Dialogue in Translation: The Nightrunner Series from English to Japanese

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Abstract: This paper will examine both the original English and translated Japanese editions of Lynn Flewelling’s Nightrunner Series in order to demonstrate the essential role of dialogue in communicating the personalities of the major characters, and how those personalities can be altered by translation. It will examine the unique difficulties presented by translation from English to Japanese caused by the strongly hierarchical nature of the Japanese language which requires the translator to have a thorough understanding of each individual character in a novel in order to produce authentic and natural translations of dialogue which accurately reflect the characters’ age, gender, social status and relationships.

Stephens and McCallum tell us that “because retellings do not, and cannot, also reproduce the discoursal mode of the source, they cannot replicate its significances, and always impose their own cultural presuppositions in the process of retelling” (1998, p.4). The translator must thus strive to reach a balance where the characters, setting and era of a novel are translated in a manner which remains true to the original, yet are still accessible to the audience of the translated work. The Nightrunner Series demonstrates the difficulty of achieving this in the case of a fantasy novel set in a created reality where the translator must infer precise social hierarchies and navigate the complex interactions of age, gender, social status and relationships.

Keywords: Japanese, Translation, Dialogue, Nightrunner series, Characterisation

Introduction

Concerning Retellings in children’s literature, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum state that “because retellings do not, and cannot, also reproduce the discoursal mode of the source, they cannot replicate its significances, and always impose their own cultural presuppositions in the process of retelling” (1998, p.4). This is true of translation in general; however it is especially relevant regarding translated dialogues in novels since their linguistic discourses are inevitably dictated by the host cultures and ideologies. This is particularly evident in Japanese where age, gender and other factors strictly determine the way in which one speaks. Translated dialogue involves and exemplifies multi-faceted, multi-layered intercultural interaction between the origin and host cultures, and between individuals and societies. The translation of a novel requires the reproduction of character, setting and era in such a way that it remains true to the original novel, and is also accessible to the intended audience of the translation.

This paper examines the original English and translated Japanese editions (translated by Nana Hamana) of Lynn Flewelling’s Nightrunner Series, in order to demonstrate the impact of translation on characterisation. We have chosen a fantasy series for our analysis because fantasies are characterised by their otherworldliness and their exploration of human nature which transcends cultural specificity. Kawai Hayao (1991) acknowledges that fantasies offer universal, autonomous narratives which reveal a multi-layered reality through each unique individual’s story, especially in relation to the conscious and the unconscious. The otherworldliness of fantasy novels is a key element which allows them to be independent from any specific temporal or spatial reality. Fantasy novels may utilise some aspects of culture or social organisation from real cultures either past or present, as exemplified by the many novels set in medieval worlds reminiscent of Europe in the middle ages in terms of their settings, attires, weaponry, transport and social organisation. However, this detachment from temporal and spatial reality allows the author to create a world of cultural diversity with magic and fantastical creatures (e.g., dragons), which liberates both the author and the readers from their own social norms. This means that fantasies are freer from the cultures of both the authors, translators and their readers than novels set in the real world, in either the past or the present.

Moreover, it should be noted that Japanese readers are familiar with the western fantasy genre from childhood, with popular and familiar titles ranging from Alice in Wonderland and Narnia to the Harry Potter series, as well as original Japanese fantasy novels developed from western traditions of fantasy. Therefore, when compared to texts such as historical
novels which require considerable socio-cultural understanding of the society of the period, there is less cultural discrepancy between the original culture and the host culture in terms of appreciation of fantasy novels in Japan. The neutrality or transparency of texts in terms of cultural implication in narrative development enables us to closely examine the more subtle yet deep-seated cultural implication embedded in linguistic discourses, such as the choice of gender-orientated vocabularies selected in a translation.

Through events and character interactions, and especially through dialogue, the readers build individual pictures of the personalities and relationships between the protagonist(s) and other characters. For the reader to engage with the story the characterisation must be believable, and dialogue is an important tool to develop personalities and relationships. The translation of dialogue requires the translator to infer precise social hierarchies and navigate the complex interactions of age, gender, social status and relationships between characters to recreate a coherent and believable world in the target language which will not alienate readers by its distance from their own reality. It is not easy to create such believability through the process of translation, as this paper will demonstrate.

