerges as a symbol of Japanese tradition and idealized femininity, standing in stark contrast to the other characters in the book.

As the title is about a pattern heavily associated with somebody who is not a main character, yet has an essential symbolic value, it may be categorised as focusing in Levinson’s view. It calls attention to a character/ theme which may not seem immediately important to the reader and may require additional spotlighting.

In terms of structure, the title word *Senbazuru* is a compound made up of three elements: “sen”, meaning ‘thousand’, “ba”, a count word for birds and rabbits (however, literally meaning ‘feather’), and “zuru”, the voiced (*rendaku*) variant of “tsuru”, meaning ‘crane(s)’ and traditionally evoking the image of the Japanese red-crowned crane.

Seidensticker’s 1958 translation *Thousand Cranes* remains faithful to the source in meaning. It adapts to the grammar requirements of English and uses the plural “cranes” after the numeral, in the absence of an equivalent English count word for the Japanese “ba”.

The resulting title retains its status of a focusing title but, unfortunately, it does not manage to convey as much to the readers it targets as the original does to the Japanese public, and to be as relevant for the former as it is for the latter. It does not compensate in any way for the possible break in the cultural background knowledge of the English readership and may thus be said to float the Gricean maxims of quantity and relation.

Though frequently used as a decorative motif, “thousand cranes” originates in the tradition of folding a thousand origami cranes. Upon completion of this task, it is believed that the person or group who has accomplished it will be granted a wish. This is a belief deeply ingrained in Japanese culture that is immediately recognizable as such by native audiences. The thousand cranes in the book title symbolize longevity, recovery and peace, but also wisdom and loyalty. It being so deeply culture-specific, the whole conceptual frame around the Japanese thousand cranes is quite difficult to transpose for a foreign audience. As a result, non-Japanese readers may be more inclined to interpret the phrase literally rather than symbolically. What may be overlooked is not only the rich symbolic meaning of the title, but also the subtle irony embedded in Kawabata’s choice when naming a book, in which infidelity is central, by a bird which symbolizes loyalty. If the author’s ironical intentions may reveal themselves to Japanese readers while advancing in the novel, they risk being entirely overlooked by English-speaking audiences.

A potential issue with the perception of the English translation of the title may stem from the popularisation of Sadako Sasaki’s story. She was a child victim of the atomic bombings of Japan who, while in hospital undergoing treatment for leukaemia,

folded more than a thousand paper cranes in the hope of being granted the wish of getting well (which, unfortunately, but expectedly, did not happen). She has become an international symbol of peace and is globally associated with the thousand cranes (DiCicco, Sasaki 2018). Sadako died in 1955, after the publication of *Senbazuru*, yet before the publication of *Thousand Cranes*. The result of the Japanese girl's story being widely known may be that Seidensticker's target audience may wrongfully associate the English title with the atomic bombings and thus build a wholly different set of expectations than those the source audience may have. The English title may thus be misleading, and consequently, we may consider that it violates the maxim of quality.

4.5. *Meijin* (1954)

Following in the footsteps of *Senbazuru*, Kawabata's *Meijin* was first published as a series only later to be edited into a full-length novel. Drawing inspiration from real events – much like his experiences in Izu and Asakusa – Kawabata, in this instance, departs from personal recollection to explore a historical game of go. The novel is a semi-fictionalized account of the famous 1938 memorial game between professional player Hon'inbo Shusai and the younger Kitani Minoru, identifiable as Otake in the novel. This was Shusai's retirement game, which he lost by five points in favour of his presumably less experienced opponent.

As mentioned in the Introduction to the 1972 English version of the novel, it is built on newspaper reports written by Kawabata himself for *Mainichi* during the actual game. These reports not only provide a faithful account of the match but also offer detailed explanations of the game's moves and rules, making the novel accessible even to readers who may be unfamiliar with the complexities of go. At surface level, the plot may appear to be a mere retelling of this match, known to the Japanese audience of the times, yet not too fresh in the memories of later readers, as the novel was published 16 years after the event. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the narrative itself is merely a means to an end, as “from the way of Go the beauty of Japan and the Orient had fled. Everything had become science and regulation” (Kawabata 1972: 52).

