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Reflections on the Translation of Manga

*Magi: The Labyrinth of Magic* is a weekly serialized manga by Ohtaka Shinobu, published in Shogakukan’s *Weekly Shounen Sunday*, published every Wednesday. The manga features characters with names from the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights* and other famous tales, but beyond that it is a fantasy-adventure series with little bearing on the actual stories the allusions come from. *Magi* revolves around the adventures of Aladdin, Alibaba and Morgiana, but the *Sinbad no Bouken: Prototype* one shot that I have translated is a side story which reveals the origins of one of the important side characters, Sinbad, High King of the Seven Seas Alliance.

As a one shot with most of the important background knowledge being filled in by the characters themselves, it made for a good project choice in both length and detail. Its genre also dictated a few translation decisions I made that applied throughout the entire process. Firstly, the fantasy setting is in a fictional country with no bearing to modern Japan, the honorifics were translated to suitable equivalents. Also, there is the matter of names and places. Starting with Sinbad, although it is quite a historic and famous name, other translations and renderings have included Sindbad and Sindibad as alternatives. A case can be made that since the Japanese renders it ‘シンドバッド’ that it should be translated as Sindbad (like in many of prominent translations of *Thousand and One Arabian Nights*), I went with Sinbad as that is how it is written in the character guidebook as well as official merchandise[[1]](#footnote-1).

Drakon’s full name and title from P33 was also a challenge, but looking at an alternative amateur translation[[2]](#footnote-2) in the end the name rendering of something where the length is the joke, not the actual words means that the differences (which cannot be truly justified either way) are not as important.

Looking at the issues of the Japanese language itself and there are some peculiarities that occur more prominently as it is also a visual media. For one, a significant narrative device in manga and other Japanese media is the term of address and term of self-reference utilized by characters to establish both personal identities as well as their relation to other characters, whether antagonistic or otherwise. Most notably is the distinction between the character Sinbad and Drakon, who use 俺 and 私 respectively when referring to themselves. This is most starkly shown on P58B1,2 as the two boys simultaneously respond to what could only be translated as “Me!” in English, yet in Japanese there is the nuance of two different usages of the first person. In longer exchanges it is possible to convey the deitic meaning of a particular choice of self-reference— for example creating more elegant speech to go along with the formal use of 私 or more rough/casual speech for the male vulgar 俺,, but for simple exclamations like the aforementioned example, there is no non-intrusive way to make a significant distinction. While there can be no other meaning but ‘Me’, to the Japanese reader this serves to reinforce the character’s self-perception via their terms of address- in English, this particular panel loses that effect.

As for terms of address for others, there are as many and more variations on second and third person pronouns that work like the different forms of self-address to establish relationships and distinguish social standing. Drakon uses お前 on P13B3 only once when addressing Sinbad, most likely reciting an official line on his enlistment orders, switching to 貴様 on the next usage of the second person pronoun on P14B3 which establishes both his disdain and dislike for Sinbad. Although in Japanese linguistic history 貴様 was part of polite language as one point, given the context (class disparity and less than friendly relations) it is being used as a male-vulgar form of second person address.

Sinbad on the other hand, uses お前 and variations of it almost across the board for the people he meets. Both Yunan (P21B7) and Drakon are referred to as お前 and he uses お前ら for the children on (P7B7) although in the latter case, I translated it to ‘you brats’ to go along with how he referred to them in the third person (P10B4). His use of a casual/close second person term of address without adhering to the shifts that would occur when observing differences in social status serve to reflect his character who believes more in the worth of people by their actions, not their titles.

Overall as the manga itself contrasts the two boys, I set out to distinguish their language in the TT, taking into account the various aspects of their terms of address and sentence ending particles. Sinbad speaks with moreinformal contractions like ‘d’you’ and ‘y’know’ to sound in line with his youth and common upbringing. Additionally, occasional usage of a profanity although overall in Japanese profanities are not as ‘harsh’ sounding as in English, and rather than go overboard with it I tried to keep it closer to the level in the ST. For Drakon, while he uses casual form with male ending particles, in the TT I wanted to contrast him with Sinbad’s speech by being relatively more refined without the use of informal contractions and fewer formal contractions.

Aside from Sinbad and Drakon, another character who warranted more careful attention to his speech style was Baal, the Djinn of the tower. Although he has very few lines, in the ST his speech is marked by using 我が as term for self reference (P56B1) as well as using そなた (P64B1), an archaic second person form of address. In the TT I utilized English archaisms, such as ‘What is thy name?’ for the line on P64B1 to set his style of speech apart as an entity of immeasurable age.

Overall, manga is primarily dialogue driven and character voice was definitely one of the priorities I kept in mind while translating. While the net meaning might not change much if all the characters’ speech were rendered to a similar style of English, I feel it would affect the overall atmosphere and reading experience to be more bland.

Some considerations that are part of translation, but pertain also to the formatting of manga include typographical choices and certain structures that are not directly translatable, such as the use of furigana implicatures on P7B7, ‘子供たち furigana: ガキンチョ’. Normally, furigana is the reading of a kanji that might be beyond the reading level of the target audience. In the serialized comic *Magi*, there is a considerable amount of furigana, but in this one shot it only occurs as a kanji reading in 1 case (P56B2) to assist with uncommon kanji and twice as a conversational implicature. In P7B5’s Sinbad ostensibly says out loud ‘children’ but the furigana word ガキンチョ, an alternative form of ガキ[[3]](#footnote-3), meaning brat, shows the reader he also recognizes the kids can be a hassle. In the TT I used ‘brats’, as ‘kids’ doesn’t necessarily have the implication of being annoying, but ‘brat’ has the connotation of being fairly young.

The second instance of this kind of implicature is P48B3 where the 国 in ‘民を見捨てる国’ ‘パルテビア’ in furigana. Here it serves more dramatic effect than narrative, but in the TT I wrote, “So a country like Partevia...” in an attempt to have it both ways because he is applying his opinion to countries in general, but obviously in their current situation he is referring to Partevia.

While translations of prose can have more flexibility in resembling the Japanese word order or rearranging it, manga has the additional constraint of having the lines flow in a visual sense as well. Sometimes a line is split into separate speech bubbles that should be reversed or reordered in English in order to flow better. As the age of flipping manga has largely ended, retaining the reading order of right to left of the Japanese, there still is the matter of the order of information presented. For example P64B4/5, in the ST the sentence is broken up as ‘the power to change this irrational world / give it to me!!’ but to make it read better and to put focus on Sinbad’s goal, I reordered it to ‘Give me the power / to change this irrational world!!’. This type of alteration is made based often on how the physical layout of a pages’ panels affects the way it is read by the reader.

The issues that surfaced when translation manga could go on for many more pages, but I have presented the ones I found most significant in regards to my experience with this story. Overall the biggest challenge was managing the unique character voices while also working with the layout for a natural reading experience. I would also like to thank my typesetter, fuwacchi for handling the entirety of the cleaning process and most of the typesetting process so that I could present this project in the same format as the source text.

1. <http://www.project-magi.com/goods/goods64.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://reader.sense-scans.com/reader/read/adventure_of_sinbad_prototype/en/0/1/page/33> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q109703450> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)