**Translation and the Japanese Language**

When a novel is translated, dialogues are often affected by the significant alteration required in order to maintain their believability and naturalness within the host culture. Meticulous care for such changes is indispensable when translating into Japanese due to its sophisticated socio-cultural linguistic systems. Human relationships are significantly controlled by language used in conversations (Iritani, 1971) and this is particularly important in Japanese where even in modern social interactions relationships are still placed in a hierarchical order and expressed by a sophisticated linguistic system of honorifics, although to a lesser degree than in the past (Oishi, 1986).

Toyama calls Japanese language an ‘indoor language’ (shitsunai-go) (1976), which means essentially that a smooth conversation can only be established when each participant acknowledges their specific role, based on factors such as their social status, sex, and age. In Japanese, the word ‘I’ tends to be avoided, although there are a large number of terms signifying ‘I’. These seemingly conflicting phenomena are in fact indicative of the Japanese perception of the significance of an individual as a social presence (or role), rather than as a symbol of personal integrity or autonomy. Morimoto (1985) states that the abundant terms for ‘I’ in Japanese do not signify Japanese people’s sensitivity or consciousness about their independence but on the contrary, their need for diverse persona in social interactions. Although excessive use of honorifics may have decreased, or become less visible in modern life, and unisex talk has largely replaced overtly feminine language (Maynard, 2005), gendered or status-based utterances are still common, especially in written discourses. Monologues and dialogues are therefore very powerful devices which characterise a person, their mental and social states in specific situations and in the narratives as a whole. When a girl’s utterances in English, a language largely lacking distinct embedded markers of gender, are translated into Japanese, the translator must generally add carefully selected words to appropriately embody the image of the girl and the specific situation, taking into consideration, for example, her age, appearance, social background, and the relationship with other characters. Such detailing can make unspoken elements explicit and the depiction more vivid; however there exists an obvious risk of narrowing or even misconceptualising the personalities and relationships in the narratives.

Translation always involves both ‘foreignisation’ and ‘localisation/domestication’ strategies although to different degrees (Hatim & Mason, 1990; Venuti, 1995, 1998). The former aims to be faithful to, and retain the original, cultural elements which are foreign to the host culture and thus often an exotic attraction. In contrast, the latter is target-oriented translation, which tries to domesticate and familiarise the original text to the host culture to make them easily accessible, often involving heavy editing (Hatim, 2001). The translator is thus faced with a dilemma when translating into Japanese, and they must determine the extent to which they should modify elements of the text to suit their audience. This is because failing to insert any gender- or status-based language at all would result in a text that does not read true to the Japanese reader, and will fail to engage them, in other words it becomes unbelievable. On the other hand, over-emphasising age, gender and status based differences risks moving the text too far from the intentions of the original.

Flewelling’s *Nightrunner* series, amongst an enormous number of titles of western fantasies translated into Japanese, offers a wide range of well balanced examples of utterances; with a large number of characters across different ages, genders and social status interacting in diverse situations. It is evident that the Japanese translator is not only skilful but also sensitive about the styles to demonstrate particular nuances, such as masculine/feminine, noble/commoner, formal/informal. This is exemplified by her particular use of various words for ‘I’: ‘washi’ for old Nyaander, ‘watashi’ for Seregil, ‘boku’ for Alec, ‘ore’ for Micum and ‘atashi’ for his.
wife and daughters Kari, Beka, Illia. The novels within the *Nightrunner* series therefore provide sufficient scope to analyse the effects on characterisation when translating from English to Japanese.

Another significant element in our comparison of characterisation in the original and translated novels is the considerable differences between western and Japanese marketing strategies and the selection of their target readers. For example, looking at the cover illustrations of the English novels, the series is presented as an action/adventure fantasy, with all three covers showing clear elements of danger (climbing a wall while being pursued; a mysterious battle scene, weapons drawn; and what appears to be a burning funeral pyre). In contrast, Japanese covers are drawn in feminine manga style (nine, in total, as each original novel has been split into three volumes for the Japanese market). They show weapons on each cover, and convey the themes of action and adventure; however, the fact that five of the nine covers feature the two protagonists, Alec and Seregil, alone, strongly hints at the male/male relationship that develops throughout the series. In Japan, there is an entire genre devoted to male/male pairings, known as ‘*shōnen-ai*’, which is read almost exclusively by heterosexual girls and women. We will argue that this placement of the *Nightrunner* series within the *shōnen-ai* genre has a significant impact on characterisation in the Japanese translation, in addition to the aforementioned difficulties presented by the Japanese language in general.