Kawabata uses the match as an overarching metaphor for the clash between tradition and modernity, between Japan and the West, embodied by the two contrasting characters – the master and his younger challenger. This was of great concern to the author and cannot be separated from the historical context of the writing. The fear of losing traditional values and the outright rejection of Western influences intensified after World War II, the American occupation of Japan between 1945 and 1952 coinciding with the time when the novel was written.

“Meijin”, the word in the title of the book, literally means ‘renowned person’ and denotes a master in a field, frequently that of board games. It may be applied to experts of several games, like karuta, shogi or go, the context clarifying which exactly it denotes. When referring specifically to go, *meijin* is the title which has historically been applied to a single 9-dan player at a time, deemed “the master”. Though originating from China and popular throughout East Asia, go has become

synonymous with Japan starting with its increase in popularity in the 17th century only, when it became a state-sponsored game (Rogers 1983). It was then that the *meijin* title appeared, alongside the position of *godokoro* (minister of go). Hon'inbo Shusai, the real-life person and book character, was the 10th and last historic “meijin” of go, as well as the last head of house Hon'inbo (<https://senseis.xmp.net>).

Under Levinson's taxonomy, the Japanese title may be classified as a neutral one, since it refers to the master, the main (non-fictional) character of the story. Though it may seem that there are three central characters in the story, Shusai, his younger opponent, and the reporter who narrates the story (mirroring Kawabata himself), the focus is on the master, not just during the match, but also following it, up until his death.

The novel was translated in 1972 by Edward G. Seidensticker as *The Master of Go*, a neutral title itself, which has remained unchanged to the present. What is immediately apparent is that the English translation provides, in an explicit manner, information which is suggested in the source title and fully revealed only in the content of the novel. In the Japanese title, it is not obvious what the game in question may be, or even if reference is made to a game at all. Thus, at first sight, the original title may be ambiguous and said to flout Grice's maxim of manner.

In contrast, the English title disambiguates at least partly what is left unclear in the original – the book is expected to be about a person who is an excellent go player (and one of a kind, as the use of the definite article may suggest). Seen from this perspective, it obeys both the maxim of quantity and that of manner. However, the general term “master” falls short of the cultural nuances that “meijin” conveys to the Japanese readers. “Grandmaster” might come close to the Japanese game title, but as it is used exclusively for chess players, the expectations that it may create are contrary to what the novel is actually about.

5. Conclusion

Our analysis of the translation from Japanese into English of the five book titles by Yasunari Kawabata has revealed that the task of transferring them from the source into the target language is not always straightforward. It has also proved that the sources of translation challenges that we anticipated do indeed represent areas from which interlanguage transfer difficulties may stem.

Though similar in function in all cases considered, the original titles and their translated counterparts are not equivalent in terms of form, quantity, quality and relevance of the information conveyed. Differences in form are the result of the grammatical and lexical dissimilarities between the two languages involved in the translation process (such as the complete lack of articles in Japanese as opposed to the frequent use of definite and indefinite articles in English; the absence of direct equivalents in English for certain Japanese words, like “ba”; or the impossibility of capturing the symbolic values of Japanese words or their components in a similar way in English, like in the case of “kurenaidan”).

Incongruence in terms of the titles' communicative value are triggered by formal differences, but, most obviously, by the very solid anchorage of the original

titles in the Japanese socio-cultural and geographical realities (e.g. the thousand cranes symbolic motif, the snow-covered region of Japan or the go leading player). The English translators failed in transferring the cultural dimension of the Japanese originals into the titles they suggested, their domestication techniques neutralizing this dimension almost completely. Thus, the Japanese culture-oriented expectations that the original titles may create for the initial readership are absent in the case of the English audience. For the latter, the titles gain in relevance only after the readers get acquainted with the content of the writings.

Overall, our analysis may be yet another proof of the fact that, though translation is always possible, loss in the process, especially that rooted in culture-specific aspects, is often unavoidable not only in the case of larger chunks of texts, but also in that of shorter stretches of language, like titles of literary pieces.

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