### The *Nightrunner* Series

Having established the complexity the Japanese language adds to translation, and the conflict the translator must face between keeping to the original and appealing to the reader, we will briefly introduce the novels that make up the *Nightrunner* series, and the main characters. To date, the series consists of four books, three of which have been translated into Japanese\(^1\) and are used in this paper. They are *Luck in the Shadows* / *Yami no mamorite* (Japanese title, hereafter LS and LSJ respectively), *Stalking Darkness* / *Hikari no karite* (SD/SDJ) and *Traitor’s Moon* / *Tsuki no hangyakusha* (TM/TMJ)\(^2\). By looking at selected dialogues from the novels, we aim to discover the extent and impact of differences in characterisation between the original and the translated novels. We will consider whether any aspects of characters have been ignored, enhanced, or otherwise altered, and possible reasons for these alterations. Our focus is mainly on how the complex interaction of gender, age and social status has influenced the dialogue choices made by the translator, and what the overall implications of these choices are likely to be on the development of the reader’s own interpretation of the fantasy world of the novel.

The *Nightrunner* series is a fantasy action/adventure series with the eventual development of a romantic relationship between the two central characters, Seregil and Alec. Although half a dozen countries and/or cultures are mentioned throughout the series, we will focus on Skalan society and social norms, as the majority of characters are Skalan, or reside in Skala. In accordance with a prophecy, Skala is ruled by a warrior queen, in stark contrast to the strongly patriarchal nearby Plenimart. The main characters under discussion in this paper are Seregil, Alec, Nysander, Micum and Beka.

Seregil is Aurënfaie, a race that matures slowly, with a lifespan of around 400 years. He is 58 years old but with the appearance of a young man. As a distant relation to the Skalan queen, he has lived in Skala for 40 years following exile from Aurënen, where he plays the role of a wastrel noble whilst leading a secret double-life as a Watcher (spy for the Queen), supervised by the wizard Nysander.

Alec is half-human, half-Hâzadrielfaie (an isolated tribe of Aurënfaie), and meets Seregil in a dungeon, where both have been falsely imprisoned. He is rescued by Seregil and becomes his unofficial apprentice, a Watcher, a friend, and then lover. Until this point, he has lived in the woods with his father, a hunter, and is thus an excellent archer, and soon becomes a skilled swordsman. His solitary lifestyle has caused him to be somewhat ignorant of society and the wider world, but he is non-judgemental, a quick learner and soon establishes his own significance alongside Seregil.

Nysander is Seregil’s beloved master, friend and father figure. He is Skala’s most respected wizard and the head of Watchers. Another Watcher is Micum, an old friend of Seregil’s, a middle-aged bear of a man, gruff and straight-talking, better suited to the rougher aspects of their Watcher duties although he is also a minor Skalan noble, who lives on a country estate with his wife, Kari, and three daughters, the eldest of whom is Beka, the remaining major character in our analysis. Eighteen-year-old Beka strongly takes after her father in appearance, fighting spirit and ability, becoming a lieutenant in the elite mounted troops of the Skalan army, the Queen’s Horse Guard.

The complexity of the interaction between gender, age and social status means that it is impossible to

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1. The fourth book, *Shadows Return* was only published in June 2008.
2. English translations of the Japanese titles are as follows: *Luck in the Shadows* is ‘Yami no mamorite’ can be translated as either the Protector of Darkness or Protector in the Darkness. ‘Hikari no karite’, is ambiguous like the English title of *Stalking Darkness*, where the Darkness can either be the stalker or the stalkee. *Traitor’s Moon* is simply ‘Tsuki no hangyakusha’, matching the original title.
discuss any single factor in isolation; however, we have divided our analysis into two broad categories of gender and social status, with age as a contributing factor for examples in both.

**Gender Issues**

The queen of Skala is a warrior, and this is the first indication of gender relations and norms in Skala – women are just as likely as men to be warriors, and in fact, of the Skalan military personnel we meet by name throughout the series, at least half are female, and most of them are in a commanding role.

The nature of Skalan gender norms poses a significant dilemma for the translator, since traditionally in Japanese men and women had very different ways of speaking (Jugaku, 1979). Even today, although the language has become more unisex, there are still some forms of speech which are highly gendered. For example, the use of the sentence ending particle ‘wa’ for emphasis is a strongly feminine characteristic of speech, whereas the particles ‘zo’ or ‘ze’ which perform much the same function, are strongly masculine. A more gender neutral particle used for emphasis is ‘(da) yo’, but the choice to use ‘yo’ after ‘no’ is distincitively feminine. Today, the use of ‘wa’ as a sentence ending particle has become quite rare, and its use signals an effort to sound particularly feminine. The translator has decided to maintain these gendered speech distinctions in the translation of the *Nightrunner* series by adding feminine speech to female and impersonated female protagonists, resulting in the dilution and transformation of Skala’s egalitarian attitude toward women to a more patriarchal context.

Such cultural appropriation is typified by the transformed characterisation of Beka in the Japanese translation. In the original novel, Beka’s personality and mannerisms are not at all feminine. She has decided to join the Queen’s Horse Guard, because, as she says to Alec “I’m not cut out to be like Mother, raising a family and waiting around for a man who goes off for months at a time. I want to be the one who’s gone” (LS, p.306). She is physically active, head-strong, and courageous. She speaks her mind without hesitation, and she is a skilled swordsman, archer, and rider. In short, she displays characteristics traditionally deemed as being masculine in both Japanese and Western society, but in Skala, she is hardly unusual. Nowhere do we see typically feminine adjectives or behaviours described – she is not delicate, refined, demure, polite, quiet, and certainly far from passive.

Beka’s speech style in the original suits her masculine personality and mannerisms, and differs clearly from those of her mother Kari (housewife) and her sisters. However, in Japanese, Beka’s style of speech is essentially the same as theirs, due to the abundant and consistent use of feminine language, such as ‘wa’ and ‘no’ at the end of sentences. These expressions, particularly ‘wa’, ‘wayo’ and ‘noyo’, are rather old fashioned and add overtly sweet femininity to the utterances. There are limited cases where Beka gives orders to her troops in clearly masculine language, e.g., “Kanzen busu shiro”, “Yari to ken wo mote! Iku zo!” (SDJ 2, p.191), the corresponding English lines are “Full armour!” (SD, p.319), and “Lances and swords! Come on now, this is it!” (SD, p.320). However, the persistent use of overtly feminine discourse strongly contradicts Beka’s personality and her capability as a skilled and brave lieutenant. For example, in the midst of battle, as she is commanding her troops, her language is still distinctly feminine: she shouts “Iku wayo!” for “Let’s go!” (SDJ 2, p.86) instead of Iku zo! or Ike! as used by male commanders. Moreover, when she tastes the blood of her first human kill from her sword according to the tradition, she says:

“Gunsō, atashi mo kore ga hajimete nano. Nanika iu beki kotoba ga kimatte iru no kashira?” (SDJ 2, p.87).

“Sergeants, I’m as new to this as the rest of them. Are there any special words to be spoken?” (SD, p.240).

This calm, feminine and slightly childish with ‘ata-shi’ instead of ‘watashi’ is at odds with the atmosphere of tension, excitement, relief and uncertainty after her first battle. Her utterance should be more masculine or at least neutral, for example:

“Gunsō, (watashi mo) kore ga hajimete nanda. Nanika iu beki kotoba ga kimatte iru noka?” or simply, “Nanika iu beki kotoba ga aru noka?”

Her femininity has been emphasised in the Japanese through the use of language which is strongly gendered as feminine, sacrificing consistency with the original regarding Beka’s androgynous personality in an effort to maintain traditional Japanese gender roles.

Masculinity is also emphasised to various degrees in the Japanese translations, however this emphasis generally does not come at the cost of character misrepresentation as in the case of Beka. For example, Micum’s way of speaking is quite rough and masculine, with the use of the ‘ore’ for ‘I’ and the frequent use of abrupt command forms and masculine sentence ending particles, e.g. ‘zo’ and ‘ze’ in keeping with his personality. In the first scene where he rescues Alex, he says, “Mittei dato? Kono baka yar ō. Sonya ore no oikko da.” (LSJ 1, p.86). His ‘ore’ is in katakana and implies a sense of joviality.
Nysander’s speech mannerisms in English which communicate his advanced age, his warm personality through his use of ‘dear boy’ towards Seregil, and his slightly formal use of language are retained in the Japanese translation by the use of words such as ‘washi’ (old-fashioned ‘I’ for an aged man) and ‘noja’ to end sentences. For example, when he sees Seregil in serious condition: “It is as I feared,” the wizard murmured, “We must get him to the Orëska House at once. I have a carriage waiting. Fetch the driver.” (LS, p.168).

In Japanese:

“Shinpai shite-ita tōri ja...Sugu ni Orëska no yakata e kakobaneba naran. Basha wo mata-sete-aru kara, gyosha wo yonde kite kuren ka”.

(LSJ2, p.11)

In more neutral speech, the sentences end ‘tōri da’, instead of ‘tōri ja’; ‘nakerba...naranai’ or ‘ikenai’, instead of ‘neba...naran’; ‘kurena ka’, instead of ‘kuren ka’. By using such language, his speech is made that of a respected, gentle and elderly Japanese man.

This makes an interesting comparison with of the degree to which traditional masculine speech patterns and markers are used in the speech of Micum, Seregil and Alec. The overall effect in the Japanese is that Micum who uses ‘ore’ is the most typically masculine, followed by Seregil. However, Seregil in Japanese gives a sense of ambiguity, as he uses strongly masculine language much like Micum, despite his use of ‘watashi’. ‘Watashi’ is a gender neutral word for ‘I’, but carries a sense of formality when used by males.

However, the representations of masculinity are not without problems. Like Beka, Alec’s characterisation in Japanese is problematic, with his consistent use of ‘boku’ (for ‘I’) and polite form (i.e., sentences end with desu/masu). As a result, he is presented as the least masculine of the three, despite his equal courage and fighting skills. His language sounds boyish, generally very polite and quite deferential to both Seregil and Micum. He does not use any overtly masculine speech patterns such as masculine sentence ending particles, or a blunt manner of speaking regardless of who he is speaking to. By choosing to write Alec’s dialogues in this way, the translator emphasises his youth and inferior social status to most of his comrades, in particular Seregil and Micum.

Social Hierarchy

Social hierarchy is another factor which dictates the style of dialogue in both real and imagined societies. Skala, of course, has its own hierarchy, placing the Skalan royal family highest in social status. However, in English, Micum, Seregil and Alec are much the same, especially as the story progresses despite formal differences in rank. Nysander, who holds a high rank near to that of the royal family is respected by Micum, Seregil and Alec primarily for his wisdom, not only for his age or rank, and their relationship is close, like that of a father and his sons.

Jentsch (2006) notes that the existence of the formal and informal ‘you’ in many European languages presents difficulties for the translator in determining which is appropriate, and that this has a considerable impact on the reader’s perception of the relationship between characters. Jentsch gives the example of the relationship between Harry, Ron, Hermione (students) and Hagrid (a teacher but also a friend) in Harry Potter, noting that while the German and Spanish translators showed a development in the relationship progressing from the formal to the informal, the French translation has the students addressing Hagrid formally (2006, p.193). In Japanese, except for their initial conversations, Harry, Ron, Hermione talk casually to Hagrid, for example, Ron says, “Hagrid, toshokan de nani shiteru dat? (Matsuoka, 1999, p.335). These differences could be individual on the part of the translator, or a reflection of cultural norms regarding the formal nature of student and teacher relationships.

The social hierarchy, often tangled with age seniorty, significantly affects all human relationships, but this is particularly true in Japanese. Japanese society, as previously noted, has historically had a strong situational hierarchy, and although this has lessened somewhat, even seemingly insignificant differences in status can have a considerable impact on the type of language considered appropriate for a person to use. Differences in protagonists’ social status are expressed linguistically to a greater degree and in more detail compared to European languages, and are thus required in any Japanese translation. In Japanese, the matter is further complicated because the style should be chosen each time, according to the situation (Nakane, 1967), and the same two people may ‘shift styles’ depending on the roles they are playing and the presence of others, as well as the progress of their relationship, e.g. from friends to lovers (Maynard, 2005). This presents a significant challenge to the translator, who must discern the social hierarchy and map it out in detail to ensure that characters’ speech suits their ‘status’.

As a result, to the Japanese reader the social hierarchy among all characters, major or minor, is clearly identified through their speech. There is no ambiguity even about the relative status of Seregil, Alec, and Micum – Alec is firmly positioned as lowest in status due to his use of polite language. As mentioned above, this polite language continues even as the story progresses and relationships change between
the characters, even when Alec develops from a shy, polite country lad to a confident and courageous young man, skilled with sword and bow, as well as various other skills.

This is unlike the English original which provides the impression that Alec has an almost equal relationship with Seregil, where the student-teacher aspect is framed as a friend learning from a friend, rather than a master and his apprentice. The growing closeness and stability of their partnership is reflected in the English dialogues by Alec’s increasingly confident speech, more prominent swearing, and his arguments with Seregil This considerable shift in maturity and their growing friendship does not affect Alec’s speech in Japanese, which remains formal and does not express either increased masculinity or informality. Alec often swears in English, for example, “Bilairy’s Guts, Seregil, I saved your life!” (LS, p.416) becomes in Japanese: “Seregil, boku wa anata wo tasuketan desu!” (LSJ1, p.123) which means “Seregil, (don’t forget that) I saved your life!” Similarly, Alec says to himself, “You went up the streambed, you sneaky bastard!” (SD, p.496) whereas in Japanese: “Kawadoko wo nobotte ittan desu ne, boku wo makau tame ni!” (SDJ1, p.211), which means “You went up the streambed, in order to shake me off!”. The use of “desu ne” does not match the tone implied by “sneaky bastard!” This and other such rough expressions are generally absent in the Japanese. Instead, Alec continues to use polite forms with boku...desu. His speech not only lacks typically rough, masculine expressions such as ‘zo’, ‘ze’ but also simple plain form, although he does talk in casual form with Beka and Illia from their first meetings. This indicates that Alec’s politeness is chosen to position him within the gender and seniority hierarchy to present him as gentle, sincere, well-mannered young man, matching the Japanese cover illustrations. However, this conflicts with his masculine personality and his growing equal standing with Seregil in the original. Furthermore, Alec’s use of polite form even in his thinking has the potential implication of indifference and/or extreme repressiveness and possibly vindictiveness, perhaps more appropriate to Thero (Nysander’s apprentice who dislikes Seregil) but completely at odds with Alec’s personality.

The discrepancy between the English and Japanese version of Alec’s speech style is the most apparent and intriguing example of how subtle alternation can critically influence characters and their relationships. Alec’s polite form in Japanese may represent his age (16) and social status (poor, from the country, and unskilled except with a bow). However, in English, such constant politeness is absent, although Alec is polite and well-spoken in general, especially early in Luck in the Shadows when he first meets Seregil, et al. One of the rare (and more natural) examples of Alex’s use of plain form is when he grins over at Seregil from his horse and says “That’s fine by me!” (SD, p.231)

Alec wa hirari to kura ni matagaru to, niyari to Seregil wo mioroshita “Sore wa yokatta!” (SDJ2, p.76)

The use of formal, respectful language in Japanese is a double-edged sword and if used in informal and intimate situations, it ironically prevents a feeling of closeness between the participants of the conversation. Furthermore, even in the Japanese context, Alec’s politeness is excessive and the consistency is rather unnatural. As mentioned earlier, Japanese language requires the speaker’s careful assessment of the other participants in the conversation in each and every situation, and he or she then modifies his or her style and formality accordingly. Alec uses polite form, regardless of the actual situations, whether he is angry, frightened, or being romantic. He even speaks in polite form to Mardus who threatens to torture and kill him, which gives the impression of being unnaturally calm and almost strangely impassive and monotonous.

However, Alec’s polite form is appropriate to the genre of shōnen-ai (pederasty or boys love in yaoi, a Japanese subculture), as indicated by the manga-style covers of the Japanese editions, illustrated by Kairi Yuki. This designation sheds considerable light on the portrayal of Seregil and Alec’s relationship in the Japanese translations. The conventions of this genre are that the two males involved in a love relationship in shōnen-ai novels or manga are almost always in an unequal relationship, in which one is clearly dominant and stereotypically masculine, and the other is shown as more submissive, and stereotypically feminine. This dichotomy is absent in the English original, but present in the Japanese, where Alec, due to a combination of factors, presumably mainly his age, is relegated to the position of the more feminine of the two, as shown by his non-overtly masculine language, and his continued use of polite forms towards Seregil even after they become lovers. Curiously, it is Seregil who has the more feminine appearance, with long hair and finer, more delicate features, but in terms of social status, age, and his position as Alec’s mentor in the arts of Nightrunning, he does not fit the criteria to be characterised as the non-dominant partner.

Conclusion

Through our comparisons between the English original and Japanese translation of discussions of Lynn Flewelling’s Nightrunner Series we have demonstrated how subtly yet profoundly ‘localisation’ is
conducted to suit the readers of the host culture by
the addition of sometimes just simple words, such
as feminine expressions (e.g., ending a sentence with
‘wa’), and how sometimes this occurs at the expense
of the original characterisation.

When translating dialogues from English to Japan-
ese, translators have to face the difficult choice of
gendered, age and status orientated words, due to the
’situational’ nature of the Japanese language. Ham-
na, the translator, has obviously made an effort to
distinguish each character by having them consist-
etly use their assigned style of speech, which cer-
tainly gives each character a clear voice of their own.
As glimpsed, the translation matches the original
smoothly, accurately and convincingly in the case
of elderly wizard Nysander, warrior Micum, and his
gentle housewife Kari – all common character types
with clearly defined conventional roles suitting their
age, status and gender.

However, at times this translation strategy has
been less than effective in terms of its faithfulness
to the original characterisation and the implementa-
tion of believability for the Japanese reader, as exem-
plified by Beka and Alec. Beka’s fiery personality
and masculine characteristics have been watered
down by the addition of overly feminine language
to her speech, even though she does maintain a cas-
ual form of speaking. As a young female warrior but
also a minor noble, she does not fit conventional
speech mannerisms of either a lower class soldier or
a noblewoman, and the attempt to strike a middle
ground in Japanese does not ring true. Alec’s person-
ality likewise suffers from being rigidly assigned a
role as social inferior to Seregil and Micum, which,
perhaps in an effort to maintain consistency, fails to
show the development of the closeness and affection
present in the original. Alec, at first glance, seems
quite straightforward – a young man from the country
who finds himself suddenly caught up in events of
great importance, with new friends and new adven-
tures, and it should be easy enough to assign a man-
ner of speech suitable to a young, polite but cour-
ageous warrior. However, Alec’s unfailing politeness
ends up creating an unbelievable character, quite
different from the original and underplays the de-
velopment of his relationship with Seregil. His charac-
terisation is further implicated by targetted translation
to suit the genre of shonen-ai, which requires a trans-
lation that firmly identifies a power imbalance
between Alec and Seregil.

What upholds the quality of a novel is the
autonomy of the fictional sphere, which in translation
may be disturbed and misrepresented by the domest-
cation of human interactions, especially in the case
of ‘unconventional’ characters, who stray from ste-
reo typical roles in the real, historical sense for the
language (in this case Japanese). Our examples reveal
how challenging it is for the translator to present
such characters in a manner that is faithful to the
original in order to share the true depth and multi-
faceted nature of the variety of characters found
within the original, while negotiating the marketing
strategies of the host cultures.

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Although Katherine is still an undergraduate student at Macquarie University, she has completed her Japanese studies, and has a strong interest in the process of translation both from English to Japanese, and Japanese to English.

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